Themenheft: Early Sound Cinema in the Late Weimar Republic
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The Hokuspokus Debate, Technological Aurality, and Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier

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The international proliferation of sound cinema in 1929 and 1930 brought the analog multimedia age to its interwar apex, and the experience of the new medium constituted an expansion of the experience of sound. What sound film could do, and how talking pictures were made, became topics not only for the film press but for the movies themselves: as Jörg Schweinitz observes, the fascination with the technical and cultural aspects of the new form sparked an «autothematic wave» in early German sound film. In the following analysis of Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier (The Shot on the Soundstage, dir. Alfred Zeisler, 1930) I will outline and discuss two initial critical responses to the film, both of which buttressed contending positions established only a short period earlier in connection with the Ufa courtroom comedy Hokuspokus (Hocus-Pocus, dir. Gustav Ucicky, 1930). The majority position (in the trade press) lauded the narrative economy and technical achievement of these dialog-driven films, hailing them as proof that sound cinema had emancipated itself from the theater and established itself as a new art form. The dissenting criticism (represented here by Siegfried Kracauer) argued that exactly those achievements had rapidly extinguished the new medium's potential for aesthetic innovation. For Kracauer, Hokuspokus and Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier proved once again how the German industry had simply thrust the stage onto the screen (Kracauer, «Hokuspokus» 383).

A survey of the trade press and Kracauer’s film critical work in the 1920s and early 1930s shows that affirmative critics and dissenters alike were aware to varying degrees of the conceptual and experiential problems triggered by the modernization of listening in interwar urban soundscapes. But they did not connect discussion of those problems with their respective discussions of Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier. I would like to make up for this lost opportunity by demonstrating how the film itself thematizes aspects of an audio modernization that included the talkie revolution but extended beyond the cinema as well. After initially reconstructing the conflict between Kracauer and the trade press on the matter of sound film’s relationship to theater, I will examine how Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier documents a range of functions and malfunctions of a precisely engineered sonic environment. One
strand of my analysis focuses on how recording infrastructure and acoustical engineering of space generate a precisely controlled soundscape that can nonetheless explode into tumult. A second, related strand examines how a recording medium, once present in the space of everyday life, changes aurality by capturing sonic traces of human actions in new ways and thus allows listeners to re-experience moments presumed lost. As a concept, aurality encompasses the mosaic of stimuli, sensations, and perceptions that make up the experience of hearing. Strictly defined, aural phenomena are physical, and aural experience is physiological and psychological. With the microphone, however, technology enters the aural domain, and *Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier* offers a fictional yet pertinent illustration of the ramifications of this new technological presence. Given his intense interest in the changing nature of sensation and perception in the interwar era, such an illustration would have warranted Kracauer’s attention. But surprisingly he saw nothing new in *Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier*, and I will therefore analyze how the film’s adherence to nascent narrative convention distracted Kracauer from perceiving its value as a key document in the history of sound film.

It is customary to assume that German sound cinema needed at least a few years to find itself, that the infancy of the new medium stretched beyond the death of the Weimar Republic that had witnessed the talking picture’s birth. But Corinna Müller’s compelling study of the silent-to-sound transition frames it differently, as did the trade press of the era.¹ In June 1930, that press featured retrospective commentaries on the year that had elapsed since the earth-shattering premiere of *The Singing Fool* (dir. Lloyd Bacon, 1928) at Berlin’s Gloria-Palast on 3 June 1929. In a paradigmatic piece published in *Der Film*, critic H. Ryk.² lauded the many accomplishments that those 365 days had seen: hot on the heels of Jolson, there was the first German foray into sound film, *Das Land ohne Frauen* (Land Without Women, dir. Carmine Gallone, 1929), followed in quick succession by such films as E.A. Dupont’s international sensation *Atlantic* (1929) and the Ufa action-romance *Die Nacht gehört uns* (The Night Belongs to Us, dir. Carl Froelich, 1929), which convinced Ryk that the young German sound film had matched, if not exceeded, the American technical standard (Ryk).³

German film art and the American technical advance experienced a matrimony of sorts when Josef von Sternberg arrived in Berlin to direct *Der blaue Engel* (The Blue Angel, 1930), about which the critic and theorist Hans Wollenberg wrote, «Wir glauben hier zum ersten Mal einer neuartigen und originären Gesetzen unterworfenen Verwendung von Sprache und Laut in einem Kunstwerk begegnet zu sein. Das ist richtunggebend!» («Der blaue Engel»).
If, as Ryk argued, sound film’s principal remaining difficulties in 1930 were
dramaturgical, not technical, then Wollenberg’s assessment of Der blaue En-
gel suggested that even those dramaturgical problems were solvable not in the
far but rather in the near term.

To note these enthusiastic responses to the young medium’s innovations
is not to exchange one narrow view for another. Compared with the audio-
visual experience that awaits the spectator in the best-equipped cinemas of
the 2010s, the cinema of 1929 and 1930 was without doubt primitive. And
opposing views on the merit of the films so praised in the trade press were not
hard to find: Kracauer’s thrashing of Der blaue Engel is but one example. At
the same time, the public discourse and the films themselves demonstrate a
legitimate history of accomplishment in those 365 days, as well as recognition
of that progress. The German sound film had not only shown, it had also real-
ized significant potential.

But what exactly had it achieved, and what possibilities had those achieve-
ments foreclosed? The drive to match or even better Hollywood standards
was exactly what put off critics who had held out hope for an aesthetically
radical impulse to flourish, even if only briefly, as the sound era dawned. In
their minds, to view sound as an addition – even a transformative addition –
was to miss the point. The emergence of sound-on-film, they held, took the
medium back to a point of origin. As Müller puts it, sound was an interven-
tion into the medium, not its completion (16). It was a chance to start anew,
which, if we follow Kracauer, the industry promptly and predictably missed.
Kracauer had experienced and theorized the silent era’s defining achievement,
a discourse of images (Bilderrede) that required no verbal recourse to con-
vey the attitudes embodied by the likes of Jannings and Chaplin, narrate à
la Griffith or argue like Eisenstein. Having witnessed how filmic discourse
could break the bounds of the word, the advent of cinematic speech struck
him as paltry, the result of a stunning technical marvel exploited for a parlor
trick.

