

Censoring films in Düsseldorf during the First World War

Sabine Lenk

Going to the cinema in wartime has been a comfort and, indeed, a near necessity for many people. Studies by Michael Hammond, Nicholas Hiley, Heide Schlüpmann and Antje Strahl, for example, have pointed out that during World War I cinemas were places where people could find shelter against physical cold and psychological hunger.¹ Soldiers on leave or too badly wounded to return to the front found a pastime, as did families and friends wanting to see the places where their beloved ones were sent, sharing in their thoughts at least some of what those close to their hearts had to endure.

The German Army, however, feared that distributing films freely might potentially damage the cause of the military. Almost from the beginning of the war they insisted on censoring every film to be shown in cinemas, as some sort of follow-up to the censorship boards introduced earlier by state authorities, mainly between 1910 and 1912, in several parts of Germany. Herbert Birett's book, *Verzeichnis in Deutschland gelaufener Filme*, shows that Berlin, Munich, Stuttgart and Dresden were the main local centers before censorship became unified under a national law voted for on 12 May 1920.² Other regions without an office of their own accepted the authorization given by the Berlin or Munich censors.³

However, my research has found that the situation in western Germany (not previously studied), and specifically in the region around Düsseldorf, was rather different. My article will show that this provincial town, albeit part of a larger national context, and so forced to "live by the rules" of the German government, could nevertheless have specific regulatory problems for which it had to find its own solutions and create its own rules, according to local necessities. In fact, a whole region was involved, which

makes this case study not just a local one, but one that is relevant for a large area.⁴

Documents found in the municipal archive of Düsseldorf, unique of their kind, present the unofficial part of this activity: when, how and by whom the orders were executed. They give a very instructive "behind the scenes" view, and show a fragment of the daily life of German society during the First World War. They let us see *how* military and civilian authorities cooperated with the representatives of an important business, in this case the film business, which during the Weimar Republic (and later the Third Reich) would be an important factor in the economic and cultural sector.⁵

Düsseldorf – a local situation far from the capital

The city of Düsseldorf, situated about 45 km from the Dutch border, was at the outbreak of war the unofficial "film distribution center of the west".⁶ This city, in the region of Rheinland-Westfalen, near to a coal-mining area along the river Ruhr with many industrial towns, is itself one of the most important cities on the river Rhine (together called Rheinprovinzen). The distributors in Düsseldorf were therefore dealing with densely populated areas, where going to the movies

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Fig. 1. Lichtspiel Feldkino, 1916. A military cinema in an occupied village, unidentified location. [Postcard in author's collection.]

had become part of everyday life. The infrastructure was not comparable to Berlin, where the local cinemas had to be supplied with prints first, and copies were then sent by train to regional centers such as Munich or Düsseldorf, from where smaller towns were served.

Traditionally a garrison town, Düsseldorf grew during the war years as it became an army supply center and hospital location.⁷ During the four years of the War, about 113,500 injured soldiers were treated there.⁸ Industry was already important and had made the region wealthy, and after 31 July 1914 Düsseldorf became one of the biggest production centers for weapons in the Reich. The population was already growing fast in the years just before the war.⁹ The number of workers living in the town increased from 48,000 in 1914 to more than 90,000 in 1918 (and in later years a third of them were women).¹⁰ When the war broke out, the town had eighteen cinemas, small and large; even in 1917, the year of the winter of great hunger (*Steckrübenwinter*), the *Reichs-Kino-Adreßbuch* lists twenty-two cinemas.¹¹

Many soldiers stayed here to recover from their injuries. In the beginning, the cinemas offered them free tickets to honor their efforts in the trenches. "In Düsseldorf alone 300–400 soldiers go to the cinemas every afternoon."¹² At the same time this offered the exhibitors the opportunity to show their patriotic atti-

tude. The concept of "practical patriotism", used by Michael Hammond and borrowed from Leslie Midkiff DeBauche, fits the Düsseldorf situation precisely.¹³ As the war went on, this free-of-charge system became too costly for the cinema owners, and after a while soldiers had to pay the same reduced prices as children.

