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Sounds of the City in *M* and *Emil und die Detektive*

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Pairing Fritz Lang’s proto-film noir, *M*, with Gerhard Lamprecht’s film adaptation of Erich Kästner’s popular children’s novel, *Emil und die Detektive*, might seem unpromising, but several considerations motivate it.¹ Both films are set in Berlin. Both deal with the pursuit of an elusive urban criminal whose unobtrusive visual appearance excludes him from suspicion. Both show how a supposedly powerless underclass succeeds in capturing him. Both show the limitations of a modern urban police force, but also how its increasingly methodical techniques can be effective in dealing with crime. And, important for my concerns as a historian, both premiered in 1931, a year of ever-mounting unemployment, already exceeding 20%, political paralysis after the elections of September 1930 destroyed even the possibility for a parliamentary majority to address the crises, and a proliferation of street demonstrations and political violence.² However, we should resist the temptation to interpret late Weimar exclusively in terms of catastrophe. Recent historians remind us instead to recognize how contemporaries’ awareness of crisis could also evoke expectations of renewal (See Fritzsc, «Weimar»; Koselleck; Graf, esp. 350–80; Föllmer and Graf, esp. 9–44).

One occasion for hopefulness about national renewal might be seen in the German film industry’s rapid conversion to sound in the months immediately prior to 1931, for from the earliest years of the republic many had come to see the film industry and its global expansion as a barometer for postwar German stature in the world.³ Corinna Müller, in her indispensable *Vom Stummfilm zum Tonfilm*, shows that the transition from silent to sound films in Germany was not «selbstverständlich» (245). At the beginning few thought that silent film would be eclipsed by sound (Rügner 93–95). Prominent German critics argued that sound film, with its «Realitätssuche,» could undermine film’s hard-won identity as art, with its imaginative essence (see Müller 16–17; Ashkenazi 249–50). Audiences, after initial fascination with the novelty, also seemed reluctant to abandon their familiar cinema experience with silent films. And due to the still primitive state of audio equipment in numerous outlying theaters, which often made dialogue barely understandable, some complained that watching a sound film was more taxing («anstrengend») than
going to the theater (Müller 245–46). Still, once the transition to sound was under way, acceptance did occur, Müller asserts, «ausserordentlich rasch» (245; see also 9–73, 108–85, 395–96). In response to the specter of runaway American dominance over the European film market, in early 1929 the Ufa management decided on a rapid conversion to the production and distribution of sound films, and it soon spurred international agreements among other film companies to overcome threatening patent wars and achieve interchangeability of equipment (Kreimeier 213). To be sure, Ufa’s prospering obscured the economic havoc suffered by smaller companies and the immense economic burdens levied on cinema owners as they converted to the new equipment. By 1931, however, technological innovations permitted the synchronization of different sounds onto a single soundtrack on the filmstock, allowing for a far more complex use of sound than early stationary microphones had accomplished, and almost three-quarters of the cinemas in Germany had converted to sound. Once film companies had built expansive sound studios and theater owners had invested in expensive equipment, it became financially unfeasible to mix the making and showing of silents with sound films. Thus grew widespread hopes for German leadership in the «Siegeszug des Tonfilms.»

In what Michael Ryan describes as «a volatile period of transition in German film culture,» Fritz Lang and Gerhard Lamprecht launched their respective forays into sound film. Since conventions in the use of sound were only beginning to develop, both filmmakers were able to experiment with how best to use the new medium. Both were conscious of the challenges of balancing sound and visual images in their films, rather than having one overwhelm the other. Both seemed at times to use sound sparingly, often producing segments that showed their continuing devotion to the visual expressiveness of silent film. A striking contrast between their respective uses of sound, however, lay in Lang’s decision to avoid non-diegetic music and in Lamprecht’s profuse use of such music to convey meaning in scenes that were devoid of dialogue or other noises. Their choices created vastly differing «sounds of the city» that accentuated differences between the ominous tone of M and the inspiriting atmosphere of Emil.

Although neither film explicitly depicts the worsening economic and political upheavals that we usually associate with 1931, contemporary reviews emphasized that cinema audiences saw each as «ein Zeitbild,» which one critic described as «ein Spiegelbild von Tageserlebnissen» (Aros). Indeed, both films abound with details of everyday life and social interactions, but both the «Tageserlebnisse» they portray and the Berlin in which they unfold differ profoundly. M shows darkened studio shots of a city terrorized by mass media reports of a serial child murderer, which evoked to spectators sensational
accounts of real serial killers («Serienmörder»), such as Fritz Haarmann, Karl Großmann, and, most recently, Peter Kürten. Those reports had gripped newspaper readers throughout Germany (Lang, «Mein Film» 5; Kaes, _M_ 30–33). It depicts myriad responses to the citywide crisis, from mothers’ anguish, to citizens’ hysteria and precipitous actions, to the police launching a methodical, but seemingly fruitless search for the killer, and to the underworld mobilizing its own self-interested search. _Emil_, on the other hand, portrays a modern, bustling Berlin with masses of people going about their business, and, in contrast to _M_, this film’s crisis concerns not a whole city but an individual boy: Emil’s mother has given him a sum of precious money to deliver to his grandmother, but upon his arrival in Berlin, he discovers that it is gone from his jacket pocket. This film focuses on how Emil and the boys who join forces with him launch an operation to pursue the thief through the city to retrieve the money. It envelops them and their adventures in the environment of Berlin of 1931 through resplendent cinematography of the city and music that conveys not only the boys’ high-spirited energy, but infuses it into the city as well.

Eric Rentschler recently suggested that we can gain new insights by putting films from differing genres into dialogue with one another (50). Responding to his invitation, I argue that _M_ and _Emil_, taken together with their darkened versus sunny urban depictions, directly remind both viewers and historical inquirers of evocative moments of the metropolis of 1931, which, when processed according to individual historical antennae, offered either new perspectives on Weimar Germany or welcome escapes from its daily travails. «Sounds of the city» in this context extend beyond an attempt simply to catalogue sounds of the urban landscape transcribed onto a film’s soundtrack; rather, they involve «listening» to the city that the filmmakers’ mixing of sound, image, and ideas produces. Listening with our minds, as well as our ears and eyes, to their creations of the imagination, I argue, enriches our understanding of Weimar society. Their city – and also the interplay between their respective choices about how to portray it – alerts us to ever-proliferating interpretive possibilities, social insights, ideological perspectives, and cultural discourses that viewers in Weimar Germany connected with.

Lang’s use of sound has received considerable scholarly attention, but as Tom Gunning notes, «although _M_’s innovative use of sound forms one of the clichés of film history, this universal acknowledgement cannot render its power banal» (Gunning 165; see also Kaes, _M_ 9–13 and Brockmann 115–19). Indeed, the abundant discussion offers an invaluable trove of ideas by which to consider what constitutes distinctive sounds of the city in the film. A significant starting point lies in Anton Kaes’s comment that, «[It] has rightly
been called a «silent film with sound,» but even the long, seemingly silent segments contain notable choices about the use of sound that help viewers to connect with what is happening in the film. The striking sequence near the beginning, for instance, shows a mother’s loving preparations for her daughter’s lunch, with sparse sounds of the soft ticking and chiming of the kitchen cuckoo clock marking the build-up of Elsie not coming home. Her rising anxiety about Elsie is evoked by silent shots of her peering over the empty stairwell, from the apartment window, and into the attic, where only a few scattered pieces of laundry hang, interspersed with her increasingly alarmed calls: «Elsie?» Even more ominous are the silent shots that dramatize Elsie’s absence: the untouched table setting, her ball tumbling into the grass, her balloon floating haphazardly against overhead street wires, followed by a black screen. Yet, it is the sound of newspaper boys shouting «Extra!» that confirms her fate. Lang later explained that he had no intention of depicting the murder but wanted to leave it to the audience’s imagination, and he insisted that sound would contribute. «Damals kam ich auch zu der Erkenntnis, daß man Ton als dramaturgisches Element nicht nur verwenden kann, sondern unbedingt sollte.» These scenes show how sound became such a dramaturgical element when interspersed with deliberate silence.