This trick pushed the cinema back into the vicinity of theater, Kracauer
found, and the gravity of the word was already pulling the sound film back
down to pedestrian ground, before it had a chance to take wing. Kracauer es-

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The genuinely new representational power of sound film, he argued, lay in the achievement of sound technology. The cinema, he believed, could now present the "real" in a way that had never before been possible. The new film, he claimed, was not just a reproduction of reality, but rather a new kind of reality itself, characterized by the new medium's unique capacity to capture and represent sounds in three dimensions.

In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that Kracauer observed further that the new film embodied the "Presence of Time". The cinema, in his view, now had the capacity to "incorporate" time in a way that had been previously impossible. This was a key feature of the new sound film, which not only allowed for the reproduction of sound but also for the manipulation of time in a way that was previously impossible. The cinema, in this sense, was no longer just a machine for reproducing images, but rather a tool for creating new kinds of time.

Kracauer's primary criterion for what constitutes a "real" film was its capacity to sound out "realities never before experienced". The new sound film, he believed, was the first to be able to "sound out" these realities. It was this capacity, he argued, that made the new sound film "true" to life. The cinema, in this sense, was no longer just a medium for reproducing reality, but rather a tool for creating new kinds of reality.

The new sound film, he believed, was a "new" aesthetic challenge. It was not just a matter of reproducing reality, but rather of creating new kinds of reality, in which the "human auditor" played a central role. The cinema, in this sense, was no longer just a tool for the reproduction of reality, but rather a tool for the creation of new kinds of reality, in which the "human auditor" played a central role.

The new sound film, in short, was a "product" of a new aesthetic challenge. It was not just a matter of reproducing reality, but rather of creating new kinds of reality, in which the "human auditor" played a central role. The cinema, in this sense, was no longer just a tool for the reproduction of reality, but rather a tool for the creation of new kinds of reality, in which the "human auditor" played a central role.

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introduction of sound automatically made film better, that is, that technical innovation equaled medial and artistic progress. But Kracauer’s dichotomy was also restrictive, as criticism of a film that just preceded Der Schuss im Tonfilmatteli showed. That film, Hokuspokus, moved trade press critics to declare that the designation filmed theater no longer applied. One finds in their descriptions a greater emphasis on technical processes than one finds in Kracauer, and it is this focus that makes their analyses worth examining more closely.

Hokuspokus is an especially well-suited example here because it is a film based on a play. As a courtroom comedy that turned on rapidly exchanged dialog and featured only four principal settings, the basic story was a recipe for filmed theater. But reviews suggest that the film’s achievement lay in its fidelity to its source and its ability to become something altogether different. The critic for Der Film lauded from the outset:


These remarks leave no doubt about the centrality of the word in Hokuspokus, becoming almost painstakingly quantitative in the assessment of how much speech makes it from the drama, untouched, into the film. At the same time, the reviewer is unabashed in his claim that the film becomes something more intense and contemporary than the play. By “more intense,” the critic means that the film makes sensory impressions that are too disproportionate for the realities of the stage and everyday life but logical for cinematic reality. The power of the image makes the comedy “eindruckswuchtiger, aufrührerischer und elementarer, als sie es je auf der Bühne hätte sein können” (Betz, “Hokuspokus”). The recollection of the intensification and resolution of these effects spurred Betz to frame the ultra-modern text in ancient terms: Hokuspokus was “eine Komödie im aristotelischen Sinne” (Betz, “Hokuspokus”). Writing in Film-Kurier, reviewer Hans Feld also addressed the film-theater relationship directly, noting that Hokuspokus screenwriters Karl Hartl and Walter Reisch did not shy away from using speech alone to narrate story events that, in silent film – “unter Sprengung der Theatergesetze” – would require a series of images (Feld, “Hokuspokus”).

In speaking of the laws of theater and making explicit reference to Aristotle, the critics reinforced exactly what Kracauer saw as the problem: the
proximity of theater and film. But Feld and Betz also argue that even a film like *Hokus Pokus*, which incorporates a majority of the theatrical forerunner’s dialogue, is something definitively new. The Aristotle reference is especially intriguing since the chapter of the *Poetics* that deals with comedy has never been found. It is announced by Aristotle in the introduction, but it remains a mystery. For Betz, the intensity of the impressions and their comic resolution is reminiscent of the Aristotelian model of emotional cleansing – an ancient dramatic objective realized by modern cinematic means. The remark is partly tongue-in-cheek, but the central point remains that the cinema has made of the play a new, more sensorily, physiologically, emotionally affecting experience.

Feld echoes this sentiment in his brief remarks on cinematographer Carl Hoffmann: «Jenseits der dem Theater gezogenen Grenzen bringt er Menschen, Figuren, Gesichter an den Zuschauer heran» (Feld, «Hokus Pokus»). In his opening paragraph, he is careful to identify *Hokus Pokus* as «ein Theaterstück, zum optisch-akustischen Werk gestaltet.» Echoing Wollenberg’s position on *Der blaue Engel*, Feld saw *Hokus Pokus* as «ein merklicher Ruck nach Vorwärts: Der Sprechfilm beginnt eigene Gesetze des Ausgleichs zwischen Bild und Ton zu finden» (Feld, «Hokus Pokus»). Further remarks establish in greater detail what this balance looks like. «Der Ton wird primär, das Wort ist Träger des Handlungsfortschritts,» Feld observes. The advance of the word to bearer of the narrative action is marked here as a significant innovation, but it does not mean the end of cinematic visuality: «Der Film, auch der gesprochene, bleibt dem Optischen verhaftet, eine selbstverständliche Forderung. Weshalb nicht auch, darüber hinaus, dem Klanglichen eine wesentlich größere Aufgabe zuweisen, als die bisherige, nur Kulisse zu sein» (Feld, «Hokus-Pokus»). This last remark reminds us that in the very early stages of sound film’s commercial viability, it was the norm to encounter movies that seemed like silent films with sound occasionally mixed in. In fact, many early talking pictures (*The Singing Fool* and its companion piece *The Jazz Singer* among them) were exactly that. These films, whose audio-tracks were provided by high-quality phonograph discs (known generically in Germany as *Nadelton*) were called «part-talkies» in American parlance, and they still showed many stylistic and structural features of silent film.

