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# ***Emil und die Detektive:* Early German sound cinema aesthetic**

## **ABSTRACT**

*In 1931 Gerhard Lamprecht directed the film version of Erich Kästner's popular novel Emil und die Detektive. A hugely successful film at the time, it was aimed to appeal to adults and children alike. This article is going to explore the film's varying aesthetic approaches in terms of its use of sound and music. A discussion of the fact that the film has been apparently overlooked in film text books, particularly with regard to its use of sound, will be attempted. A number of different factors with regard to the optical sound process (sync and post-sync) will be considered, along with a discussion of what are widely understood as technological determinants at the time of the film's release.*

## **KEYWORDS**

early sound film  
German cinema  
Lamprecht  
Kästner

It is often the case that works of popular literature struggle to convince when adapted to the film form; audiences and critics frequently believe the film version less successful than the original work. Once a reader has constructed the narrative world of a novel in their mind's eye, has imagined what characters look and sound like, has developed a picture of a landscape or constructed particular architecture in line with the text, it seems difficult to accept an alternative vision offered via film. All too often the conclusion

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arises that ‘the movie is just not as good as the book’. Without wanting to get drawn into a discussion of how sensible or rational such expectations of literary adaptations could ever be, occasionally a film appears that satisfies even the most entrenched expectations (or ‘could soften the most entrenched mindset’).

One such exception is Gerhard Lamprecht’s 1931 film version of Erich Kästner’s novel, *Emil und die Detektive*. Shot at the Ufa studios in Neubabelsberg as well as on location in Berlin, the film premiered on 2 December 1931 to great critical and popular acclaim. As a new DVD version released by the BFI in the summer of 2013 invites a wider audience to acquaint itself with the film, it seems appropriate to revisit the film’s remarkable technical and creative achievements. Back in 1931, reviews published in newspapers and film journals gave a sense of the enthusiastic reception which met the film:

What a happy concept, to focus on Erich Kästner’s glorious youth novel as the basis to this film. The story of the determined youngsters who take it upon themselves to hunt down a seasoned criminal is an imaginative subject which lends itself to opportunities afforded by the screen. Billy Wilder’s version skilfully capitalises on the novel’s potential for adaptation, showing a deft touch in transferring the narrative, which the screen puts to good use (*Lichtbild-Bühne*, Nr. 289, 3.12.1931).

Not only did the Kästner text have to evolve from page to screen, it also had to be developed within the context of film’s contemporaneous transition from silence to sound. Erich Kästner initially worked on a script for the film version with Emmerich Pressburger. Ufa then decided to introduce another writer to the development process: Billie Wilder (who even at the time was being referred to as Billie or Billy) joined the writing team. However, Kästner became increasingly disenchanted with the script adaptation, as Pressburger and Wilder attempted to expand the story. Kästner’s dismay is palpable in his diary, where he condemned an early version of the script as ‘ghastly’. (Belach and Bock 1998). He was particularly exasperated at attempts to distort Emil’s character into a more mischievous person than the boy from his original story.

Furthermore, Kästner was disparaging of the film script’s misguided character portraits, which had Emil referred to as ‘the steer of Alaska’ and Pony Hütchen described as a ‘Texan rose’ (Belach and Bock 1998). Irrespective of how this kind of characterisation was to become integrated into the spoken dialogue of the film version, Kästner was clearly incensed at the tone that the script was developing. As a backdrop to these concerns, Kästner had previously expressed clear views on the aesthetic style of sound film. A year before *Emil* was being made, he published a review of *Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier* (Zeisler 1930) in the *Neue Leipziger Zeitung*, a newspaper for whom he worked as a regular contributor. That particular film was a ‘whodunit’, which incorporated a narrative twist that hinged entirely on sound technology. In his review, Kästner had praised

the film's imaginative use of sound and railed against what he saw as the film industry's predominant focus on 'acoustic realism'. Kästner decried filmmakers who appeared too pre-occupied with technical determinants, without recognizing the creative potential afforded them through the new medium of sound.

In his review (published in the expansive Ufa anthology edited by Bock and Töteberg in 1992), Kästner recalls a conversation with an unnamed director, with whose opinion on sound he finds himself resolutely agreeing:

Colleagues are forever confusing sound film with theatre; they seem to forego all creative opportunities afforded by film.'(..) '...colleagues are keen to record everything that is audible, irrespective of the narrative's requirement. Imagine a couple quarrelling in the middle of a busy street. Do you think those two would be paying much attention to the cars, the trams, the passing chatter of other pedestrians? But many directors are unaware of this.