Several striking street scenes also occur in silence, without the traffic noise and other ambient sound that will soon become conventional. For instance, one relatively long segment shows, with unexpected silence, the stealthy convergence of police vans and marching officers in a darkened narrow street; it visually narrates an action organized with military precision to launch a raid on an underworld pub. So uncomfortable with this segment were the restorers of a 1960 version of $M$, that they added traffic sounds and music (reproduced in $M$, Disc 2). In a 1963 interview, however, Lang stressed that the omission of sound here was intentional (Bareither 195). Clearly also intentional was the sudden breaking of the silence by a piercing police whistle followed by a loud shout, «Die Bullen!» – two distinct sounds to signify the beginning of the raid. With that, the scene is suddenly transformed into visual turbulence and a cacophony of shouting voices of people trying to escape the round-up. Lang’s moving from total silence for the police approach to the aural and visual turbulence of the panicked crowd (signifying two distinct sounds of the city) is separated by the shrill whistle and isolated shout: the intricate preparations behind a police action and a multi-layered portrayal of police relations with the populace. Far more frequently than the injections of carefully-chosen sound into silences, however, the sounds of Lang’s city are made by humans, whose many utterances serve widely varying dramaturgical functions: a peculiar whistle by the killer, a hysteria that breaks out through-
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out the city, aural – and visual – instruction about modern police techniques, cross-cutting dialogue that shows parallels in two organized searches for the killer by Berlin’s police department and its underworld groups, and a tumultuous kangaroo court staged when the underworld captures the murderer. The instances of city voices/sounds, not unexpectedly, convey a metropolis in which inhabitants cannot be reduced to uniformity but also which left spectators grappling with questions whose answers rested with their own radically differing experiences: a populace is panicked by the killings and erupts into wild accusations toward each other, or, conversely, acts as a responsible citizen (the film seems to incline toward the former); the police are ineffectual in their methods or, conversely, meticulous (critics differ sharply here); the urban criminals are motivated by self-interest, or, conversely, their ultimate goal is to bring him to justice through their «trial,» or they simply become a lynch mob (all possibilities are in the film). «Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder,» reads Lang’s original subtitle for the film, and in portraying the many dimensions of the city’s search, he uses sound in multifarious ways to compound the complexities of visual narrative that were already hallmarks of his films: by sharp interruptions of sound to the dramatic build-up of a silent segment; by a multitude of voices comprising the city’s response to the presence of an unknown murderer; by didactic narrations of an inventory of police methods; by off-screen voices (or other sounds) whose origin may or may not be clear; by cross-cutting of dialogue linking action in different locations; and, in the last moments of the film, three succinct sentences enunciated in three rapid shifts of location that will leave spectators pondering where the film’s resolution lies. For attentive spectators who exited the cinema onto the streets of Weimar Germany (and critiques suggest that audiences were extremely attentive), it was «ein nachdenklicher Film, der von Anfang bis zu Ende interessiert […] hat» (Aros) and one that would inspire, confirm, or provoke a wide array of perspectives on the surrounding society.

The key sound in M is the musical fragment that ultimately leads to the identification and capture of the killer: an eerie whistling in the street of a theme from Edvard Grieg’s Peer Gynt.8 Audiences first hear it in a scene that shows a nondescript middle-aged man (played by Peter Lorre) leading a little girl to a blind balloon seller from whom he buys a cheery doll-like balloon to present her – or is it, as Gunning suggests, «a grotesque humanoid shape» (171)? Through the sporadic repetition of the whistled theme, the audience comes to recognize it as a sign of the killer’s compulsion, and a subsequent hearing of it allows the balloon seller to identify the child abductor.9 What Lang intended to be a clumsily whistled fragment to forestall any supposition of musicality on the part of the killer, was nevertheless so striking that
one film-music historian listed the Grieg theme as one of the nine «erwähnenswerten Tonfilmpartituren» of 1931 (Bareither 196; Thiel 142–43).

Still more prevalent than the killer’s whistling of the Grieg theme is the multitude of voices that reveal the rising terror and popular hysteria of the city’s inhabitants (the prominent Berlin accent of such voices clearly identifies the city even though the film does not explicitly name it). Siegfried Kracauer observes, «Lang’s imaginative use of sound to intensify dread and terror is unparalleled in the history of the talkies.» The opening scene has a washerwoman on a tenement balcony, screaming at children below, who are playing a grisly game about the killings, and, of course, in the following scenes we hear the frantic calls of Elsie’s terrified mother. The next shots lead into a montage of popular hysteria as citizens process the news. Newsboys shouting, «Extra!» become, in Gunning’s words, «the voice of the city, a carefully orchestrated mounting chorus of news vendors, their diverse voices competing with each other and with car horns,» with people quickly grabbing copies (175). Another shot shows a crowd gathered around a Litoßsäule plastered with a poster of the latest news, and people at the back, straining to see, shout for someone to read it. The apparent reading aloud of the poster, however, proves to be an early instance of Lang’s technique of overlapping one sound in two different scenes. As the voice continues, a cut takes us to a Kneipe where a group of aging burghers are enjoying the regular encounter of their Stammtisch. The voice proves to be that of one of its members reading a newspaper account to his cronies: «Jeder Mensch auf der Straße kann der Täter sein.» The idea incites a crossfire of accusations about one of them being the murderer, and the gathering breaks up with angry threats of libel suits flying. Subsequent shots on the streets show staid pedestrians transformed into angry mobs. Passersby start screaming, «Murderer!» believing that an accused pickpocket being escorted from a bus by police is the captured killer. Another group crowds around an unprepossessing elderly gentleman who has responded to a child’s question about what time it is and frenziedly accuses him of being the child murderer. Whether such overwrought outrages merely satirize popular behavior or exemplify Lang’s deep-seated suspicion of «the people» remains controverted; indeed, in one critique, Thomas Koebner argues both possibilities in succession (36–37). Alternative interpretations by Tom Gunning of these scenes have proposed an «image of city inhabitants as isolated, atomized individuals under a regime of terror,» or the «fragmentary nature of the citizens of the metropolis, not only mutually suspicious of each other, but each absorbed in their own dramas and reactions to the crisis» or the «anonymity and disintegration of social space» (174, 176).
A counterpoint to the hysteria of the populace is found in the visual and aural representations of a modern and highly professional urban police force, which Lang has already introduced in the sequence where the police converge for the raid. The key scene, in which Lang employs another inventive interplay of sound and image, involves a phone conversation between the police commissioner («Polizeipräsident»), who is overseeing the search for the killer, and an angry minister, who demands repeatedly that the police need to achieve «das Resultat» in finding the killer. From his end, the police commissioner patiently but emphatically lists the unremitting efforts of his men, while the camera roams through city spaces, providing a visual compendium of the rationalized police procedures he is describing: shots of men searching bushes at a site of one of the killings, retrieving a bonbon wrapper; a huge slide of an enlarged fingerprint retrieved from the paper; city maps pored over to find out where the wrapper might have originated; interviews with a succession of candy shopkeepers. A brief interruption to the description has a graphologist dictating a letter to his secretary about the evidence that shows the perpetrator had to be extremely deranged. The minister on the phone is not impressed, but his visibly impatient gestures communicate to spectators the impossible situation his men are confronting.