Taken together, Feld’s comments demarcate a basic critical position: theater-sourced film is not filmed theater; in fact, achieving a cinematic flow of verbal interchange that blends the vocal rhythms of the live stage with the larger-than-life visual impressions of the screen constitutes a successful breakthrough into new medial and artistic territory (*Neuland* is a term that recurs throughout his review). In direct opposition to Kracauer, Feld identi-
fies the move toward dialog-driven story as exactly the kind of progress in the
area of sound that Kracauer claims is destroyed by dialog.

Betz’s Der Film review stressed the necessity of considering the entire appa-
ratus of audiovisual recording at each stage of the creative process. Hartl
and Reisch “haben Wort und Bild ausgewogen, gegeneinander ausgespielt,
miteinander wirken lassen,” he maintained, and the actors displayed a new
level of competence in delivery for the microphone (Betz, “Hokuspokus”).
Feld’s Film Kurier review also praised both conception and execution. “Schon
das Drehbuch bedarf einer ganz anderen geistigen Durchdringung,” Feld
observed, and he lauded Ucicky as a director of cinematic voices: “Ucicky,
in der Führung der Sprecher am Unsterblichen Lump geschult und darüber
hinausgewachsen, gibt ihnen die Möglichkeit der Entwicklung. (Womit der
Beweis erbracht, dass auch differenzierte Sprechfilmregie kein Monopol der
Theaterleute ist)” (Feld, “Hokuspokus”). The actors, he noted, were becom-
ing more proficient enunciators, which is to say more aware of the medial
nuances of their vocal art: “Die Filmleute stehen hinter den Kollegen vom
Theater kaum zurück; sie sind dabei, den Vorsprung der Dialogbeherrschung
einzuholen.” Film could not only stand alone vis-à-vis theater; it could be
better. Feld summed it up in these terms: “Mit dem Dialogfilm Hokuspokus
hat die Ufa dem tönenden Film auf einem bisher unbeschrännten Gebiet zu
einem Triumph verholfen, der für die grandiose Aufwärtsentwicklung des
deutschen Tonfilms das beredteste Zeugnis ablegt” (Feld, “Hokuspokus”; em-
phasis added).

These reviews stake out a position that both undercuts and reinforces Kra-
cauer’s central thesis about the antithetical nature of speech and non-verbal
sound in the nascent talking picture. On the one hand, they demonstrate the
sensitivity of artists, industry types, and audiences to medium-specific prob-
lems of sound film design (broadly understood). Their discussion shows that
contemporaries framed sound film in 1930 not as a quantitative addition of
audio to visual but as a new medium, which explored new aesthetic terri-

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tory. On the other hand, the reviews demonstrate that Hokuspokus is Kra-
cauer’s prophecy fulfilled, in the way that the film relies on the spoken word
to be the scaffolding, without which the entire cinematic undertaking will
collapse.

Betz designates Hokuspokus a Dialogfilm, and this term was just one ele-
ment in the typology of films that Müller reconstructs in her study of the
silent-to-sound transition. She notes Gesangsfilm, Sprechfilm, and Geräusch-
film as three further common designations, the last of which was used to de-
scribe exactly those projects that sought to forego dialog-driven stories in fa-
vor of representing aspects of the sounding world that had nothing to do with
human speech. Müller argues that a major impetus behind such experimental projects originated with the «Sound Film Manifesto» drafted by major artists of the Soviet cinema (Pudovkin and Eisenstein, most prominently). Though scholarship has traditionally traced the effects of that manifesto only in the Soviet cinema, Müller argues that its prompt translation and broad dissemination through critical and creative ranks in the German film scene meant that the ideas of Eisenstein and his peers had a palpable impact on German theory and practice as well (18). It is clear that Kracauer’s either/or position shared much with the Soviets. As the trade press discussion of sound dramaturgy indicates, however, there were dimensions of early sound cinema for which Kracauer’s criticism did not rigorously account. Furthermore, neither the Soviets’ nor Kracauer’s frameworks could accommodate films that worked outside the binary, both reinforcing nascent dialog-narrative conventions and casting a critical (or at least ironic) light on those conventions by signaling the mechanisms of their construction and exploring the experience of sound for its own sake. Over the balance of this article, I will argue that Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier was just such a hybrid.

The initial run of Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier saw busy box offices and packed houses, and the response in the trade press bordered on effusive. Reviewing again for Der Film, Betz wrote:

[W]as das Bild an Aufregendem, an Sensationellem und an packenden Überraschungen bringt, das steigert der ihm verbundene Ton zu einem dramaturgischen Effekt von nie dagewesener Wirkung. Noch nie ist in einem Tonfilm die Fülle der neuen technischen Möglichkeiten so geschickt, so meisterhaft verwendet worden wie hier. (Betz, «Durchschlagender Erfolg»)

The review specifically lauded Zeisler for his overall aesthetic approach, which treated «Ton und Geräusch als dramaturgisches Element – nicht nur als gegebenes und daher irgendwie zu verwendendes Hilfsmittel.» It mentioned cinematographer Werner Brandes, set designers Willi Herrmann and Herbert Lippschütz, and sound editor Erich Leistner by name, praising all for their role in generating the compelling audiovisual world. And it made explicit mention of the quality of recording and playback, which was «voll und flüssig, ohne die geringsten Nebengeräusche.» Here one detects the affirmative tone that frequently characterizes film reviews in the trade press, but there is also evidence once again of attention to the new possibilities of sound and the desire to judge a film based on its exploitation of its new medial potential. As the review makes explicit, these were judgments of the dramaturgy of sound, a concept that appeared frequently in the trade press in 1930. Again, there was a recognition that sound was not merely a supplement to the visual image but a co-constituting element of a new kind of art.
Regarding technical dimensions, Film-Kurier reviewer Georg Herzberg echoed his colleague at Der Film: «Das Tontechnische des Films ist vollendet. Man spürt die Technik gar nicht mehr, und das ist das Beste» (Herzberg, «Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier»). This comment represents the second prime criterion in the critical judgment of early sound cinema. Even as detractors and defenders stressed the importance of attending to sound as a co-constituent of the audiovisual image, not merely a supplement to pictures, they also placed great value on the technical apparatus of sound capture, production, and reproduction erasing itself. Like the visual image, sound was expected to achieve great sensory and dramatic magnitude, even as the machinery that produced it disappeared in exhibition.