As Kästner's novel was being adapted into a script, the author feared that his original material would be taken in a direction that strayed away from the text's sense of 'here and now' and its contemporary urban landscape. The book's success had in part been based on its innovative and informal style. The words on the page flow in an easy conversational style, making the author's voice palpable in the text. Part of the scene-setting narrative technique involved explaining to the reader how he (Kästner) had originally come up with the idea for the book. Although the author brings himself into the narrative, his writing technique avoids making the book seem artificial or contrived; its realistic and eloquent style draws the reader forward into the pages, blurring the lines between fiction and reality. Kästner's conversational story-telling device had the effect of inviting the reader to feel as if listening to a story, virtually hearing it unfold as being told directly by the author. It seemed to him vital that the sense of authenticity and freshness manifest in the book be reflected on the screen (however, without using a narrator as voice-over).

Fortunately for the well established and universally respected Erich Kästner, and after some heated arguments and re-drafts, the writing team managed to strike the right chord and Kästner was pleased with the end result. In particular, it was the film's imaginative style and perceived authenticity in its portrayal of the children's world that impressed audiences and critics in 1931.

The *Kinematograph* praised Wilder's adaptation of Kästner's original text, singling out the 'fascinating pace' of the film's narrative from the 'excitingly dramatized' beginning to the moment when the 'common thief transpires to be a wanted bank-robber'. Crucially, the reviewer posits the view that it is down to Wilder's script and its sensitive handling by the director Lamprecht that the successful screen concept is realised in line with its original subject matter, 'inducing millions to applaud.' (*Kinematograph*, Nr. 280, 3.12.1931)

The critic of the *Lichtbild-Bühne* singled out the work of the cinematographer Werner Brandes and the sound recordist Hermann Fritzsching, actually citing them by name (!) in the review, before going on to praise composer Allan Gray's 'imaginative' score that becomes a 'pivotal driver for the film's action at times'. (*Lichtbild-Bühne*, Nr. 289, 3.12.1931)

In spite of its popular success as film and novel, *Emil* has faded from public awareness – until recently. Interest in the story is being rekindled with a new stage production at the National Theatre in London and a re-issue of the film on DVD by the British Film Institute are encouraging signs. After all, as an example of early German sound film, Lamprecht's *Emil und die Detektive* has been woefully overlooked in scholarly appraisal of key films from that era. Fritz Lang's *M* (1931), and latterly his 1933 *Das Testament des Dr Mabuse*, are of course rightly acknowledged as classic examples of early sound film. Given the murky urban settings, shot in a cinematographic style that reflected its lineage to German expressionism, Lang's early forays into sound showed great imagination and remain stunning examples of early sound film. Alongside Lang, G. W. Pabst, Erik Charell, Wilhelm Thiele, Piel Jutzi, Josef von Sternberg and others have contributed films during the early 1930s that have been more widely discussed, but *Emil* is a significant example, which has been overlooked. Of particular interest is that the film appears to ease its audience gently into its sonic landscape, and into the world of sound film generally.

The opening scene lasts about four minutes and depicts three youngsters acting out a schoolboy prank in Emil's little home town of Neustadt. They roll dice to decide who should carry out a dare, and once this challenge has been assigned to young Emil, the remaining boys observe the action from a safe distance. The friends keep a lookout as Emil clammers up a public monument, a statue, which he is tasked to re-design. By adding a notebook, a cap and a stick-on moustache, the monument is made to resemble the local policeman, who happens to wander into the scene as the 'misdeed' is being committed by the masked boys. What is noticeable about this opening section is that until the action cuts to the next set-up (a dialogue scene that has Emil walking in on a conversation between his mother and another woman), the film displays a distinct silent movie aesthetic, and employs a strictly synchronous music score via the film's optical soundtrack. However it is precisely because of this synchronous relationship between image and music, in spite of its silent film aesthetic, that the opening sequence is already part of the sound era, and not really a throw-back to the *silents*.

It is worth remembering in this context that during the so-called 'silent' era, the way a film was 'seen' (i.e. projected) was – more or less – as the film had been intended to be seen by the director. Visual elements of the film, its cast, performance, costume and make-up were all part of the *mise-en-scène* a director or studio could determine. However, how this film would 'resonate' in the audiences' perception was down to factors beyond the film-maker's control; particularly how any film might be sonified was actually governed by local idiosyncrasies, and was ultimately determined by how well equipped a cinema was. The way a film was

‘sounded out’ for the audience depended on the degree of sophistication of a particular cinema in terms of either musical/orchestral accompaniment, from the grand stable of professional musicians employed in some cities to the more modest musical accompaniment available in more humble settings. Some cinemas dispensed with musical accompaniment altogether, for a variety of reasons, or may have employed a technician to be on hand behind the projection screen to provide some live sound effects.

Bearing this context in mind, even though the opening scene of *Emil* is in keeping with the silent film tradition, the fact that its score is reproduced in an identical manner on every screening means that the film could be seen and heard in the manner intended by its creators.

Back to *Emil*’s opening scene: Allan Gray’s score illustrates every nuance and action of the visual drama, from the rolling of the dice through to the boys being chased by the local policeman, in a manner decidedly in the vein of silent film music. Noticeable in this context is that the music sounds very contemporaneous to the urban cabaret style of the Weimar period in instrumentation and tone, rather than employing a more whimsical/sentimental or even bucolic musical vernacular.