Film-going was very important, as other entertainments, such as variety and legitimate theatres, dance halls, etc., were no longer allowed. Cinemas were permitted to continue business, although a small number of them closed for some weeks after 2 August 1914, the first day of mobilization, due to a lack of staff – many projectionists had to shoulder arms and leave for Flanders, France, or another enemy country. Cinemas reopened during the fall of 1914.

During the war years the annual number of film shows in Düsseldorf declined, but the number of tickets sold steadily increased.¹⁴

Year	Number of shows	Number of tickets sold
1914	4,228	1,611,719
1915	3,610	1,675,049
1916	2,891	1,730,437
1917	2,739	2,266,483
1918	2,740	2,558,453

So, for example, if three to four hundred soldiers bought a ticket every day in 1915, they would have represented from 6.5 per cent to 8.5 per cent of the annual audience.¹⁵ Considering the huge numbers going to the movies it is quite understandable, from its own point of view, that the Army in North Rhine-Westphalia was keen to censor the films circulating in the area. And representatives of the film industry in western Germany (who by now had major financial investments in cinemas) were also eager to have their films censored – by *one* single institution in their *own* region. While this seems strange today, there were several reasons for it. From about 1912 the censorship office in Berlin filled in most of the censorship forms (Zensurkarten) accompanying every single print. Censorship took place in Berlin, as almost all German and foreign producers and distributors had their headquarters in the capital. A change in legislation, voted for on 2 July 1914, had brought uncertainty and the fear of higher costs for the cinema industry because it was now being asked to pay twice: for the censor in Berlin and for the local police to do it all over again.¹⁶

Furthermore, the middle-sized towns in the western part of Germany, situated near or on the rivers Rhine (mostly Catholic) and Ruhr, did not always agree with the decisions of the police in Berlin. The capital of the Reich, a metropolis of more than two million inhabitants under Prussian administration and influenced by Protestants, seemed “too liberal” for the authorities of smaller provincial towns.¹⁷ The Berlin film censors, at least according to the local representatives of the cinema industry in the West, were not firm enough in cutting out the “vices” presented in films.¹⁸ The local police agreed: the Catholics in the Rheinland asked for a more severe censorship than was the case in Berlin.¹⁹

Another reason for wanting regional censorship was that a print released officially in one town could be forbidden in another, which meant a loss of money for the distributors. Indeed, the cinema industry complained about “the damage and disaster caused by local interdictions during the first year of the war”.²⁰ They agreed that a local institution should be in charge, to protect them against arbitrary measures and bring more stability to their business.

The censorship board: the Filmprüfungsstelle, Düsseldorf (1915–1918)

As most film distribution companies had opened

offices in Düsseldorf, their representatives united in a regional film distributors' association for Rheinland-Westfalen (the Provinzialverband für Rheinland-Westfalen zur Wahrung gemeinsamer Interessen der Kinematographie und verwandter Branchen e.V., or Provinzialverband) and suggested that a censorship institution should be established in the city.²¹ It was from Düsseldorf central station that prints were normally shipped to other towns, after having been viewed and ordered by the cinema owners on the local “cinema mile”, Graf-Adolf-Straße. Furthermore, transport costs could be reduced and the risk of losing films was minimized when the cinema directors fetched and brought the prints themselves to a nearby office.

But to open a censorship office during the war was not an easy task. The distributors' association and the Army (Rheinarmee) started collaborating in the summer of 1915. Many details needed attention, and some rather foreseeable practical problems had to be resolved, including finding a sufficient number of “cultivated people” who would be willing to work as censors and who would not be likely to be drafted into the military; finding an office in which to house the institution; and organizing a schedule to make sure that enough prints and the censors to view them were always present (and that no print was, by accident, viewed/censored twice). Rules had to be established, such as how much to charge for each censored reel and what would be the working hours for the censors and technical staff (who had to keep the projectors running, etc).²² They needed to find a newspaper in which to publish their verdicts (or find another method of publicizing this information). And of course there were certainly more details which demanded attention.