A different police method for searching for the killer rests on the idea that he might be immersed in the underworld society, and this supposition – implausible as it is – allows the police to launch a raid on a lowlife establishment. As noted above, in this tumultuous scene we «hear» both aurally and visually a sound of the city that reveals the cynical, stormy, and ultimately submissive relationship of the underworld to the police. After the officers force the clamorous crowd back down the stairs into the basement pub, the crowd’s angry shouts turn to ridicule when they recognize the figure of Kriminalkommissar Karl Lohmann descending from the shadows. They begin a sing-song chant: «Lohmann, der dicke Lohmann,» but Lohmann’s paternalistic, «Na, na Kinder» quickly reveals the kind of familiar relationship the police have with the underworld, and the sound of the pub clientele addressing Lohmann as «Herr Kommissar,» along with his self-evident use of Du in return, leaves no doubt as to the hierarchy of authority here. Sitting down at a processing table, he brings order to the room as he examines each person’s identity papers, shrewdly rejecting the many forgeries. Almost all who pass by are dismissed with «Alex,» i.e., they are to be sent to the police headquarters on Alexanderplatz for further processing. Interspersed into Lohmann’s ongoing inspection is a silent visual collage that inventories a vast array of confiscated weapons and stolen goods being arranged on tables by the police (yet another depiction of police techniques). The crowd’s raucous taunts have long since
yielded to grudgingly obedient silence – a transition that offers a vivid display of the police’s authority when they are in immediate contact with a group of criminal suspects. The portrayal of the police and their methods sparked considerable discussion. Kracauer notes that the film’s «pictorial reports on current police procedures are inserted in such a skillful way that they appear to be part of the action» (219), and Kaes suggests that the film displays procedures from the popular 1926 police exhibition in Berlin (M 35; see also Lang, «Mein Film» 5–6). Others have asserted that the film shows the ineffectualness of the police, whose search leads into countless blind alleys and false directions.¹⁰ The film, however, does demonstrate, as the Polizeipräsident argues on the phone to the minister, the extraordinary difficulty of tracking down a criminal in a city of four million, and, it should also be remembered, police methods do eventually lead to their identifying the killer.

But it is the group introduced in the raid scene that gets to him first. Far from being the obsequious bunch being processed by the police in the bar, the underworld is shown to constitute a highly organized and efficient business. The scene opens with four professional criminals pacing in an apartment, anxiously awaiting the arrival of their Chef for a meeting of the representatives of the various specialties (pickpockets, burglars, card sharks, con artists). Here again, sounds of the city include silent segments, such as one that follows after a man asks for the time on the phone and then systematically lays out and synchronizes his stolen watches on the table. As they nervously await their overdue leader, they complain about the intensifying pressures by the Bullen: «Deinem Beruf kannst nie mehr nachjehen, weil de dauern über’n Kriminaler stolperst» (Lang, M. Protokoll 39). After a tense waiting time, Schränker, the Chef, arrives, and after angrily ordering the shades to be drawn, he convenes the meeting. The real problem, he tells his confederates, is that «Ein Aussenseiter verdirbt uns das Geschäft.» They need to launch a search for the killer, he asserts, to get the police off their backs (Schränker here clearly endorses the idea of the ineffectualness of police), and he proceeds to work out how they should organize the search.

As the meeting unfolds, Lang launches a new exploration of voiceovers and images. The scene begins by showing the smoke-filled meeting around the dining table of the apartment, but in mid-sentence Schränker’s speech and gesture merge into that of another speaker and, spectators soon learn, another meeting. Members of the police ministry sit at their own conference table, also beneath clouds of smoke, hammering out their new possibilities for the search. Using both visual and aural cross-cutting between the two settings, Lang is portraying, in the cynical words of critic Rudolf Arnheim «representatives of two solid bourgeois professions who earn their daily bread through
the commission and obstruction of punishable offenses» (qtd. in Brockmann 121). In neither interviews nor writings did Lang accede to such an interprétation, but the segment leaves no doubt regarding his conviction about parallels between the two groups, who both see themselves as professionals attempting to solve the seemingly intractable problem of finding the child murderer.

Kaes builds a convincing argument that memories of World War I and Germans’ experience of total mobilization pervaded Weimar society, and in his discussion of M, he specifically emphasizes its legacy in these two meetings.¹⁷ The plans concocted in both the gangster and the police meetings involve not only their identical goal of capturing the murderer but also of organizing their action to mobilize for a war against this enemy. After the far-reaching experiences of wartime mobilization, «military technology,» in the words of Fritzsche, «had evolved into a «second nature» which would fundamentally reshape postwar Europe» («Landscape» 38). Although the underworld group and the police devise radically differing approaches to finding the killer, both create detailed plans and a command structure that suggest the «second-nature» of military-style organization to which Fritzsche refers. In this case, of course, each organizational plan is tailored to the conditions of the big city, rather than the goals of wartime mobilization. The police meeting, focusing on the hand-scrawled letter sent to the press by the killer, decides they must seek someone with a history of derangement. A collage of shots (many of them silent) shows the layers of organization: canvassing hospitals and mental asylums for names of patients released in the last five years; consolidating the stacks of information and producing a typed list with addresses of each; dividing up the names and assigning detectives to check out each person for possible clues. Karl Lohmann is in charge of the operation, and subsequent close-ups show names being scratched off the lists and scenes of Lohmann reading reports and discussing the progress of the operation with one of the detectives. All of this organization involves processes that resemble command techniques from the war. Similarly, the gangsters, having decided to organize a citywide surveillance network using the union of beggars, launch their own conscription-like process in the headquarters of the beggars’ organization with close-ups of lists of beggars’ names being coordinated with a city map and shots of each beggar approaching the table to be assigned to a district.

Each operation leads to an unobtrusive man named Hans Beckert, whom spectators have long known to be the killer. Lang later declared that he deliberately chose Peter Lorre to portray the murderer because his ordinary appearance so much challenged what Lang called «the famous Lombroso image of a murderer,» who people thought could be recognized by anatomical features such as «big eyebrows, big shoulders.»¹⁸ Noteworthy is that both
groups eventually identify the killer as a man of obvious insanity, with the police finding him by tracking the rambling letter to the room of the man who scrawled it and the underworld identifying him by his compulsive whistling of Grieg’s theme. The police list leads a detective to visit Beckert’s room and pick up material clues that Lohmann eventually puts together with other evidence they have collected. The balloon seller recognizes the distinctive whistle, and his shouts mobilize the underworld network on the street. Despite each group’s differing method, the sound and camera suggest that they simultaneously identify Beckert: adjoining shots has each leader exclaiming that they are finally on the trail of the killer.

The beggars’ pursuit is launched with the branding of the iconic identifying chalk «M» on Beckert’s coat. Instantly abandoning the little girl he was targeting, the now-frantic Beckert hastens through the streets. He is followed by a succession of streetwise pursuers, each of whom hands him off to the next with a sharp whistle. When a passing fire engine (with siren sounding) cuts off the beggars’ view, he disappears, but they are certain (and the camera confirms this) that he has ducked into an office building. Informed by phone, Schränker organizes his men to go after him. As the camera narrates the gangsters’ practiced skills in trashing the office building to carry out their search (not unlike the narration of police methods during Lohmann’s phone report), sounds of the city are, like so many others in this film, mostly visual. The most important literal sound is the faint tapping of Beckert trying to shape a nail to open a door, which allows them to discover him hiding in an attic. A cut takes us to the police waiting in Beckert’s darkened room for their man to come home. Were it not for the office building operation by the underworld, they would have captured him that night, but at the cost of one more victim.