As Emil and the other boys throw their dice to decide who will undertake the daring stunt with Neustadt’s public monument, the orchestral score mimics the rolling of the dice and the subsequent stalking out of events around the monument. The only sound gesture that is non-musical during the opening sequence is a loud whistling call (almost certainly post-sync), generated by one of the boys to warn Emil of the arrival of the local policeman. When looking at a scene such as this, it is valuable to get a sense of the reaction to the film at the time of its release. Did contemporary film audiences feel disappointed at the silent film aesthetic of its opening sequence? There is no real indication to attest to such unfulfilled expectations. On the contrary, the film proved to be an instant popular hit, a fact that would run counter to any notion that the audience was in any way alienated or disappointed by this approach. Instead, one film critic, amidst all the wider praise for *Emil*, welcomed the style of the film’s opening:

This atmospheric film exudes an infectious freshness and youthfulness. Its world is depicted with the creative imagination of a child. A world familiar from one’s own childhood – this is the main appeal of the film and its seductive charm. All credit must go to its director Gerhard Lamprecht for his achievement. Without hesitation from its (ingeniously silent) beginning to its spectacular finale. (*Lichtbild-Bühne*, No 289, 1931)

Realism and authenticity were praised as outstanding qualities of the film by this and several other critics; furthermore, there was clear acknowledgement that the aesthetic style of the opening exemplified a rather ingenious approach. No sign of disappointment there. Only one critic laments Inge Landgut’s portrayal of Pony Hütchen as too self-aware (Landgut was the only younger actor in *Emil und die Detektive* who had



previous film experience, most notably as Elsie Beckmann in *M*). In addition to praise for the musical score, camera work and sound, critics continually singled out Wilder's script and Lamprecht's skilful direction of the film's youthful cast. Reviewers complimented the film for having struck exactly the right balance in depicting a truthful image of a contemporary youth which enjoys being adventurous and playful, but a youth which is also pragmatic – savvy in employing telecommunications and shrewd in financial budgeting when the children give chase in a taxi, one eye on the purse, the other on the taxi meter. (*Film-Kurier*, Nr. 283, 3.12.1931)

The composer Allan Gray was born in 1902 in Poland as Josef Zmigrod; soon after his birth, the family moved to Berlin where he grew up. He studied music with a number of teachers, including Arnold Schönberg who did not permit any of his students to work in popular theatre or the cabaret. For that reason, Zmigrod adopted the pseudonym of Allan Gray (an amalgam of the names Edgar Allan Poe and Dorian Gray). Under this stage name, he contributed a number of musical numbers to the burgeoning Berlin cabaret scene, and perhaps that musical background is heard in the instrumentation of the opening scene of *Emil und die Detektive*.

Before working with Lamprecht, Gray had written the score to Piel Jutzi's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, as well as having worked with Erich Kästner, setting a number of the author's lyrical works to music. Having become established as a film composer, Allan Gray's scores continued to feature in a number of popular early German sound films until the Nazis rose to power. In 1933, Gray left Germany and eventually settled in Britain, where he became a regular composer for Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's Archer's productions, including *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943) and *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946). His last great film score of significant note was for John Huston's *The African Queen* in 1952.

In *Emil und die Detektive*'s opening scene, Gray's specially composed sync score with inherently musical sound effects makes *Emil*'s opening curiously akin to Warner Brother's Vitaphone picture *Don Juan* (Crosland 1926), that predated Lamprecht's film by five years. In 1926, Alan Crosland's film made for Warner Brothers was at the cutting edge of technology. The Vitaphone system employed on *Don Juan* had provided the film with a sync score and occasional sound effects to accompany the picture. In contrast to the Vitaphone system, where the soundtrack was recorded onto separate gramophone disks that ran in sync with the projector (as one can imagine, sync drifts were an ongoing problem that beset this technology), *Emil und die Detektive* was made using an optical sound system, Tobis Klangfilm, which would result in a combined optical print of image and sound. From the separate needle-tone sound of the Vitaphone era to a combined optical sound system afforded by Klangfilm – within the context of the technological and aesthetic transition experienced by cinema audiences at the end of the silent and the beginning of the sound era – five years is a very long time. Within the

context of Emil, this stylistic transition is effected in less than five minutes, as the story moves ever forward. Next, Emil is shown as he eavesdrops on the initially unseen dialogue between the two women of the subsequent scene, with the camera then panning from Emil outside the open window in the act of *listening in* to the women in conversation. The camera stays on the women until Emil feels the need to interject, as he protests vehemently against being referred to as a little child. Through the use of sound and dialogue, the two narrative planes of the exterior and the interior world converge, and thus the grown-ups' preoccupying concerns are brought within Emil's hitherto playful horizons.

The story continues with Emil making preparations for his train journey to the big city, as the youngster is asked to deliver a sum of money to his grandmother in Berlin. As Frau Tischbein helps her son to get ready, she entreats him to look after the money (a considerable sum by their modest standards) as well as the good suit donned for the journey, most carefully. Thus the audience is primed to the significant story element: a sum of money in the care of young Emil; what could possibly happen next . . . ?