The board members of the distributors' association started negotiating with the relevant authorities: the police of Düsseldorf as well as at the Army's headquarters (Generalkommando) in Münster (VII. Armeekorps, General Egon Freiherr von Gayl) and Koblenz (VIII. Armeekorps, General Paul von Ploetz). In September 1915 the police accepted responsibility for the censoring, under the condition that the distributors' association would find adequate rooms and would do the administrative work.²³ The censorship board was to be called the Filmprüfungsstelle Düsseldorf.²⁴ As in other towns it became part of the police. Freiherr von Gayl, in his “Bekanntmachung” (announcement) on 21 October 1915, stated that his decision to establish a censorship board for the



Fig. 2. Interior of Schadow-Lichtspiele, 1916. A Düsseldorf Cinema where soldiers went to see films without mixing with the local population. [Postcard in author's collection.]

district he controlled (VII. Armeekorps) was based on the “many complaints” that “film screenings and posters did not suit the gravity of the situation” (i.e. the mood of wartime). His measures were to be expanded into the neighboring VIII. Armeekorps.²⁵

The influence of the film industry in Düsseldorf must have been considerable, otherwise they would not have been able to persuade their military “partners” to accept civilians, and even film representatives, among the censors. When the distributors’ association met with the generals on 9 September 1915 at the hotel Artushof, near the famous Königsstraße, they brought a list with names of possible members.

On 3 November 1915 the *Düsseldorfer Tageblatt* announced that the Filmvorprüfungsstelle was ready to take up its work.²⁶ In charge was Alfred Rosenthal, a film journalist and author, and there were several other film industry representatives.²⁷ The last to join the group were apparently three officers to represent the Army, Hauptmann Kürten, Hauptmann Kämpffe (or Kampfe) and Leutnant der Reserve Kamp von Schartrow. The other board members had earlier agreed to participate. Among them were journalists, teachers, lawyers, representatives of the Chamber of Trade, the Red Cross, the supervisory school authority, the municipal youth

welfare office, a local women’s club and, of course, several directors of the bigger cinemas in town. The names of about thirty people can be found in different documents.²⁸ Their first meeting took place on 5 November 1915. The *Düsseldorfer Tageblatt* informed its readers that from 11 November onwards only censored films would be allowed to be shown.²⁹ Therefore it was very urgent for the jury to start its work.³⁰ The first screening room was quickly opened at Hohenzollernhaus on Königsallee 14.

Unforeseen troubles

Very soon after starting the work the board encountered its first problems. They were of various kinds and were discussed by the members of the jury.³¹ One member noted the lack of professionalism among the distributors, disrupting the schedule of the board and causing a considerable loss of time.³² There were technical problems with the projectors.³³ Then it turned out there were a huge number of films to view: it seems that a minimum of 10,000 meters per day had to be seen in order to keep up with the incoming submissions.³⁴ So a second jury was mooted, but there was insufficient space to accommodate it in the Hohenzollernhaus, and an attempt, starting 2 January 1916, to make two groups work in parallel in the same room failed. So that month an-

other room was equipped with a projector and opened for screenings on Graf-Adolf-Straße 37a (at the same location as the cinema Asta Nielsen had been since 1913).³⁵

Personnel shortages continued through 1916. Not enough jurors were available to keep up with the workload, so more teachers were invited and joined the group.³⁶ Then the director, Alfred Rosenthal, was called up for military service (until then he was classed “nur garnisondienstfähig” – only fit for service at the garrison), and difficulties followed to find a replacement.³⁷ For at least one session too few members of the board showed up, so that films could not be censored and the prints had to be sent back.³⁸

Other problems arose, too. A re-examination of censored films by some small town mayors caused delays and trouble for local cinema owners.³⁹ There were criminal attempts to cheat by forging titles on a censorship form (Zensurkarte) or by submitting already banned films again, but under another title.⁴⁰ Last, but not least, an important – even decisive – question had not been discussed in the beginning (at least not extensively enough): what censorship rules should be followed in viewing the films.

What had to be banned and cut out?