One member of the gang opines that Beckert should be handed over to the police, but Schränker disabuses him of the idea, asserting that only they themselves can enact justice (their original motivation for the search – getting the police off their backs – has now been eclipsed). The climactic scene of underworld justice takes place in the cavernous basement of an abandoned 

*Schnappsfabrik.* The scene is preceded by Lohmann’s interrogation of Franz, the one man whom police captured from the underworld operation in the office building and who has divulged to the astonished detective that they have caught the child murderer. With a dialogue overlay of Franz describing where they have taken him, a succession of shots shows the ruined exterior and empty interior of the huge factory building. The dialogue breaks off, and a cut takes us to a dimly lit industrial stairway; with a sudden burst of noise, three men haul a screaming Beckert out from a locked door and shove him down another stairway. He wheels around, wide eyed, as he sees where he is;
in complete silence the camera pans over scores of underworld people, there
to witness the «trial.» In this 14-minute segment voices explode into multi-
levels of exchange. From the people, there is attentiveness, jeering laughter,
and murderous rage. From Beckert, there are first frenzied protests that they
have no right to try him, and then his haunting monologue, in which he nar-
rates the voices in his head and his compulsion to kill.21 From the presiding
Schränker, we hear repeated insistence that a compulsive killer must be elimi-
nated (mental treatment under Paragraph 51 only insures that he will be back
later to kill). And from a disheveled defender, who in imitation of regular ju-
dicial procedures is supposed to give the trial some legitimacy: a fervent argu-
ment against executing a sick man (some spectators saw this as a powerful argu-
ment against the death penalty, which was under debate in Germany). Film
critics in their newspaper accounts also noted another kind of sound of the
city during this scene: cheers and whistles from the audience at the film’s pre-
miere, whose rowdy interjections echoed to strident Weimar debates about
the insanity defense of Paragraph 51 and the death penalty, which attests to
the vociferous involvement that Weimar filmgoers often displayed.22 The an-
ger of the crowd reaches a crescendo, and, screaming, they surge forward,
about to tear Beckert limb from limb. But suddenly they stop – total silence
– and, in unison, staring forward, raise their hands up, which even Schränker,
after a brief hesitation, does as well. Cut to a shot of the cowering Beckert, as
an authoritative hand grasps his shoulder and a somber voice intones: «Im
Namen des Gesetzes.»

The next scene opens with five robed justices seating themselves at the
bench; the presiding judge proclaims, «Im Namen des Volkes.» Cut to three
women in mourning garb; the weeping mother of the murdered Elsie intones,
«Davon werden unsere Kinder auch nicht wieder lebendig. Man muss eben
noch besser auf die Kinder acht geben. [black screen, as in the opening mo-
ment of the film] Ihr!» Some interpret the brevity of the courtroom scene as a
disturbing allusion to Weimar justice.23 In an interview, Lang was non-com-
mittal, insisting that he and the scriptwriter, Thea von Harbou (his wife at the
time), wanted only to portray the ugliest imaginable crime. And the mother’s
admonition embodied their intent (Bareither, 183, 194; Lang, «Mein Film» 6).

Clearly, the film invokes many issues of contemporary German society and
opens many interpretive questions. Moreover, the complexities compound
themselves when we try to assess possible effects of the film on audiences,
remembering that the cheering or whistling attested to spectators’ interaction
with the film24 and to their hearing from it differing sounds of the city: hyster-
ical burgthers (or, conversely, burgthers called to be attentive to their chil-
dren’s safety); an indefatigable police force (or, conversely, one hobbled by
dead-end efforts); sympathy with a killer driven by insanity (or, conversely, a conviction that all humans are responsible for their acts); an argument against the death penalty (or, conversely, an argument for it as essential punishment); weakness of the authority of law (or, conversely, its majesty). Lang’s portrayals of the underworld open still more possible interpretations for the spectator. Were they criminals merely trying to lessen intrusive police raids? Or professionals whose skills capture the killer? A crowd committed to bringing the killer to justice? Or, simply, a lynch mob? Was their «court» an attempt to carry out real justice? Or, conversely, a blatantly illegal imitation of the legitimate judicial system? The film’s portrayals offer support for any of these perceptions. And an essential component is Lang’s use of sound – multifarious voices from a wide range of people, reliance on silence at key junctures, cautious recourse to film noises, his cross-cutting of dialogue and image – all contribute to the film’s «open case.»

Confronting the questions raised by M’s treatment of such themes impels historians to continue to expand their horizons beyond what Peter Fritzsche describes as the «excessive focus on the fate of the Republic» and «the anguished wanderers among the postwar ruins to which we continue to be introduced in even the best syntheses» («Weimar» 639). In a more open exploration of Weimar history, he continues, «What historians are left with is not one single Weimar story, but multiple versions» (647). My own decision to leave open the questions raised in the film is grounded in my conviction that this approach better allows us to hear and see M as an intricate Zeitbild that begins to hint at the tangled complexities its spectators confronted both during the film and when they left the cinema doors.

Emil und die Detektive, in contrast to M, touches upon few Weimar controversies, and it offers a mostly optimistic Zeitbild, replete with abundant images of contemporary society, particularly of Berlin, in 1931. As mentioned earlier, a band of children organizes a pursuit of the man who stole 140 marks from Emil, and their mobilization becomes a lively adventure with serious purpose. Rather than showing the «Weltstadt der Krise» that the popular press touted, and in contrast to Lang’s film-noir depiction of darkened urban neighborhoods, Lamprecht depicts the site of the children’s adventure as a sunny Berlin whose streets teem with traffic and pedestrians. In so doing, his film radiates an optimistic perspective on the future of Germany – despite the children’s urgency about the theft.

The film, which premiered at the Ufa-Theater Kurfürstendamm on 2 December 1931, was greeted with almost universal enthusiasm: «Wenn wir aus dem Kino kommen,» wrote one critic, «so haben Emil [and his comrades] uns Skeptikern wieder ein Stück Glauben an unsere Gegenwart und an un-
sere Zukunft geschenkt» (M.Sp.). A significant component of its success was composer Allan Gray’s expressive musical score, which becomes the film’s most prominent sound of the city. In contrast to Lang’s decision against using non-diegetic music, Lamprecht made music into a central dramaturgical element. The lively rhythms, the interweaving of musical foreboding with sparkling harmonies, and the many instrumental variations give vitality to what Kracauer calls a «neat and unpretentious documentary shots of Berlin street scenes» and convey the light-hearted tone to the children’s adventure that Kästner’s novel demands (Kracauer 225; on the novel, see Roper, «Emil»). The experience of having studied in Berlin with the pioneering composer Arnold Schoenberg while supporting himself by writing cabaret music enabled Gray to create an energetic musical score that exemplified reassuring promise about urban modernity (see Rotthaler; Crook). This inventive interaction between sound and image suggests close collaboration between Lamprecht and Gray to produce magical scenes of the children moving through Berlin streets. Not surprisingly, Wolfgang Thiel lists Gray’s score among nine «erwähnenswerten Tonfilmpartituren» for 1931, from the 155 sound films released that year (142–43).