As mother and son leave the house, they are accosted by the same local policeman, who had very nearly caught up with Emil following his prank with the monument in the opening scene. At this moment, Lamprecht's film ingeniously plays with sound concepts, using the idea of two different points of audition to develop the narrative. Emil shrinks back in fear at the appearance of the policeman who in turn takes Emil's mother to one side to have 'a quiet word'. Just at that time, a horse and cart pass noisily in the road rendering Emil unable to hear what is actually being said. As Emil stands a little way away from the adults, he remains frustratingly out of earshot and unable to listen in. Meanwhile, the actual conversation between his mother and the official is being revealed to the audience as a discussion about by-laws and opening hours (Frau Tischbein runs a modest hairdressing operation from her front room).

Kept in the dark by the obscured acoustic of his point of audition, Emil is convinced that he has been rumbled. As he steps forward to join the adults, he voluntarily presents his wrists to the policeman ready to be handcuffed and lead away. The policeman in turn fails to understand the boy's gesture and instead grabs hold of the Emil's hand to wish him a good journey. (Here a visual gag is delivered by the use of the soundtrack's playing with different aural perspectives.) Confusing as the adult world must seem to Emil at that moment, he is quick-witted enough to regain his composure as both mother and son declare the destination of the journey in response to the policeman's enquiry as 'Berlin'. Their enthusiastic voices are used by the film to ring in the next visual transition: Emil's 'Berlin' is overlaid as the picture cuts to the platform indicator depicting that destination.

Lamprecht's film shows a similarly adroit approach (as has elsewhere already been attributed to Fritz Lang's *M*), utilising sound dialogue as a stepping stone to shift from one location to the next. From these opening scenes onwards, Lamprecht's film becomes increasingly complex from

the sonic perspective (the film's grand sound finale is discussed below), whilst managing to preserve the youthful sense of fun encapsulated in Kästner's original book.

As the film continues, Allan Gray's musical score remains a key element, though the soundtrack integrates other sound effects alongside the music. This in itself is quite an unusual approach as, by and large, early sound films tended to use music less (perhaps in an attempt to distinguish themselves from silent film) and if music was employed, it frequently had a connection to the diegetic story space (such as in the many musical operettas that gained in popularity in German cinema at the time – *Die Drei von der Tankstelle* (Thiele 1930) and *Der Kongress Tanzt* (Charell 1931) are well known examples).

Furthermore, it was still relatively uncommon to use music in combination with other sound effects or as underscore with dialogue.

Emil boards the train to Berlin and begins his journey, and as fellow travellers exit the train at another station he finds himself left alone in the compartment with a dubious looking character – wearing a black hat; the man has an intimidating demeanour. Emil is right to be suspicious as the man turns out to be a thief who steals Emil's precious banknotes. Grundeis (the thief) drugs the unsuspecting boy, having given him some sweets laced with a sedative. As Emil is unconscious, he dreams of a strangely distorted world in which he attempts to get away from Grundeis's clutches. All through the dream sequence, the music is the main element on the soundtrack, using a range of changes in its instrumentation to denote different stages of the dream. In the scene immediately before the dream, when Emil was being offered the fateful sweet, the score has musical pauses to allow for dialogue elements to be heard simultaneously and the score appears to actually fade in and out as Grundeis and Emil speak. Once the sedative begins to work on Emil, dialogue elements cease and the music takes over. At times, the score still retains traces of the silent film aesthetic of the opening sequence – occasionally still mimicking sound effects – but gradually, the music resembles conventional film scoring, that is to say as an accompaniment rather than a driver of the action. As Emil wakes from his sleep and discovers the theft of the money, orchestral sound effects conjure up the arrival of the steam train – Emil exclaims in horror that he has been the victim of a theft – the music again underscoring his discovery.

In the next scene Emil gives chase and clammers aboard a tram to keep up with Grundeis. The conductor asks for tickets, and again, the music score continues under the spoken elements. Initially, the voice of the conductor is out of vision, with the actor's back turned to the camera, and it is entirely possible that this is a post-sync voice element that was recorded at the same time as the music was being recorded. The conductor goes on to call out the name of the tram's next stop as 'Kurfürstendamm' in vision with good lip sync, but again, potentially a post-sync recording on account of its acoustic perspective. In contrast, the earlier dialogue elements integrated into the score between Grundeis and Emil in their train compartment seem to be sync rather than post-sync. This suggests

two different processes employed in achieving the same overall effect, namely combining spoken voice elements with a music score.