Kracauer agreed that this second objective of technical proficiency and the auto-erasure of the apparatus was well met in Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier: «Die Wiedergabe des Tons hat sich merklich vervollkommnet, und das gelisperelte S wird wohl bald ganz verschwinden. Dank dem technischen Fortschritt sind die darstellerischen Leistungen lockerer, freier» («Film-Notizen» 389). But he directly contradicted the trade press consensus on the matter of sound film vs. theater. What he had stressed in his review of Hokuspokus applied here as well: «Die großen Chancen des tönenden Films werden vertan, wenn man die Leute Dialoge führen lässt wie auf der Bühne. […] Macht die zusammenhängende Rede zum Handlungsgerüst, so ist das rein visuelle Geschehen eine bloße Zutat und kann sich nicht mehr ungehindert entfalten» («Film-Notizen» 389). It is tempting to take such remarks as garden variety aesthetic conservatism, with an emotional charge of nostalgia: the champions of film art, forced to witness that art’s undoing of its own progress, now long to wind back the medium’s technological clock. But were it that simple, then there would be no need to insist on «great opportunities.» This raises the question of whether the compulsion of speech that quickly became the norm in the early sound era foreclosed the possibility of realizing the opportunities of the new medium, as Kracauer thought was the case with Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier.

The film’s detective story genre supplies a character whose modus operandi mirrors that which Kracauer ascribes to the medium in general. Kriminalrat Holzknecht (Ernst Stahl-Nachbaur) articulates his rule of thumb simply and straightforwardly: «Ein schönes runderes Geständnis ist mir lieber als ein ganzer Sack voll Belastungsmaterial.» Like the sound film, the homicide investigator is driven to make people talk. In pursuing his objective, Holzknecht manages by design and by accident to discover previously unknown dimensions of the sound film world. The movie itself generates similar illumination about its medium, even as it — to Kracauer’s ear — generally does the wrong thing.
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The film begins with an embrace and a kiss. In a medium shot, we see two figures in profile, and we hear the chime of a clock. Immediately, then, the film signals its new bisensory representational capacity, first using only the sound, then using a brief insert shot of the clock to confirm the source. The lovers are soon interrupted by a more troublesome sound: the door buzzer. It could not possibly be Fräulein Caspar, the man insists, somewhat out of sorts, ushering the woman into the adjacent bedroom. Naturally, it is Caspar, and a classic scene of confrontation between the jilted lover and the new couple ensues. As the verbal sparring boils over into a physical confrontation, Caspar draws a pistol from her purse, tries to force her way through the man into the bedroom, and fires a shot through the door. We then hear a scream and shout in quick succession. The scream is not speech but intelligible noise: it is the young woman’s death scream. The shout is verbal – «Halt!» – and the response to it by characters and camera signals immediately that this opening is actually a scene (scene 25b, to be exact) of a film within the film Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier. The source of the shout (as a panning camera soon shows) is Kalser (Erwin Kalser), the director of the film within the film, and he clarifies for the confused actors that the scene must be reshot because the gun discharged too soon.

Just after Kalser’s «Halt!» the sound engineer notes from his cabin above the set that the death scream of the actress playing the new girlfriend (Fräulein Saylor, played by Berthe Ostyn) sounded brilliantly authentic. Moments later, the composure of all present is suddenly and severely tested: in the brief exchange that ensues as cast and crew reset for the scene, it becomes clear that Fräulein Saylor has been shot with a weapon that is all too real. The authentic-sounding scream signaled an actual death.

One of the first lessons of sound filmmaking was the necessity of a hermetically sealed sonic environment, in which «quiet on the set» would be synonymous with quiet, period. Egresses were few, a fact that the film accurately reflects. Kalser recognizes the criminological expediency of the building design almost immediately, and he orders a crew member to seal the sole door and stand watch there until further notice. Holzknecht and his sidekick, Kommissar Möller (Alfred Beierle), make the scene in short order, and in the balance of the film, we explore together the spaces of cinematic production and homicide perpetration, with eyes peeled and ears piqued.

In 1930, moviegoers familiar with accounts of film production published frequently in the trade and popular press had a preconceived image of the world behind the scenes (Müller 367–68). In that image, the camera was immobile, hermetically sealed in a cramped cabin (Box) within the cavernous soundstage, clicking and whirring away, sonically isolated from the sensitive
ear of the microphones placed within the walls of the set and hanging from booms above. We see and hear this ourselves throughout Der Schuss im Ton- 
filmmatelier: the box that houses the optical camera and its two operators is shown multiple times from within and without, and a series of exchanges be-
tween the Berlin dialect-speaking cameramen provides local color and comic relief at various junctures. The shots of the box are accompanied by shots of
the sound apparatus: the lead sound engineer in his booth, on the mezzanine
level above the set; the microphone booms; and the technicians in the record-
ing rooms, where the remotely located sound cameras record the audio sig-
nals from the microphones on celluloid, creating the raw sound track. What
we do not see, of course, is the unchambered, movable camera that captures
the images of the immobile, chambered camera. It is this «blimped» camera
(Verpackte Kamera in German), in the middle of the set but never shown
in the film, that shoots the opening sequence. Der Schuss im Tonfilm-
atelier draws back the filmmaking curtain extensively. The camera in the middle
remains hidden, though, despite the fact that it could easily be showcased.
All eyes receive visual data that point to its existence— it pans 180 degrees in
the opening sequence, for instance, which would be impossible for the cam-
era in the box— but only a spectator with trained eyes would take conscious
note.