It seems that while everybody was busy with practical questions, almost nobody had thought about fixing rules and instructing the board members. Only the Army insisted that the “gravity of the situation” needed a more severe censorship than in peacetime and that “exciting (sensational) scenes” should always be banned.⁴¹ In mid-January 1916 a correspondence began between the parties concerned. The Düsseldorf police offered to make an extensive list of basic principles.⁴² The points of view of the Catholic film journal *Bild und Film* were recommended.⁴³ Books and articles by well-known authors of the Kinoreform movement, such as Herman Häfker, Konrad Lange or Albert Hellwig, were suggested as a reference point.⁴⁴ In November 1915 Düsseldorf’s police inspector Gauer had gone for inspiration to Berlin to talk to his colleague Prof. Dr. Karl Brunner, feared by the entire film industry for his severe verdicts. In February 1916 the local head of the Catholic Church and member of the censorship board, President General Mosterts, submitted his reflections on what he personally would eliminate in a picture.⁴⁵ It is interesting to see that the Army seems to have left it to the civilians to discuss this issue and to find a solution.

Finally all jurors received some general instructions in the form of a Memorandum for the members of the film censorship committee (Merkblatt für die Mitglieder des Filmprüfungsausschusses), including this advice:

The *ensorship* concerns the *effect*, not the *content* of the film. Therefore the censor, during the examination, has to ask the following questions: (1) How does the picture influence the audience including adolescents older than 16 years? (2) How does the picture influence children and adolescents younger than 16 years?⁴⁶

The memorandum included two pages of what the author – probably a member of the police – considered to be offensive. These general instructions endeavoured to make sure that all films were viewed and judged according to the same principals. On the other hand, they set a high standard, and practical problems remained, such as additional jurors having to be found the moment it became obvious that the current members could not cope with the enormous number of prints submitted every day.

Herbert Birett has found seventeen title lists published in the *Amtsblatt der Königlichen Regierung zu Düsseldorf* from November 1915 until April 1917, which include 555 banned films. Only a few titles are mentioned in the files at the municipal archive, which means that censoring had quickly become routine work. In one dossier two titles can be found: *Der Spion* and the drama *Schwert und Herd* (Georg Viktor Mendel, 1916, National-Film GmbH Berlin), banned for “casting a slur at the class of the big landowners and so doing harm”.⁴⁷

According to their belief that Rhineland and Westphalia needed stricter censorship, the Filmprüfungsstelle Düsseldorf was harsher in its verdicts than other censorship boards in Germany. From March 1916 onwards the lists also state the Berlin decisions, so that both cities can be compared. The Prussian censors in Berlin were normally milder than their colleagues, restricting a film for children only, sometimes after having imposed some cuts.⁴⁸ Birett mentions that Berlin banned about 2 per cent of all films, Munich 5 per cent. As for Düsseldorf, it is not known how many films were censored, and the percentage might have been a lot higher. As an indication, from the establishment of the censorship board up to early 1917, between 5,000 and 6,000 films were examined, and about 520 were totally or partially

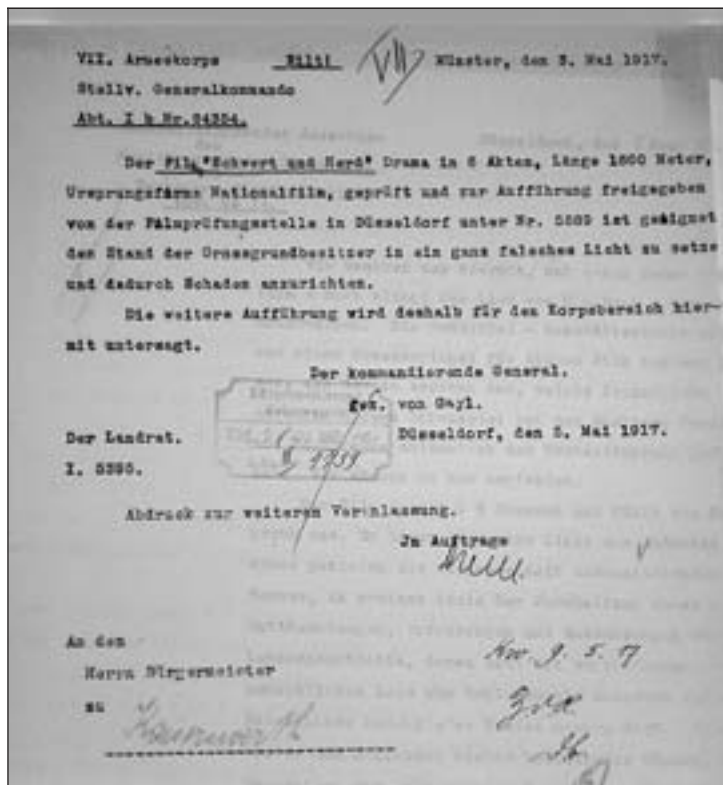
banned, which means that between 8.6 per cent and 10.4 per cent were affected by an interdiction of some kind.