While Emil is still travelling on the Berlin tram in pursuit of Grundeis, the picture cuts to Emil's train (now minus Emil) arriving at the station where his cousin and Grandmother were due to link up with him. Here the musical score resumes the steam train elements of the same train's earlier arrival at a previous station (where Emil swiftly got off the train to pursue Grundeis) and then train and score come to a gradual halt. The action cuts to Pony Hütchen (the nickname of Emil's cousin) and his grandmother in the ticket hall – clearly a studio set rather than an actual location. The footsteps of the extras as they descend from the 'platform steps' and as they cross the 'hall' to the barrier betray the studio setting. But interestingly, the picture then cuts from the set to a real platform with passengers getting off a train, before cutting back to the ticket hall of the studio set. Several other cutaways of a real ticket hall are also integrated; presumably this material stems from the same rushes that had been shot as Emil got off the train in pursuit of Grundeis. Lamprecht's film attempts to give the visual elements as realistic a setting as possible by including a range of location elements (street scenes, railway station views, as well as the tram chase). Interestingly, the soundtrack does not cut away from the studio ticket hall when the real station elements are seen, illustrating an attempt at creating sound continuity between several different settings. Although the studio set is a little unconvincing in terms of sound, this approach does show a certain awareness of how to build a sonic environment by not cutting away from the implied sound-world of the 'ticket hall'.

This may have been a less obvious approach at the time than one would expect today. For instance Robert Siodmak's *Der Mann der seinen Mörder sucht* – also made in 1931 – is marred by sound dis-continuity cuts, that have the effect of undermining any notion of narrative flow. In Siodmak's film, the action cuts between two different locations, for example, from an interior dialogue scene to a 'meanwhile-across-the road' shot. There, the filmmakers appear at a loss as to how to respond to this scenario via the soundtrack and cut back and forth from the respective sync elements, hard and in step with the visual cuts. This works in counter-point to any sense of narrative flow developing. Filmmakers clearly had to learn how to use sound to their advantage to string different shots together – at least they had to form an understanding of how to avoid sound undermining story continuity unintentionally. Comparing Lamprecht's *Emil* to Siodmak's *Der Mann der seinen Mörder sucht*, it would appear that some productions acquired such awareness sooner than others.

Back to the studio ticket hall in *Emil*, as Grandmother and Pony Hütchen wait in vain in for the boy. In addition to the slightly wooden sounding footsteps and sync dialogue elements of various extras, other sound elements are also included, quite possibly in addition to the studio sync: an occasional background cry summoning a porter's assistance, as well as general 'crowd walla' and milling around in a slightly reverberant acoustic. This demonstrates an attempt to widen out the scene, suggesting

a sense and depth of the space beyond the visual frame. Again, this shows an approach to sound that is more sophisticated than may initially be expected from a film of the early sound era.

Having exited the tram, Emil positions himself across the road from a café where Grundeis has decided to have something to eat. At his lookout, Emil is accosted by a local boy, Gustav, who carries in his pocket a small horn which he sounds to attract the attention of other members of his band of local children. The book already describes Gustav using the horn as a device to attract attention. The film adds another sound layer by also letting Gustav indicate his thought processes through the use of the horn – including a ‘brain-tick-over sound’ as well as expressions of approval or disapproval.

Though music remains a strong feature during subsequent pursuit scenes as the boys tag Grundeis, later scenes introduce an additional sound level alongside the score: an enthusiastic crowd of youngsters that noisily cheer as they close in on Grundeis. The presence of two separate elements on the soundtrack (score and children cheering) is augmented by a third element: as Grundeis attempts to get away from the bank, the cashier operates an alarm buzzer which attracts the attention of some passing policemen.

Once the thief has been accosted and the money returned to its rightful owner, the story resolves with a grand scene of Emil’s triumphant return to his home town of Neustadt. Having received a sizable reward through his work in capturing a wanted thief (Grundeis turned out to be a career criminal rather than a mere opportunist), Emil and his friends, as well Grandmother and Pony Hütchen arrive by airplane amidst a grand fête thrown by the good people of Neustadt. Here the film deviates considerably from the more moderate finale described in Kästner’s book: a cozy coffee and cake afternoon in the home of Emil’s aunt and uncle in Berlin.

Clearly, the film script wanted to develop the opportunity to create a grander setting and achieves this through an impressive set piece: a large expectant crowd, a sync brass band and the appearance of the airplane. All three sound elements can be heard simultaneously; the soundtrack appears constructed in layers, consisting of some specific post-sync dialogue as well as more generic crowd elements, alongside the diegetic music score (initially the musicians remain mostly out of vision, until the brass band is seen to disintegrate in their eagerness to rush forward to greet the landing plane). In addition to the above, the approaching ‘plane sound’ can also be heard as it is coming in to land. There can be little doubt that this is an artificially created sound effect standing in for a real plane (and as a sound effect, it lacks a certain oomph that a real plane could have provided) – but nonetheless, this is real evidence of a multi-layered soundtrack that relates to various story elements, while they are in and out of vision. The moment when the picture cuts to the band, as the players individually get up and exit from their podium, is a treat. Each instrument, as it files past the camera (and the microphone in the vicinity of the camera), can be heard as a solo element, complete with an ‘up and past’ acoustic dynamic.