*Emil*’s first sounds of the city occur when the boy from Neustadt gets on the train to Berlin and enters a compartment filled with strangers. The sounds that Lamprecht used to begin this segment soon became conventional: hissing steam, a long train whistle, the accelerating roar of turning wheels, and, at a later stop, the conductor’s «Einsteigen, bitte.» As Emil’s train ride continues, however, music supplants the train noises, and it now epitomizes the forward motion to the city: an accelerating rhythm in the lower strings replaces the noise of the rotating wheels, and woodwinds replace the train whistle.27

A new musical theme of foreboding appears, however, at first intertwined with the exciting musical anticipation of the big city. Preceding it is a visual sequence that begins as Emil surveys his fellow passengers. In the camera’s vignettes of each, they appear to be a cross-section of burghers, and Emil’s polite gestures suggest his eagerness to be part of the brief, anonymous encounters that typify social life outside of Neustadt. But an ominous fellow passenger gains Emil’s attention, after the camera pans toward a raised newspaper in an opposite seat, and it is lowered to reveal the darting gaze of a man reacting to Emil’s comment that in Berlin he will have «etwas Geschäftliches zu erledigen» (i.e., delivering the money to his grandmother). The leering man makes Emil still more uncomfortable when he unleashes a barrage of tall tales about how things work in the big city – until admonished by fellow passengers to stop talking foolishness. After the next stop, Emil and the sly stranger suddenly are alone in the compartment. Ominous tones of music
intensify visual signs of Emil’s aversion. He is worried enough to retreat to the restroom, where he pins the money inside his jacket pocket in a close-up shot accompanied by a four-note descending horn phrase, identified in the printed transcript of Billie Wilder’s screenplay as the Geldmotiv, which will recur later in the film (Emil Drebuch 45).28 When the man foists a drugged bonbon on Emil, a mounting sequence of minor chords in the deep winds, followed by a string version of the Geldmotiv, mixes with a descending two-note phrase by lower horns, then trilling winds that intensify the excitement, followed by a discordant piano. As the camera depicts Emil’s blurring vision, a sudden slowing of the music portrays his succumbing to the drug.

Lamprecht’s filmic portrayal of Emil’s subsequent frightening dream has been aptly described by Helga Schütz as, «entfesselte Stummfilmszenerien, in denen alles vorkommt, was es so an Schrecknissen in Emils Welt gibt» (11). The music, however, intensifies the visual terror of the scene. A fantastical filmic montage shows the compartment bench stretching absurdly to several times its length and then contracting, and the now crazily leering man going through wild contortions with his legs, chewing frantically on the rim of his hat, blowing clouds of smoke from a two-foot flame thrower. During the visual chaos, the music rises with a conglomeration of woodwinds, syncopating percussives and strident incursions of other instruments. Through the smoke of the flame thrower, the camera focuses on the compartment’s emergency brake high above, with Emil rising in terror through the air to grasp onto it (of course, the train does not stop). Suddenly, however, Emil is outside, floating through the sky clinging to a parachute-like umbrella toward the iconic traffic tower at Potsdamer Platz; he lurches around the tower, cringing when from the traffic platform the dreaded hometown constable angrily stretches out a gigantic hand (in close-up) to try to catch him. With a roll of snare drums the music reaches a climax as plumes of smoke swirl from the traffic tower around Emil.

This nonsensical and chaotic world, besieged with fire, smoke, and threatening authority, along with increasingly agitated music, is the film’s most ominous foreboding of calamity. Lamprecht and Gray created this portrayal as a version of Kästner’s dream scene in the novel, and the images and sound suggest terrors of the city experienced by many newcomers to Berlin.29 But the smoke, the fury, and crashing music may also allude to forebodings of wider catastrophe lurking beneath the sunny Berlin of this film or, more likely, to remembered images of the war.

Emil snaps awake to find himself lying on the floor, and like the decelerating train the triumphal music that introduces the first scenes of Berlin also slows with the arrival at another Berlin icon, Bahnhof Zoo. The compartment
is empty, and Emil discovers that his money is gone. What follows is a succession of shots that narrates Emil’s pursuit of the thief via tram to an observation spot across the street from Café Josty (where the thief enjoys a late breakfast). Similarly, Gray’s succession of accompanying musical segments «narrates» a vibrant metropolis that surrounds Emil; interwoven passages suggest both his frantic determination not to lose sight of the thief and his simultaneous awe at the passing cityscape. The scene, moreover, offers a fine instance of the layers of «Tageserlebnissen» that occur throughout the film: in this case, an inventory of Berlin sights that surround both inhabitants and visitors; a cross section of Berlin inhabitants going about their everyday lives (on the train platform, in the tram car, on the streets), and the unfolding crisis of a young boy suddenly cast into the middle of the teeming city. As Emil first dashes through the platform crowds and onto the street, he crouches into a creeping motion to avoid being seen by the thief; pulsating beats by strings beneath the sliding phrases by woodwinds lend rhythm to his movements. As the thief settles into a Strassenbahn and Emil enters the back of the car, strident tones by horns declare a new phase to the pursuit (Kästner 203). The tram sets in motion, and a refrain that seems to epitomize a lively urban tempo launches a scene that might aptly be titled, «Das war also Berlin,» which the novel’s Emil had time to think to himself despite his anxiety about keeping the thief in sight.30 In the film, despite his new worry about having no money for a tram ticket, Emil is also looking at sights as the tram passes Bahnhof Zoo, Ufa-Palast am Zoo, Kaiser Wilhelm Gedächtniskirche, rows of multi-storied buildings atop an array of businesses, and a swarming procession of all manners of conveyances and people. Inside the tram the camera interjects shots of the thief, who appears to be a supremely confident burgher sitting erectly in his black suit and stiff collar with his hands resting on his walking cane, and gazing matter-of-factly out the window.

At the tram’s first stop an abrupt cutoff of the «urban tempo» melody and the opening of a new one seem to celebrate Emil’s ingenuity in moving away from the approaching conductor to the back car while still keeping the thief in sight. A momentary shot of the street sign Trautenau-Str. and Kaiserallee establishes the tram’s arrival at the thief’s immediate destination, and, as he alights, the original refrain resumes (beginning a climactic rise toward the end of the segment) and accompanies his striding into the well-known Café Josty. As with his settling into the tram, a preliminary musical resolution occurs here when the man sits down at the café. Crashing cymbals and horns build to the scene’s real resolution after Emil scrambles off the tram, maneuvers across the traffic-clogged street, and hides behind a kiosk to keep him in sight and decide what to do next, alone and without money, in this metropolis.31
Beeps from a horn startle Emil, and he turns around to see a boy holding a bulb horn. Their first encounter begins badly, with the boy commenting on Emil’s dumb dress suit. His unintended insult accentuates the chasm between small-town and metropolitan identities, initiating a sound of the city that will recur. Emil, however, soon is telling the boy, Gustav, about his pursuit of the thief (cut to the café where the thief is lustily eating a soft-cooked egg and drinking a beer). Gustav becomes excited: «Mensch, das ist ja wie im Kino!» He announces to Emil that he will get reinforcements. A magnificently choreographed sequence follows, in which Gustav, dashes through Berlin streets and gathers an ever-growing number of boys from their play. The boys’ gazelle-like skipping conforms perfectly to Gray’s dance-like music, transforming what might otherwise have been a prosaic sequence into a charming youthful adventure. Charming, also, are the adult passersby who stare in bemusement as the boys run past recognizable street locations, such as the entrance to the Wittenbergplatz U-Bahn station. As the boys run up to the kiosk where Emil is waiting, the music builds to a triumphal climax, resolves into a tonal conclusion, and then is silenced.