It seems that for quite some time the film industry did not receive sufficient information about the reasons for banning. After more than half a year, in June 1916, the distributors' association protested against this policy in a letter to Düsseldorf's alderman, Robert Lehr, complaining, that "In the case of censorship, the owner of the film is never informed about the reasons for its interdiction". Cinema owner Genandt, the author of the letter, argued that a distributor had to pay "12,000, 15,000 or more Marks" for the rights to a film for a particular territory:

[B]y shortening or cutting out the scenes in question, or even by changing a whole act, which the production companies would be willing to do, some costly films could be salvaged for the owners instead of being totally blocked.⁴⁹

During the war every film producer, of course, knew that content which was considered acceptable before the conflict could now become "a sensitive item", and therefore what might have been considered a profitable film could suddenly turn into an unsaleable object. So if a film was totally banned based on a taboo subject matter the distributors' association would rarely contest the judgement, whereas in the case of a banning based on particular scenes the distributor could make some cuts and then submit the film again.⁵⁰ For Genandt this was a way to save a film for Rhineland and Westfalia, the districts for which his colleagues had booked it. But despite Genandt's letter and the considerable number of totally forbidden films, the Filmprüfungsstelle seems not to have changed its system.

What precisely was censored? Film censorship during wartime is done for all kinds of reasons, such as avoiding anti-war sentiment which might be aroused by horrific images (hurting the audience's feelings and morale); avoiding the demoralizing of spectators, especially family members of soldiers at the front, by scenes showing wounded and dying men; keeping the audience from recognizing parallels between a fiction film and the actual war, which might lead to criticism of the Army or other authorities; and avoiding the showing of films which might influence people already tired of the war to oppose it openly.⁵¹



Such motives were of great importance to the German Army and were considered Army affairs (Heeresangelegenheiten) which had to be strictly controlled. Other unwanted images were those already proscribed before the war: scenes of immorality, violence, dissemination of politically radical ideas and anti-religious feelings, etc. The Army wanted "nice pictures", full of good humor, with an upright view of life, offering a calm education for mind and soul.⁵² The aforementioned guidance notes for censors, the "Merkblatt für die Mitglieder des Filmprüfungsausschusses", also mentioned these "peacetime sins". The censorship lists of Düsseldorf found by Birett confirm that the censoring parameters of the pre-war years as well as subsequent military reasoning were both followed. For example, scenes from *Die kleine Heldin* (Alfred Halm, 1915, National-Film GmbH) had to be cut for showing the harassing of a helpless woman, the injuring of a civilian (violence), and dead soldiers, even if these were French (Heeresangelegenheit). After the cuts the Berlin censors decided in 1915 that the film could be seen by adults, though it was still forbidden for children.⁵³ But, significantly, Düsseldorf did not allow it at all.

Fig. 3. Copy of a letter to the mayor of Kaiserwerth, a village near Düsseldorf, stating that the film *Schwert und Herd*, authorized by the Filmprüfungsstelle, has now been banned by General van Gayl himself. From the file III 7799 Filmzensurstelle Düsseldorf (1915–1916).