This last scene, in particular, shows a truly accomplished approach in constructing a soundtrack in a more complex manner which becomes an integral part of the storytelling. However, also present in that final scene is a moment when the filmmaker did not quite manage to hit the right note in the balance between visual and aural story-telling elements: during the speech, when Emil is being praised for his heroic achievements, Emil appears to have a flashback to the moment Grundeis was caught. We see three cutaways from outside the Berlin bank showing the crowd of boys as they wrestle with the thief. Here the intention was presumably to illustrate Emil remembering the involvement of the whole band of children, thus motivating him to decline the victor's wreath which the mayor had just placed on him. In turn, the youngsters pass the wreath from child to child, each acknowledging in turn the role that others had played in bringing Grundeis to justice. These flashback cutaways occur too rapidly and without any sound accompaniment and are probably lost on most viewers at that point. Here, either a visual signal (such as a dissolve) or an aural gesture (music or a sound effect) could have helped to make the thought processes in Emil's head clearer – but at any rate, the cutaways needed to be held for a little longer to register across the auditorium.

Erich Kästner's novel had originally been published in 1929 and gained instant popularity with younger readers. Ufa producer Günther Stapenhorst, who took on the film project, was keen to stretch the project not just as a children's story, but one that would also draw in older viewers. The film's publicity material attests to the broad age demographic, including reference to the film being suitable for everyone between '70 and 6'. (Belach and Bock, 1998: 157)

While Kästner's novel had been enjoyed in the main by young readers, the film was purposefully marketed by Ufa to have broad audience appeal, as the production company aimed to expand box office potential. Several critics at the time described an excitable audience's response, where adults and children had to show considerable restraint as they cheered the story's heroes on. In this context, the film's broader audience appeal is evident. Georg Herzberg wrote in the *Film-Kurier* of the enthusiastic scenes in the auditorium in response to the film's screening as an expression of the film's universal appeal: one would have to be a particularly 'ossified or stuck-up adult' not to succumb to the film's charm within the first few hundred feet of the screen action. The story would cause most grown-ups to forget 'the last ten, thirty or fifty years' of adult existence, inducing a childlike enthusiasm for the story's ups and downs. (*Film-Kurier*, Nr. 283, 3.12.1931)

With *Emil und die Detektive* as the sole exception, Kästner's books and poems were amongst those thrown onto the Nazi bonfires that were lit from May 1933 onwards to 'cleanse' German libraries of unwanted material. The film version of the story continued to be shown in cinemas up and down the country for many years after Josef Goebbels assumed his tight control over German art and culture, but eventually the prints were withdrawn from circulation as Kästner's name was increasingly *persona non grata*. In spite of being repeatedly arrested and interrogated by

the authorities, Kästner managed to weather the upheaval of war and fascism without leaving Germany. The author wanted to stay in Germany to bear witness to the era; he even continued to contribute to the literary scene under a range of pseudonyms, thus circumventing the Nazi's desire to prevent him entirely from publishing his writings.

Following its release in 1931, the film *Emil und die Detektive*, in its original German language version, played successfully abroad in the United States, France and Britain. In a pre-war Europe, Kästner's story had cross border appeal, as *The Observer's* film critic wrote: '... Take a boy of about 13 years with you. But if you can't provide a boy of thirteen, a boy of six, or ten, or sixteen or sixty will do very nearly as well.' (Belach and Bock 1998, p.170). Shown without subtitles, the film was deemed to have universal appeal and even rated by *Sight & Sound* as 'the best children's picture ever made.' (Belach and Bock 1998, p.171)

Thus, irrespective of linguistic barriers, the film appealed to audiences beyond Germany's borders. So much so that soon a British remake was being planned: *Emil and The Detectives* was shot in 1935 and directed by Milton Rosmer, the musical score was again the work of Allan Gray.

*Emil und die Detektive* was director Lamprecht's third sound film; it was shot over a period of 6 weeks during the summer of 1931 with a cast of professional adult actors in addition to the sizeable number of youngsters, many of whom had little or no previous acting or film experience. Prior to the film's release, Lamprecht himself wrote in the *Film-Kurier*: 'It was not intended to be a film only for children. It was meant to appeal to the larger cinema public. And I feel it will manage to do so, if only because it places them, without any sentimentality or cuteness, in a world they experience themselves every day.' (Kardish 2010: 173)

Gerhard Lamprecht's career as a director spanned 40 years, from 1918 until 1958, during which time he directed more than fifty films. In addition to being a prolific director, Lamprecht had also been a great film enthusiast from his early childhood. Through his father's work he had the opportunity to sit in on countless film screenings in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From this time onwards Lamprecht became a keen collector of films and film memorabilia. But his enthusiasm for film also extended to the technical side of the film-making process. According to Aurich (2013, p.193) Lamprecht had patented 'a device for the automatic adjustment of a cinematic recording device' during the 1920s; further evidence of his desire to advance film making as an artform, as well as its associated technology. Eventually, Lamprecht's private collection would form the basis for Die Deutsche Kinemathek in Berlin 1963.