Gustav announces their arrival with his trademark beeps, and when he asks what he thinks of the assembled gang, a surprised Emil exclaims, «Kolossal!» Sounds of the city here are youthful excitement and camaraderie – far removed from the eeriness of Beckert’s whistling. To be sure, the eagerness of the boys inspired not only young spectators, but also older ones, including an enthusiastic Fritz Olimsky, who further expressed hopes for its international acclaim: «Kurz einer jener seltenen Filme, die eine ganze große Freude sind, und denen man die weiteste Verbreitung auch im Ausland wünschen möchte, denn schließlich wird hier ein Stückchen echtesten Deutschtums verkörpert.» Indeed, most contemporary critiques expressed enthusiasm that rested in two contentions: Emil offered a momentary escape from the cares of the day, or Emil offered an inspiring hope for the German future (See M. Sp.).

A new tenor emerges, however, when the boys retreat to a nearby lot to hold a Kriegsrat, and, just as the creation of a command system and the mobilization of soldiers were sanctioned and necessary in war, so the boys’ war council established a military-like hierarchy and created its organization of the group to get Emil’s money back. The military-laden dialogue begins when Gustav first leaves to seek Verstärkung, and, returning with the group to the kiosk, commands, «Das Ganze halt!» Such language next proliferates when the boys move to a lot and, standing up on a piece of abandoned equipment that resembles a caisson, a self-appointed leader (whom Gustav identifies in a whisper to Emil as «unser Generalstabchef») issues a barrage of orders. He first informs Emil he is abgelöst at the kiosk by two Stafetten (cut to two
boys peering across the street). He then goes through stages of organizing the group for action: collecting Betriebsskapital, naming five detectives to carry out the Verfolgung and relegating the other disappointed boys to Bereitschaftsdienst. He orders one boy to man a Depeschendienst at his parents’ telephone. He orders all to disperse to their posts and await further Befehle, and then, «Marsch!» Despite the reluctance of those left out of the action, they do shout the established password: «Parole Emil!» The scene portrays the leader’s power and the others’ unquestioning submission.55 Military terminology also abounds through the rest of the operation, when they follow the thief to the modest Hotel Biedermann and set up their Hauptquartier in a fenced off vacant lot to begin the Belagerung, when Emil’s cousin Pony Hütchen arrives with Verproviantierung. The boy at the Depeschendienst is notified, «Der Feind hat [Zimmer] Nummer 9,» which shows the boys’ notion of themselves as an army mobilizing for action against the enemy. As the boys disperse to go home for the night (all except Emil, who, disguised as a bell boy, makes several unsuccessful attempts to find the money in the man’s room), the leader orders all to appear sharply at 8:00 a.m. for Alarmbereitschaft. As in M, with the scenes of organization by the police and the underworld, military thinking is pervasive; memories of mobilization fill the language, even among children who did not experience it.56

The best-known scene of the film – and one that has provoked controversy – begins the next morning outside the hotel. Emil is amazed to discover that overnight the operation has attracted a crowd of hundreds of boys, who shout vigorously «Parole Emil!» When the thief walks out of the hotel, they march after him, spontaneously making a spectacle of one who wants to be an anonymous, respectable burgher. A brisk, bouncy march music starts up, in time with his swinging cane and striding past the modest shops of the neighborhood. Signaling that this is more than the self-confident stride of a proud burgher, the march theme is interspersed with sudden stops, tocks from castanet-like clappers, high pitched sliding whistles, and syncopations. When the man catches sight of the boys marching behind him, he becomes visibly nervous, and humorous injections in the music make light of his growing unease and the boys’ growing delight in that. He makes a sudden turnabout and strides toward the group, but they, too, turn and advance away from him; he quickly wheels back to get away from them and attempts to continue a perusal of shop windows; but the boys dash after him and begin to shout. The camera, tracking the group at eye level from the middle of the street, now includes Pony (the only girl in the crowd) proudly pedaling her bicycle alongside the running boys. As the chase accelerates, the march theme swells into the full orchestra, but the crescendo of the boys’ shouts begins to drown some of it
out. The climactic birds-eye shot shows two streams of running boys converging behind him, and the thief now breaks into a terrified run. Trumpets blare, cymbals crash, and the orchestra sounds a decisive ending chord just as the man lurches into a neighborhood bank. Emil also enters. When asked to prove that the 100-mark note now being presented has been stolen, he tells of the pinpricks he made while pinning it to his jacket. The bank official presses an alarm pedal, and when the thief dashes out of the bank, the crowd of children, still screaming, mob him and allow the police to wade through and lead the still upright, dignified-looking man to an open police car.

Some recent critics have denounced this scene as a pogrom-like chase, and a freeze-frame look at the thief’s terrified face lends credence. Others, however, have argued more convincingly that it shows seemingly powerless children prevailing over someone more powerful — a respectable-looking adult. Both Kästner’s novel and the film support the idea of determined children bringing a criminal to justice.

The last scenes suggest a completely optimistic view of Weimar Germany in 1931: an efficient police system takes over; they identify the man as a wanted bank robber (involving shots surveying police methods, not unlike M); the police commissioner tells the boys that the criminal’s capture involves a 1,000-mark reward. Headlines roll from the presses, featuring Emil’s photo on the front page — an instance radically different from the «Extra» headlines in M, but similarly exemplifying what Gunning characterized as «a city hungry for and inundated by information» (176). Triumphal band music accompanies the rolling headlines, and when the camera cross-cuts to the homecoming, it proves to be the diegetic music of a small-town celebration. Lamprecht’s ending, which departs from the novel’s homely scene in the grandmother’s kitchen, shows a plane landing in Emil’s hometown, where townspeople cheer him and his comrades. The airplane’s arrival increases Emil’s modes of transportation in the film to four: train, tram, taxi, and airplane — not to mention the boys’ running through Berlin streets, but it is music, not machine sounds (except for the first train segment), that accompany all of them. All of these elements contribute to a Zeitbild of the Großstadt — one that, to be sure, contradicts the more pervasive Zeitbild of a city wracked by political and economic crises.

Kracauer refers to Emil as among the few Weimar films with a «faint suggestion of democratic mentality» and also one of the few that portray Berlin as a city «in which civil liberties flourish» (224, 225). Indeed, the crowded Berlin streets are calm, and civil liberties can be discerned in portrayals of a responsive police force, responsible bank personnel, and a vigorous press. Moreover, an important element of the book’s and the film’s popularity is that
mobilization occurs from below. But the militaristic hierarchy in the boys’ organization does raise questions about a «democratic mentality.» More problematically, any interpretation of the film’s democratic inclinations must also consider its being shown in Germany until 1937, with only the banned author’s name removed (Dahlke 283). Some of the virtues it exemplified, such as the boys’ camaraderie, the militaristic hierarchy, and pursuit of the «outsider,» were not necessarily anathema to ideals of the Volksgemeinschaft, or possibly, as Fritzsche suggests, «the idea of mobilization rather than the particular aims […] constitutes the common ground between [the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich]» («Weimar» 652). The question of what constitutes the children’s triumph is complicated as well. Does it lie in the resourcefulness of these German boys and their determination to achieve justice, as critics were wont to commend? Or is it due to their imitation of practices they see daily in adult society (especially the military dimension), which the film deftly portrayed? Kästner’s novel and the film offer both possibilities. The film is, however, unequivocal about Emil becoming a hero of the urban culture, as the bestowing of reward money, the front-page photo, and his homecoming by plane attest. These final elements become ebullient sounds of the city and, as such suggest, as one critic put it, «endlich einmal ein Wirklichkeitsmärchen … vielmehr mit Jungens, die sich die neue Zeit ihrer Phantasie dienstbar machen» («Emil»).