It is not surprising that any reference to the visually concealed yet undoubt-
edly present blimped camera is absent from reviews in the popular press, since
such technical details were not especially pertinent to general commentary on
production and entertainment value. More surprising is the absence of such obser-
vations by trade press journalists, who frequently visited studios and
would have easily noted the missing camera. Müller argues forcefully that
this silence was conspiratorial: the writers, she claims, agreed not to mention
what was obvious to them because they did not want to ruin the effect of the
legend of sound film production, which the industry wanted its audience to
keep on believing (366–69). Without contradicting that argument, I empha-
size here a further correspondence between the reviews. They also, without
fail, take up the very issues of speech, sound, and the aural-visual balance that
were treated in the pieces on Hokusokus, suggesting the dominance in Au-
gust and September 1930 of larger conceptual concerns about how the new
medium should define itself against speech-based theater and image-based
silent film.

As even Müller concedes, the film itself accurately reveals a number of au-
thentic aspects of sound film production. In other words, it participates visu-
ally in a process of medial self-definition. And the object of greatest technical,
narrative, and visual interest in Der Schuss im Tonfilmmatelier is arguably the
sound system, to which the audience is granted ample visual access, even as the blimped camera remains unphotographed. This simultaneous display and concealment generate a fraught perceptual situation: the audience is granted a look and a listen behind the veil of sound film production yet shielded from sensory data that would disrupt the pleasurable processing of the unfolding narrative. The sound film draws attention to itself as sound film, but not in a way that disrupts conventional patterns of reception. As Marion Tendam argues in an essay on meta-phenomena in early sound film, these «sound film signals» to the audience break cinematic illusion at targeted moments in order to cement filmic reality effects in the final analysis. Borrowing a term from Michel Chion, Tendam argues that the game initiated by these signals reinforces an «audiovisuellen Pakt» that connects the events on the screen to the realm of reception, «um auf diese Weise das rein technische Zustandekommen der tonfilmischen Wahrnehmungsatmosphäre vergessen zu machen» (Tendam 228). This is the dual edge of reading Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier: even as the audience watches and listens to a movie about making a movie, it has little opportunity to probe into the techniques that conceal the technologies that generated the very movie it sees and hears. As the film exposes the world behind the scenes, the spectators become insiders who are unaware of their blind spots. They can be confident that they know all the essentials of how sound film is made, while actually grasping very little about how *this* sound film was made.

In their world, the fictional cast and crew are film professionals, so they are familiar with the technical dimensions of filmmaking. As with the audience, however, that familiarity has its limits. In the studio, the characters inhabit an environment densely populated with recording devices. Though generally aware that they are encompassed by these technologies, they are unable to attend simultaneously to all those devices, how they function, when they are functioning, and what the ramifications of the recording process may be. They think that they already have it figured out, and even if they did not, such multifaceted attention is simply too tall an order for an individual human perceiver. There is thus a lag between the characters’ understanding of their media-related experience and their analytical grasp of precisely how the medial component of their environment changes that experience. They know, for example, that the microphone hears all, but their verbalization still follows the unspoken principle that if they speak when no one else is around, no one else will hear.

There is a logic to thinking that no one else can hear when no one else is around, but it is not a logic that is consciously elaborated and confirmed with each utterance. In fact, this kind of thinking is hardly thinking at all: it is the
kind of intuitive, preconscious mental guidance of behavior that transpires in milliseconds and goes unreflected. It is a habit, in this case one formed over millennia of human audition. Those millennia had seen any number of means of eavesdropping; the very term harkens back to surreptitious listening without technological aid. But this habit accumulated a much more significant degree of risk in the age of the microphone. In addition to being a whodunit and a police procedural, *Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier* also charts a move toward awareness of the ramifications of technological aurality. At critical moments, characters become acutely aware of the suddenly perilous dimensions of their habit of letting the eye judge what could and could not be heard by whom. These short bursts of awareness create conditions for a new understanding not only of the technology but of the habits themselves, habits that must be reconsidered once aurality and technology interpenetrate. It is at such moments that the film becomes an unwitting document of this moment in the history of aural experience, a moment at which an environment permeated by recording technology becomes feasible on a limited scale. The sound studio is by no means paradigmatic of the degree to which recording devices have proliferated in all spaces of life by 1930. It is an exceptional case, but it prophetically indicates the possibility of a much wider presence of technologized aurality. The absence of acknowledgment of these issues in Kracauer’s review is strange – the habits and conditions of perception, after all, were among his central analytical foci throughout his intellectual career. I will now turn to his theorization of those habits and conditions, in order to recognize in Kracauer’s thought what is missing from his film comment and to provide as a basis for my further analysis of the film.

Kracauer’s interest in perception, habit, and everyday experience is traceable as early as 1922, in a series of remarks from «Die Wartenden.» In this early essay, he focuses on the historical undoing of the traditions of religion, which augured the modern conditions under which individuals lead socially atomized, culturally impoverished, spiritually empty lives. There is no nostalgic wish for old times to return, however, nor is there pessimism. Instead, Kracauer sketches out an attitude or stance (*Haltung*) of waiting as a hesitating openness, through which those who wait might be able to reinject meaning into existence, a meaning appropriate to their juncture of history. This stance should foster a mode of understanding that cannot be conveyed as knowledge: «[Es] lässt sich nicht als Wissen vermitteln, da es gelebt zu werden verlangt und überdies Erkenntnis des Betrachtenden dem Leben und seiner Kunde vorgreift» («Die Wartenden» 169). In playing the archaic *Kunde* off against its more modern counterpart *Wissen*, Kracauer establishes an opposition between an understanding that maintains close proximity to the physical
and sensory experience of life and the abstract knowledge that has a stronger affinity with theoretical discourse. The problem with Wissen is that it literally removes human beings from their own reality, jumping ahead of life to draw conclusions before things unfold.