This enthusiasm for film and the film-making process are pointers towards a director who would have wanted to be at the forefront of utilising new film technology within his work. Interestingly, one could posit the view that Lamprecht was deliberately easing his audience gently into the story. The film begins with musical accompaniment that is firmly rooted in the tradition of silent film. Perhaps such an approach was shaped by Ufa's anticipation of a broad audience demographic, expecting older as well as younger members of the audience in the auditorium. After all,

some early sound film theorists were concerned about offering up too much stimulation for the senses all at once through the combination of sound and image.

The film *Emil und die Detektive* further illustrates the notion that the transitional period into sound was not a homogenous event, that happened at the flip of a switch overnight. When looking at various films from the period, a range of different approaches of engaging with sound can be observed. But what is interesting about Gerhard Lamprecht's film version of *Emil und die Detektive* in particular is that even within one single film there may be a range of different aesthetic approaches to sound. In spite of (or perhaps precisely because of) the silent film aesthetic of its opening, *Emil und die Detektive* is a noteworthy exponent of early German sound film. As has been discussed in this article, the film develops an increasingly complex relationship with the soundtrack, whilst at the same time telling its story very effectively and in an engaging manner.

As Rick Altman emphasises in his book *Silent Film Sound* (2005), there is a tendency amongst contemporary film theorists to accept certain film truisms about a historical period as fact. Altman cautioned against merely reiterating what generations of film-scholars have been repeating as historically accurate without seeking to cross-reference these facts to primary sources. Though Altman approached this discussion from the perspective of silent cinema, a similar caution also applies to the discussion around early sound film. There seems to be a widely held notion that early sound films could not be mixed or post-produced from the sound perspective *at all* – a concept that may have been all too readily accepted and disseminated by a clique of film theorists. One notable exception is Corinna Müller's German language book *Vom Stummfilm zum Tonfilm* (2003). As a very detailed survey of the transitional landscape in German film from the silent to the sound era, she includes a fascinating section on technology, relying on primary sources as much as possible. Müller exposes that multi-tracking on location was already possible at the very beginning of the sound film period in Germany – though perhaps not commonplace, and ultimately determined by the overarching narrative requirements of a film. Furthermore, Müller goes on to explain that post-production mixing could also be achieved, either through replaying a range of sound tracks and re-recording them, or through the optical printing process. Though both methods still contained technological difficulties, it is too simplistic to assume that no such processes could take place at the time in the German film industry. When looking at the soundtrack of *Emil und die Detektive*, it becomes apparent that there is already a surprisingly complex sound aesthetic, and that sound post-production may have played a significant creative role. But the view that early sound film had very little potential to refine sound (either on location or in post-production) remains entrenched. Certainly, all attempts to return to original source material to explore and chart the past should be welcomed in this context.

Gerhard Lamprecht's film is a primary example of how sonic style in cinema was a process of evolution. In essence, *Emil und die Detektive*



should be recognised both as a remarkable sound achievement, and as a microcosm of the film medium's transition from the silent to the sound era.

*Emil und die Detektive* (1931)

Director: Gerhard Lamprecht  
 Producer: Günther Stapenhorst  
 Music: Allan Gray  
 Camera: Werner Brandes  
 Sound: Hermann Fritzsching  
 Screenplay: Billie Wilder  
 Original novel: Erich Kästner

an Universum-Film A.G. (Ufa) film

available on DVD:

Ufa DVD German DVD containing 1931 and 1954 remake, 2009

BFI DVD original 1931 German version with English language subtitles, 2013

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## APPENDIX

### ORIGINAL QUOTATIONS /HISTORIC FILM REVIEWS

(available on line via Filmportal):

#### Author's note

'H.H.' presumably initials of writer. This appears to be the approach at that time of *Lichtbild-Bühne*. Different newspapers had different formats – *Film Kurier* generally does not list any author unless the article represents a particular commentary by someone well-known, whose opinion is not normally published in the paper, but whose name is imbued with the concept of influential discourse. In addition, publishing conventions/policy appear potentially fluid over time and thus subject to change.

#### H. H., *Lichtbild-Bühne*, Nr. 289, 3.12.1931

<http://www.filmportal.de/node/13777/material/667492> (accessed 06/10/2013)

'Eine glückliche Idee war es, Erich Kästners prächtigen Jungens-Roman als Stoff heranzuziehen. Diese Geschichte von den entschlossenen Bengels, die es auf eigene Faust unternehmen, einen ausgekochten Betrüger zur Strecke zu bringen, ist frisch-originell, bietet vor allen Dingen filmische Möglichkeiten. Die auch der Manuskriptverfasser Billy Wilder zu nutzen verstand. Sicher aufbereitet, geschickt durchkonstruiert bot das Drehbuch offenbar eine Unterlage, mit der es sich schon arbeiten ließ.'

(...)