What do our two films, taken together, suggest about sounds of the city? As we have seen, Lang and Lamprecht took differing approaches to using the new medium as a central element in depicting the city. Lang not only invoked a melange of voices from disparate groups in the society to build such a multifaceted response to the crisis of the child killings, but he complicated these in intricate ways with his cross-cutting of dialogue, his superimposition of narrative over visual montages and his use of carefully-chosen individual sounds (such as the whistling of the «Peer Gynt» theme) to create tension or convey a psychological state. Lamprecht’s less intricate use of sound nevertheless produces a rich complex of sounds of the city. Most prominent is Gray’s dynamic and expressive music and his creative use of such a wide range of instruments, rhythms, and tonalities to bring the cityscape and the boys’ movement through it to life. The dialogues among the boys also reflect many influences of their experiences with the city, and their interactions with the bank official and the police detectives at the end suggest their awareness of the adult institutions that await them (even as enthusiastic critics praise the film for offering a young generation hope in desperate times). Lamprecht’s sounds of the city, finally, contain interactions between aural and visual images, everyday inhabitants, and a narrative of children making use of the city’s rich possibili-
ties for organizing for an important action, all coming together in a Zeitbild that so many spectators saw and appreciated. In short, in vastly differing ways and tones, both filmmakers used sound – and often, silence – to support and complement their visual portrayals of the metropolis. (This is by no means unique to these two films; historians of Weimar Germany should join their film studies colleagues in giving attention to the widest possible spectrum of films now accessible). Despite our knowledge of what awaits Germany, these films remind us that in 1931 contemporaries could see – in addition to unemployment lines, political violence, emergency political decrees, and even frightening crime – that the metropolis offered positive possibilities for the future (Zukunftsvorstellungen). 41 These are evident when an Emil critic enthuses, «Sieht so die künftige Generation aus, werden so unsere Nachfolger leben und handeln, dann braucht uns vor der Zukunft nicht bange zu sein» («Emil»). Ofer Ashkenazi’s suggestions about popular films of these years seem particularly apt to Emil: they «celebrated the conspicuous richness of Weimar urban culture, in which incompatible aspirations and beliefs existed simultaneously, without a definite criterion that would establish unambiguous truth» (263–64).

Due to Lang’s dark depictions of the dire crises radiating from the child killings, possibilities of a positive future may at first seem more limited in M, but they do include a society successfully mobilizing to catch a murderer; institutions halting a lynch mob and exercising judicial authority; and a plea for citizens to pay more attention to the younger generation. As noted above, the closing appeal by Elsie’s mother for greater watchfulness of the children has been interpreted by some as distrust of the state (e.g., Kaes, M 75), but the mother’s direct appeal to the spectators might also be seen as the film’s plea for a more rational and less hysterical populace.

These two films and their sounds of the city leave the prospects for the future much more open than many histories of Weimar Germany suggest; Detlev Peukert, for instance, declares in his compelling history of Weimar Germany that with the onset of the world economic crisis in late 1929 and the elections of September 1930 in which Nazi representation quadrupled, the republic effectively came to an end (249). Yet, a consideration of portrayals of the city and its sound in M and Emil should remind us to persist in trying to deal with «the richness of Weimar urban culture,» even in such a dire year as 1931. Even as we continue to investigate the demise of the Weimar Republic, we must remember that in 1931 few Germans had fixated on that possibility, and many anticipated a host of other possibilities. As we have seen, M and Emil embed their respective crises in a context of such possibilities, displaying rich Zeitbilder that I have called sounds of the city in recognition of this
volume’s focus on sound cinema. Obviously, looking from the perspective beyond 1933, we know that Weimar Germany did not have a future, and the abundant array of Zukunftsvorstellungen evident not only in these films but also throughout Weimar society (see especially Graf 112–78) will thus collide with a calamitous historical reality. Knowing of the future that awaited Germans in 1931, perhaps, then, we should give the last word here to Erich Kästner – not the author of Emil, but the author of Fabian, a novel that depicts looming catastrophes in the Berlin of the early 1930s. Peukert chooses a sentence from it as the epigraph for the last section of his history, «Total Crisis, 1930–1933»: «We’re living a makeshift life; the crisis will never end» (247).

Notes

1 Joe Hembus and Christa Bachmann are the only authors I have encountered who compare the two films, and our respective lists of parallels overlap, although their list has some slightly different emphases (48).

2 For an overview of the impact of the world economic crisis in Germany, see Peukert 247–57. On intensifying political crises, see Mommsen 357–98. As to mounting street violence, even a brief glance at one week of Berlin headlines in 1931 shows a society of marching legions organized for warfare against perceived internal and external enemies: national socialists attacking Jewish-looking passersby, communists raiding a Nazi pub, thousands converging to promote Germanness abroad, violent clashes between communists and social democrats who had been planning to hold a meeting of collaboration, a demonstration advocating a housing settlement to relieve Berlin’s unemployed, and the Reichswehr band organizing a mass meeting to collect Winterhilfe for unemployed veterans. I take these headlines from a cross-section of Berlin newspapers from the randomly chosen week of September 10–16, 1931 about halfway between the premieres of the two films.


4 Kreimeier 216. There are conflicting interpretations of when sound film took hold in Germany: Müller sees 1930 as the crucial year, explaining in passing that she did not analyze M because by May 1931 it was a «vergleichsweise spät[e] Tonfilm» (12, 21). Ashkenazi comments that by the fall of 1930 «more than 90 percent of German productions involved sound recording, but the span of years in his subtitle suggests a longer transition (250). For a good overview of the development of new sound technologies
through many media and an assessment of intermedial influences, see Weitz 207–50 and Ryan.

5 Ryan 275. Actually, Emil was Lamprecht’s second sound film, but the first, Zweierlei Moral (premiered 5 January 1931) was dismissed as a «müßlungenen Film, weil [das] Drehbuch aus nichtssagenden Dialogen und mißratenen Möglichkeiten besteht» (Wendtland 4).

6 Kaes, M 19. Gunning aptly characterizes it as «a hinge between Lang’s silent cinema and sound cinema» (164). See also Ryan 269–70.

7 Bareither 195. A similar assertion about sound as dramaturgy occurs in a 1975 interview with Lang (M, Disc 2).

8 The theme is from «In the Throne of the Mountain God.» Kaes offers an explanation of the historical context of a dramatic production of Ibsen’s Peer Gynt in 1928 that might have inspired Lang’s choice of this theme (20–21). The whistling was done by Lang himself on the soundtrack.

9 Ashkenazi emphasizes: «the complete break between sounds and visual images function as the main means of identifying the killer»; his whistling «identifies an obvious insanity» (259). Brockmann describes the theme as «part of his own private soundtrack» (114). Gunning offers a fine exposition about how this compulsion is portrayed in the sequences of Beckert looking in shop windows and approaching little girls (188–92).

10 Ashkenazi suggests the use of dialect is a «discourse of identity formation in the modern world»; further, «the vernacular dialogue explores the national distinctiveness of the speaking protagonists» (258, 261).

11 Kracauer 220. On signs of public hysteria in response to actual serial murderers during this time, see Kaes, M 32–34.

12 Ryan writes that there is debate about the voice, that some think it might be a radio newscaster reading (271). But I find the «kiosk» voice merging into the reading of the article at the Stammtisch to be a clear instance of Lang’s extending an at-first unknown voice into that of the visible reader at the table.