To move toward Kunde, one must shift emphasis «von dem theoretischen Ich auf das gesammnmenschliche Ich» (169), a shift that forms a mutually reinforcing relationship with the movement «aus der atomisierten unwirklichen Welt der gestaltlosen Kräfte und der des Sinnes baren Größen» and into «die Welt der Wirklichkeit und der von ihr umschlossenen Sphären» (169). According to Kracauer, the intellectual trend of the postwar years has led thinking people directly away from reality, not toward it:

> Infolge der Überspannung des theoretischen Denkens sind wir dieser Wirklichkeit, die von leibhaftigen Dingen und Menschen erfüllt ist und deshalb konkret gesehen zu werden verlangt, in einem entsetzenerregenden Maße ferngerückt. Wer versucht, in sie einzuschwingen und sich mit ihr zu befreund, der gelangt natürlich nicht ohne weiteres zu einem sie konstituierenden Sinn (169; emphasis added).

Those who do make the attempt to reenter reality may, though, at least discover that «das Leben mit dem Nächsten, dass überhaupt die wirklche Welt in ihrer ganzen Breite mannigfachen Gesetzlichkeiten unterliegt, die weder theoretisch-begrifflich ausmehbar, noch lediglich die Frucht subjektiver Willkür sind» (169). Meaning does not simply leap out at those who take these steps, but a modicum of understanding of the governing principles of life may be possible. It is a modest objective, but one that can only be had (if at all) by living one’s reality, seeing it concretely, perceiving and becoming friendly with it. These principles, however, are neither so general that they can become axiomatic (like the laws of physics, for instance) nor so specific that they can be seen as the result of individual arbitrary inclination. They form a system, but it is a system that can only be glimpsed at close experiential range. When Kracauer speaks of the I that is common to all humanity, then, he is not thinking in idealistic, moral terms but in terms of concrete experience: we all see, hear, touch, and navigate an environment of people and things. That is what connects us.

The desire to understand reality in this way is what draws Kracauer to the quotidian, the popular, the everyday. Christian Sieg argues that Kracauer «searches for phenomena of everyday life that throw into relief what is normally experienced but not recognized as such» (112). As framed by Sieg, Kracauer’s concept of the real «refers to a field of human action that unfolds along lines as yet unrecognized but principally understandable. […] [T]he ‘real’ in Kracauer might be characterized as preconscious behavior, situated precisely between [the] unconscious and consciousness» (113). Kracauer’s redemptive
criticism, as Miriam Hansen designated it, «attempts to rescue experiences from the ephemeral» in order to assess them on their own terms, and these experiences without doubt encompass what Sieg calls «the habitual sphere» (113). With this in mind, one can read Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier as a document of what happens when a new phenomenon (the microphone) becomes present in and thus disrupts reality, forcing habits of verbalization and audition from the preconscious to the conscious realm and triggering a reconfiguration of perception. Even as Kracauer wrote off the film, it was doing his work for him.

In Holzknecht, the film features a character who is rigorously trained as an aural perceiver and thus more consciously attuned to aural habits and sound processing. When he arrives, he conducts an inventory of vocal responses to the crime and a survey of the engineered space of seeing and hearing, in order to determine how its assets may work in his investigative favor. In one scene, he touches and contemplates the microphone that hangs in the vicinity of the shooting before strolling slowly past some crewmen, picking up their ad hoc eulogies and quietly scanning their words for case evidence. They notice his listening, and the conversation lulls. Holzknecht puts two and two together.

Proceeding on the most plausible hunch that the shooter is either Fräulein Maurus (Gerda Maurus) or Harry Frank (Harry Frank), Holzknecht maneuvers them into location for a brief conversation, then leaves them alone to calm each other by talking through what has happened. Möller is confused by the tactic of leaving two suspects alone to sort out their stories, but Holzknecht heads directly for the command and control center of sound cinema: the audio control booth. Here, he asks the sound engineer (Friedrich Franz Stampe) to engage microphone seven, which hovers above Maurus and Frank, who now speak freely, guided by the preconscious notion that Holzknecht’s corporal absence means that they are beyond his audible range. This is a fruitful tactic at first: Maurus and Frank are engaged to be married, and the recently deceased Fräulein Saylor is Frank’s former lover, which means that they are inclined to suspect and interrogate one another – with Holzknecht listening in at the sound engineer’s side and watching them from above. Frank pleads with Maurus to be honest with him and asks her whether she was the shooter. Maurus turns her head away and upward in a diva’s show of exasperation, and as she does so, her line of sight crosses the microphone. She freezes for a moment, then states the obvious and asks an ominous question: «Da hängt ein Microphon! Vielleicht ist es eingeschaltet?» A cut takes us back to Holzknecht, who instructs the engineer to switch off. «Ich glaube, wir werden jetzt nichts Interessantes mehr zu hören kriegen.»

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As a narrative component, this scene displays a new investigative method and thus tips off the audience as to how Holzknecht might solve the crime. In terms of aural and verbal habits, Maurus’s reaction illustrates the lag effect noted above, which occurs when a new medium proliferates in an everyday setting: everyone knows about the medium, but few understand with precision its structures, techniques, and ramifications. Most, therefore, do not realize how to best adjust their expressive and communicative habits, given the presence of the new medium. And even those who should know better suffer lapses of attention, as Maurus and Frank demonstrate. Questioning one another at the table, they fail to arrive immediately at the simple realization that the microphone need make no distinction between recording their performances and recording their private conversations. Maurus becomes aware of the mic by accident, and when she does, a moment of stunned silence signals the actors’ realization that the microphone is far more than a tool that helps them ply their trade.