'Dieser Film hat Atmosphäre. Von ihm geht eine Frische aus, eine Jungenhaftigkeit, die mitreißt. Das ist eine Welt, erfaßt mit der Phantasie und Illusionskraft des Kindes. Eine Welt, wie man sie selbst als Junge gesehen: Der Hauptreiz des Films, dessen Zauber man verfallen muß. Gerhard Lamprecht, dem Regisseur, gebührt hierfür allererste Anerkennung. Das geht ohne Stocken vom (raffiniert stummen) Anfang bis zum bravourösen Schluß.'

'Die Männer an der Bild- (Werner Brandes) wie an der Ton-Kamera (Hermann Fritzsing) brillierten ebenfalls mit vorzüglichen Leistungen.'

Wesentlich zum Erfolg trug die einfallsreiche musikalische Illustration Allan Greys bei, die streckenweise geradezu zum wesentlichen Träger der Handlung wird.

**Kinematograph, Nr. 280, 3.12.1931**

<http://www.filmportal.de/node/13777/material/667490> (accessed 19/10/2013)

‘Das Manuskript schrieb Billy Wilder. Ein junger Autor, über dessen Qualitäten viel gestritten wurde und der sich bisher, immer tastend nach neuen und originellen Formen, vielleicht hier und da noch etwas unsicher bewegte. Er verzeichnet jetzt einen Treffer ins Schwarze. Zeigt eine geradezu überragende Begabung für bestimmte Stoffe und rückt mit einem Schlag mit diesem Werk in die Reihe der ganz Großen.

Er schafft seinem Film ein geradezu faszinierendes Tempo, führt seine Handlung mit logischer Konsequenz auf der Linie des Sensationsdramas von Anfang an bis zu dem Augenblick, wo sich der gewöhnliche Dieb zum Bankräuber entpuppt.

Es ist ein Manuskript, das in vieler Beziehung Schulbeispiel sein könnte und das deutlich zeigt, daß es letzten Endes nur an der packenden Konzeption liegt, um den Erfolg zu sichern, und daß es absolut falsch ist, etwa zu behaupten, daß der Film nicht auch einmal nur durch den Inhalt Millionen zum Beifall zwingen könnte.’

**Georg Herzberg, *Film-Kurier*, Nr. 283, 3.12.1931** Herzberg:

<http://www.filmportal.de/node/13777/material/667488> (accessed 18/10/2013)

‘Das Manuskript dieses Films schrieb Billy Wilder. Eine saubere, vorbildliche Arbeit. So muß ein Detektiv-Film aussehen, so logisch und geschlossen.

Wilder's Arbeit ist um so mehr anzuerkennen, als sie nicht ohne Gefahren war. Der Autor hätte nämlich entweder den Stoff rettungslos verkindlichen können, so daß ein einigermaßen aufgeweckter Tertianer ihn verächtlich als Quatsch bezeichnen würde. Oder er hätte den Stoff fern allem kindlichen Verständnis entwickeln und dadurch den Kontakt zur Jugend verlieren können.

Billy Wilder und der Regisseur Gerhard Lamprecht haben die goldene Mittellinie gefunden, auf der allein der Stoff gestaltet werden konnte. Sie haben sich hineingelebt in die Seele der heutigen Jugend, die auch noch ihre romantischen Ideale hat, das Indianerspielen und die Freude am Cliqueswesen, aber deren Vertreter heute auch mit jungen Jahren schon einen ausgesprochen praktischen Sinn hat. Diese Jugend weiß, daß ein Telefon ein sehr nützliches und schnelles Verständigungsmittel ist, daß man sich ein Taxi mieten kann, aber auch bezahlen muß.’

**Erich Kaestner's diary notes: (published in *Emil und die Detektive* FILMtext, 1998, p160):**

'... Das Manuskript ist ekelhaft. Emil kauft in Neustadt einen Blumentopf für die Großmutter. In Berlin, auf der Straßenbahn, kauft er einem Herrn den Fahrschein (...). Der 'Stier von Alaska' wird er genannt. Pony 'die Rose von Texas' (...) Die ganze Atmosphäre des Buchs ist beim Teufel. Und ich werde Anfang der Woche saugrob werden, wenn ich mit Stapenhorst rede. Heute hoffe ich mit Preßburger zu sprechen ...'

**Erich Kästner's review of *Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier* (published in *Das Ufa-Buch*, 1992, p270) entitled *Die Ästhetik des Tonfilms***

'Ich bin gegen den akustischen Realismus. Meine Kollegen nehmen alles auf, was zu hören ist, und ihnen ist es gleich, ob die Bildsituation dazu berechtigt ist. Stellen Sie sich vor, daß ein verankertes Liebespaar im Straßenlärm steht. Glauben Sie, daß die beiden die Autos und Straßenbahnen und Gesprächsfetzen überhaupt hören oder doch entfernt so wie wer, der den Lärm betrachtet? Aber die Regisseure beachten das nicht.'

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