13 Gunning 177–81. Critic Rudolf Arnheim, who expressed early skepticism about sound film, in that it would undermine film as an artistic medium, expressed approval of this scene because the superimposed «lecture» of the Polizeipräsident on the phone was not presented as a simple merging of sound and film in a setting (70).

14 Scholars have debated whether Lohmann was based on the well-known Berlin police commissioner Ernst Gennat, and as with most of his responses to questions about influences or meanings, Lang was ambiguous, but in interviews he did frequently mention his close relations with «Alex,» the police presidium on Alexanderplatz (Bareither 195; Kaes, M 31–33; Herzog 296).

15 Still another use of whistling occurs during the police raid, when Lohmann softly whistles while preparing to examine each person. As Anton Kaes and Eric Rentschler interpret it, it suggests that the people are like his children; he knows their tricks; there is a working relationship between the criminals and the police (M, Disc 1, Audio Commentary). During this sequence, the film presents some police interviews in the district around the pub, and in one of them, a pubkeeper, played by the down-to-earth Rosa Valletti, correctly warns about outraged members of the underworld subjecting a captured child killer to their own mob justice.

16 Burch 24. Herzog’s long section entitled, «A City Tracks a Murderer: Methods of Criminal Investigation,» despite the title, suggests the methods are depicted as ineffec-

Sounds of the City in M and Emil und die Detektive

17 See Kaes, M 38–46, and, more comprehensively, Kaes, Shell Shock, especially Chapter 1: "The War at Home." On militarism in Weimar films and society, see also Roper, Fridericus. As Gunning emphasizes, this cross-cutting sequence of the two meetings is only one of many in the film (167).

18 Bareither 199, Cesare Lombroso, a nineteenth-century criminologist, argued that criminals could be identified by physiological characteristics.

19 The close-up of the chalked M scrawled by the pursuer on his hand is probably actually Lang’s hand; he claimed his hand appeared in each of his films. See Gunning, xii, 1–4.

20 The dialogue mentions that it went bankrupt in the inflation (i.e., 1923); this is the film’s only explicit reference to Germany’s economic crises.

21 «One of the finest performances in sound cinema and an extraordinary example of writing for the new “talkie” by Thea von Harbou» (qttd. in Gunning 194). Brockmann emphasizes the sound of the voices in Beckert’s head (124).

22 For instance, a scathing comment about the spectator noise from the nationalist Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung: «Hier an dieser Stelle, wo tatsächlich eine natürliche, spontane Volksäußerung, die jeder Unvoreingenommene täglich auf der Straße beobachten kann, zum Ausdruck kam, fühlten sich die Gegner der Todesstrafe bemüht, ihren Protest durch Pfeife und Zurufe kundzutun» (Werner).

23 Kaes argues that the «real» courtroom scene is so brief that «it also challenges this institution’s power and effectiveness» and that the mothers’ last words about protecting our children «betray the public lack of trust in the state’s power to protect its citizens» (M 75). Bareither, on the other hand, quotes from a 1948 letter by Lang to a Princeton film professor regarding the court scene: «the picture argues strongly for the maintenance of democratic procedure without ifs or buts» (186).

24 «The film shows how both sides break the law in their pursuit of the murderer. The city like Germany itself under Heinrich Brüning in 1931 was no longer governed by the rule of law, but swayed by the pressure of mobilized masses» (Kaes, M 53). Korte grounds his helpful approach to film reception in such a notion of an interactive process. As he affirms, a host of factors influence how a film will be seen: psychological and sociological variables, concrete living conditions, personal and political perspectives, the whole social and historical context – all affect the way a film is received (40–41; his schema on 43 offers a particularly useful list of components for considering reception).

25 Herzog. Gunning comments: «It is precisely the manner in which the film is pre-Nazi that makes it so complex» (198). Or, as Koeber put it after surveying the many unresolved issues: «Das Dilemma bleibt unaufgelöst» (38).

26 In 1932 an article in a popular magazine urged that a new Berlin tourist guide should lead visitors to locations of the «Weltstadt in der Krise» such as welfare offices, empty new buildings, lines of unemployed, etc. (qttd. in Föllmer and Graf 9). None of these things are visible in Emil.

27 Nora Alter notes that in Walter Ruttmann’s Berlin, die Sinfonie der Großstadt (1927) the train accelerates «in sync with the music,» but this was before the synchronization of sound and visual on the film that developed a short time later. The musical score by Edmund Meisel was played either by a live orchestra or by a simultaneously playing sound recording. As Alter makes clear, this is «technically a silent film,» and she «hears» its real symphony in terms of its visual rhythms, changing tempos, and structures (193, 211, 208).

28 Samuel Wilder received the nickname Billie from his mother, by which he became known in the Weimar era. After emigrating to the US, he became Billy Wilder.

29 The novel offers a different but also urban-orientated dream sequence (Kästner 193–97).
Fritzsche reminds us of Berlin «as an image of movement ‹tempo, tempo,›» and «restless energy,» and Gray’s accelerating score conveys this («Landscape» 35). Gray’s music and Lamprecht’s shots show an exuberant modern metropolis, which many critics praised far removed from a Berlin that other contemporaries criticized as «emptiness» and «‘money streets’» (Fritzsche, «Historical» 146–47).

Both the novel and the film emphasize that in order to keep the thief in sight, Emil had to spring off the train at Bahnhof Zoo, rather than at Bahnhof Friedrichstraße, where his grandmother and cousin were waiting to meet him.

As Peukert emphasizes, «Uniform, militarized behaviour spread from the radical fringes of politics to what had previously been the middle ground, and by the start of the 1930s had established itself as the dominant style of a political culture fractured along political lines. The outward style became universal» (163). See also note 18 above. It should be stressed that Kästner was a strong critic of what he saw as the pervasive militarism, as numerous poems like «Kennen Du das Land wo die Kanonen blühen?» make clear.


From one such critique: «Der renommierte Film der Vor-Hitler-Zeit offenbart schlagend die Nähe bürgerliche, scheinbar unverdächtiger ›Law and order‹-Vorstellungen zum Faschismus [...] Tatsächlich hat die Filmhandlung ihr Modell ebenso im Judenpogrom wie in der demokratischen Detektivarbeit [...] Feind aller aber ist der Außenseiter, der Gesetzesbrecher mit der unbedeutlichen Physiognomie und dem polnischen Namen» (Graf). See also Bäumler 154.

«Die ‹Hetzjagd› ist eine Notmaßnahme der an sich Schwächeren, die sich anders nicht zu helfen wissen und nur durch Einigkeit stark sind» (Tornow 29).

Kästner was critical of how dangerous adult behavior could be imitated by children in their play, as a series of satirical poems dealing with children’s «Nachahmungsbetrieb» makes clear. Especially pointed was Kästner’s feuilleton article that quoted the children’s explanation of their game of «Hinrichtung,» which had led to the death of a playmate: «Wir haben es nur wie die Erwachsenen gemacht.» Kästner also had long vilified what he saw as Germany’s militarism, and he was especially critical of a society that taught its children «stramm deutsch und militärisch zu marschieren» (See Roper, Emil 57–58, esp. n25 and 60, esp. n32).

See Graf 13. And Peukert reminded us, «That there are no entirely hopeless situations in history was shown by 1923» (75). Indeed, he argued, 1931 could be interpreted as
considerably less desperate than 1923, after which Germany did enter a period of relative stabilization. See also, Fritzsche: «Again and again, feelings of insecurity and discontinuity, and the sense that the future was an unknown and dangerous destination, mingled with a heady opportunism about new possibilities and new conquests. The promiscuity of German politics in the 1920s and 1930s derived from precisely this complementarity of crisis and renovation» («Landscape» 42).

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