Despite Holzknecht’s remark to the sound engineer, there are interesting things yet to hear in the film. Holzknecht and Möller cannot track down the murder weapon, for example, but the weapon betrays its own location through sound when excessive heat in the resistor box where the murderer stashed the pistol makes a shell discharge. Moments later, we witness another aural explosion. An image of a hand dropping a match into a pile of unspooled film sets up a one-minute fire-in-the-studio sequence, in which a torrent of screams fills the soundtrack and all but drowns out the shouted exchange between Kalser, assistant director Kemp (Paul Kemp), and the two investigators. Aside from a sensory rush that signals the imminent narrative climax, this sequence also shows how quickly the precisely engineered aural system of the sound studio can be overwhelmed. Instead of sound being controlled, here it dominates: no one can escape the physical impact of the collective scream. This intense impact is due in large part to the sealed, comparatively small space of the studio. Within those spatial bounds, sound achieves greater reverberation than it would in an exterior setting. To the ear, the sound lives a little longer, and so to our perceptual processing center, the sensory information remains readable for another split-second. This illustrates the basic principle that sound can be conserved and manipulated through technical (in this case, architectural) intervention. Along with the insurmountable boundary of the spatial seal, this principle will be the murderer’s downfall.

It is directly after the aural deluge stemming from the fire-triggered panic that Holzknecht becomes educated about a more permanent means of sound conservation. He wanders into an editing room, where he meets a sound editor’s assistant (Eva Behmer), who is cutting the unneeded sections of film
away from those to be used in the final print. Holzknecht notices something odd: the film is not imprinted with meters of still images in identically sized and spaced frames, rather with a narrow, constantly exposed strip of endlessly shifting shades of gray, near the left edge. This is the sound track of the Tobis sound-on-film system, and Holzknecht is perceptually arrested in his contemplation of it. He is especially intrigued when the assistant tells him that they always have recordings of pre-shot banter that the microphones catch while the remote sound cameras are reaching their proper synchronous speed. «Wir lachen uns manchmal halb tot, was da unten im Atelier alles gequetscht wird, wenn die Leute glauben, es hört niemand. Für den fertigen Film wird das alles wegeschnitten.» He immediately asks her to edit together a length of film containing everything that she has thrown away, and it is this joined strand of castaway threads that contains the murderer’s pre-crime allocution of his guilt. The unraveling of the killer’s cover-up is literal, an unraveling of audio film.

This cutting room collaboration sets up the film’s climactic interrogation. Having heard the killer incriminate himself on the discarded length of sound film, Holzknecht has the evidence prepared for a special exhibition in the screening room. He first plays the sound scene – it is only the audio track, no images – for director Kalser, Kemp, and the sound engineer. The sound engineer confirms that the exchange just heard is a conversation captured inadvertently between takes, and after a few moments of contemplation and discussion, Kemp and Kalser confirm that the voice of the apparent killer belongs to a bit-part player named Max Seemann Thoeren (Robert Thoeren). What they all hear (along with the cinema audience) is an exchange in which a male voice demands more money, a female voice refuses to pay any more, and the male voice threatens dire consequences. Lest there be any doubt what is at stake, the female voice exhorts the male voice at one juncture: «Was fällt dir denn ein? Tu den Revolver weg!» Once consensus on the killer’s identity is reached, Holzknecht requests that Kalser summon Seemann Thoeren to the screening room for questioning.

Seemann Thoeren enters the scene with a tenuous confidence that is further shaken in his verbal exchange with Holzknecht and Möller. The actor first denies that he even knows the deceased Fräulein Saylor, but after making him stumble in direct examination, Holzknecht trips his suspect up completely with the captured conversation. The actual playback sequence is subtly yet thoroughly self-reflexive. In essence, this is a fifty-second, shot-countershot dialog (fifteen shots, alternating with perfect timing). Zeisler carefully matches the duration of the takes to the rhythms of the verbal back and forth between Berthe Ostyn and Robert Thoeren, but Ostyn’s Fräulein Saylor is of
course dead, so her presence in the scene is strictly sonic. The alternating images are thus not of a speaking Seemann Thoeren and a speaking Fräulein Saylor. Rather, they show a speechless Seemann Thoeren and the static grille of a loudspeaker, mounted in the screening room wall, that becomes interactive with Seemann Thoeren as it conveys both his and Fräulein Saylor’s voices. Instead of an exchange between two human figures with mouths moving synchronously with articulated words, what we see and hear is an exchange between a human figure and a strangely incarnate speaking thing, both of which feature static vocal openings, and only one of which actually produces sound – as it re-produces speech. Seemann Thoeren stands in shock as the dialog unfolds. Only now does he realize that he, having so cleverly concealed the experience of the soundscape, wept in an exchange with Seemann Thoeren as it conveys both his and Fräulein Saylor’s voices.

As Adalbert Forstreuter and other critics seeking to characterize the strange character of the radio voice in the mid-1930s would recognize, the fact that our own skull is a resonance chamber means that there is literally no other human being for whom our voice sounds as it sounds to us. Our voice, conveyed by an audio medium and thus externally sourced, is in concrete terms a new sound to our ears. It is foreign, even if immediately familiar. This uncanny fusion of the known and unknown aural signature of the self produces a moment of shock, and this shock is a component of the paralysis experienced by Seemann Thoeren when he hears the sound of his own voice originating from the vibrations of a speaker membrane, not his own vocal cords. Here he becomes suddenly conscious of being caught in an exchange that he thought no one else could hear, and this awareness jarringly casts his preconscious aural and verbal habits into stark relief. If we break down this moment of insight as a case example that tells us something about the history of media and the history of sound, we find an illustration of what it would mean to live in a world – virtually realized in the artificial, sealed environment of the soundstage – in which no sound ever dies, even those that, for whatever reason, one would prefer to lose to silence. As a work of architecture, the studio itself is a technical intervention that prolongs the life of sounds by fractions of seconds, as was demonstrated in the cacophony caused by the fire. In the sound film studio, the apparatus of audio capture, processing, and playback is a near-ubiquitous infrastructure within that structure, an infrastructure capable of regenerating the sounds of the past – not only those designed for recording, but also the incidental verbal and non-verbal sounds that flesh out a given soundscape. In the aural environment of the soundstage, sounds are redeemed from dissipation, and speech and noise temporally past but still virtually reverberating can be made resonant again. To make a past sound
present again – not in a dream or a story told but via mechanical-electronic capture and playback – is to make a dead moment vibrant again, creating a synchronous existence of past and present that time itself does not allow.

In the age of smartphones, podcasts, and cloud-based audio servers, this technological archiving of aural experience is nothing unusual. In 1930, it was markedly stranger, since such archiving was the province of the sound-media industries, not a hobby that one could indulge in via a common, mobile device. The fictional cast and crew who populate Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier are a group of people for whom a principal space of everyday life – the workplace – overlaps with an audio industry. This overlap creates the basic condition for a murderer to betray himself, but that is just the most sensational illustration of how aural life changes, once recording infrastructure spreads through the structures of everyday experience.

Was this world of sound’s virtual immortality tantamount to a «Darstellung und Formung der durch keine früheren Mittel noch vernommenen Wirklichkeit, jener Wirklichkeit, die auf der Bühne bisher nicht mitgesprochen hat,» as Kracauer sought in his programmatic 1928 essay («Tonbildfilm» 124)? Did Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier provide a new sense of «das Tönen und Lärmen um uns, das mit den Bildeindrücken noch niemals kommunizierte und stets den Sinnen entging» («Tonbildfilm» 124)? My reading emphasizes the film’s unprecedented depiction of sonic environs and audio recording, and the trade press critics were in consensus that Zeisler’s film followed the trail blazed by Hokuspokus in fusing elements of theater and silent film into a definitely new art form. But Kracauer’s review of Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier makes it clear that he did not see aural innovation in the film, and there are three basic reasons for this. To understand the first, we can return to «Die Wartenden» and to Sieg’s account of Kracauer’s theory of the ordinary. In the passages that I considered from that text, one notes the preponderance of visual concerns. The reality that lies beyond the grasp of overwrought theoretical thinking, according to Kracauer, must be lived and seen concretely. Living involves all senses, but in Kracauer’s framing of the move from abstract Wissen to the Kunde of reality, vision predominates. The soundscape is a recurring concern throughout his feuilletonistic writing of the interwar era and his major late texts (Theory of Film in particular), but it does not achieve equity with the visual image at the center of his intellectual project. Sound’s invisibility and ephemerality simply do not align well with his method.

Secondly, Kracauer’s interest as a cartographer of modern experience is surface-oriented. When his attention turns to sound, he is interested in it as a perceptible component of the complex sensory mosaic of the world, not so much in the infrastructural entrails that yield it. His term das Tönen und
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*Lärmen um uns* describes the extant soundscapes of the late 1920s and early 1930s (especially in cities), those unwieldy yet not totally random masses of sonic material that were not especially comparable to the engineered, controlled soundscapes of the film studio. This reason connects to the third, which involves Kracauer’s embeddedness in this moment of media history. Reading Kracauer and the film retrospectively as I do allows one to recognize the media-historical points that he missed, but it would have been difficult to speculate about a medium’s future permeation of aural experience from his temporal location (nor does his interwar work suggest strong interest in such speculation.)

Kracauer did not see evidence in *Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier* of noises that would take on the same life, «zu dem einst der stumme Film dem Spiel der Schatten und Lichter verhalf» («Über den musikalischen Tonfilm» 411). Perhaps he saw the killer witnessing his own unwitting testimony as yet another trick to get audience attention hung up on *speech*, a trick set up over the course of a film that trains its audience to attend to recording and playback in such a way that the sensory incongruity of the flowing words and the motionless mouth of Seemann Thoeren would seem unremarkable. Or perhaps it was simply the elaborate contrivance of the film within the film, all those sound film signals to the audience, drawing them into a game that would allow the most striking aural moments to register with the ear but fail to violate the audiovisual pact that Chion and Tendam characterize. In any case, Kracauer in the early sound era was searching for a film, «der […] die Dialogform zerbricht» («Film-Notizen» 189). In *Der Schuss in Tonfilmatelier*, he saw nothing that broke the paradigm of the stage, as the great silent cousins had broken the bounds of the word.

Nevertheless, I have drawn here on Kracauer’s own ideas about sensory aspects of reality, patterns of human perception, and levels of awareness of those patterns, in order to derive a vocabulary that allows us to characterize the density and complexity of *Der Schuss im Tonfilmatelier* as a document of technologically augmented aurality. As a film critic, Kracauer sees nothing of note in this movie. But as an experience-based aesthetic theorist, he charts an analytical trajectory for those who seek a more precise grasp of what cinema – outside or within the bounds of convention – did with problems of sound and media during its technological revolution in the twilight of the Weimar Republic.
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Notes

1 Müller’s close focus on the transitional phase allows her, for example, to consider Fritz Lang’s M «a comparatively late sound film,» and her analysis treats Wilhelm Thiele’s Die Drei von der Tankstelle (The Three from the Gas Station, 1930) as a case of the «perfection achieved at Ufa after only a half-year or so of accumulated sound filmmaking experience» (21). This scope is fruitful because it illuminates the magnitude of the technical and formal progress of the first year of commercial sound cinema.

2 As was common in the Weimar era, this critic is identified with an abbreviated name. For the sake of readability, I am omitting the period at the end of Ryk. in subsequent references, as I will do with Betz., who also wrote for Der Film.

3 Extant versions of the film make it difficult to assess how compelling Ryk’s claim is, but the conviction illustrates the perception of high quality.

4 According to Rudolf Arnheim, this limitation, jarring at first to our perceptual system, is the principal reason of the medium’s creative potential.

5 The «Sound Film Manifesto» is also known as the «Statement on Sound Film,» the «Statement on Sound» or simply «A Statement.» It was originally signed by Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Grigori Alexandrov, and it is generally associated with proponents of the Soviet cinema of montage (see Eisenstein et al.).

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