The film industry in Berlin probably complained about this severity, as the president of the Berlin police contacted his Düsseldorf counterpart about his concerns in this matter. He mentioned some titles and explained why he thought they should not be forbidden, including *Die kleine Heldin*, but also *Der gestreifte Domino* (Adolf Gärtner, 1915, Stuart-Webbs-Film), *Das tanzende Herz* (Max Mack, 1916, Greenbaum-Film GmbH) and *Die Finsternis und ihr Eigentum* (Otto Rippert, 1916, Deutsche Mutoskop- und Biograph GmbH).⁵⁴ It is not known whether the jurors in the West of Germany knew about this complaint and whether they acted with less severity from then on. But the letter must have had some influence as two of the films, *Der gestreifte Domino* and *Die Finsternis und ihr Eigentum*, after a second viewing by the board, were allowed to be screened for adults.

At least in one case the Army did not agree with a decision. *Der Spion* (Heinz Carl Heiland, 1917, Frankfurter Film-Co. GmbH), released on 7 August 1917 with the consent of the censors, was forbidden by von Gayl on 13 October 1917. No reason was given in his note. He may have been inspired by Berlin's example, where the film was forbidden. Spy films such as *Doppelt verwundet* (1916, Camp Film), also mentioned by the president of the Berlin police, were generally considered undesirable during the war.⁵⁵ (It was only allowed in 1918, its title changed to *In die Wolken verfolgt*, but stayed forbidden for children.)⁵⁶

The Filmprüfungsstelle and the film industry in North Rhine-Westphalia

Even if it took less than half a year to come to an agreement and make the necessary arrangements, given that the war had begun in August 1914 the Filmprüfungsstelle started very late. As already mentioned, it suffered from a lot of start-up problems. Its low productivity was the major one.

The importation of foreign films from "enemy countries" such as France or Great Britain had, in general, already been stopped earlier, which made the situation even more difficult for the cinema owners.⁵⁷ By mid-December 1914 all French and British films produced after 1 August 1914 were banned by order of the minister of war.⁵⁸ As the board of censorship was very slow to take up its duty, a decreasing number of films could be put at the disposal of the exhibitors. And as the distributors' association was not able to tackle the problem, the film-hungry cinema owners started to grumble. In March 1916 the

complaints were already so extensive that the organizers had to think about an appeals commission.⁵⁹ The police noted in April 1916: "Up to now the censorship board in Düsseldorf has censored 1,800 prints. Considering there are 200 cinemas, this number seems small ..."⁶⁰

If 1,800 films were examined since the beginning, that meant 360 titles per month or 90 in a week. But since mid-November 9,000 films had been submitted, most of them consisting of several reels, so just a fifth of the total number had been actually dealt with up to that point.⁶¹ The Filmprüfungsstelle would need until the beginning of 1917 to cope with the problem, as by then between 5,000 and 6,000 "old films" had been censored, as already mentioned.⁶²

The censorship activity was voluntary work, and the committee members worked when they had time to do so. Films were shown between 10 and 12 a.m. and 6:30 and 8:30 p.m. On Monday afternoons and Saturday afternoons nobody worked.⁶³ This meant that twenty hours per week for one group or forty hours for two juries were all they could manage. The maximum they viewed per day was fifteen films, including one-, two- or three-reelers.⁶⁴ At that pace the censored titles had soon been shown in every venue, and the demand for new films was continuously to be heard. The distributors' association, under the pressure of their colleagues, suggested in June 1916 that they would accept the decisions of Berlin's censor board and use the Berlin Zensurkarten.⁶⁵ But the police of Düsseldorf objected:

It [the Filmprüfungsstelle] was established to undertake a re-examination in accordance with current conditions and the circumstances in Rhineland and Westphalia. The previous censorship results show that among the films censored [and passed] by Berlin's police were a good number of pictures which did not meet the requirements.⁶⁶

The police obviously did not trust their own colleagues in Berlin. Instead they clearly preferred a local solution and suggested setting up a second censorship board in Cologne to help out. This idea was strongly rejected by Rosenthal and his colleagues, certainly not only because of the long lasting rivalry between the two neighboring towns, but because they would not want to diminish their influence and lose their dominant position in the film business.⁶⁷ As an alternative, the distributors' association suggested inviting more people to join the

board. The police asked for a considerable number of additional staff: "The maximum output of 20,000 film-meters per day requires a pool of more than 80 members."⁶⁸ In June 1916 about ninety jurors worked for the Filmprüfungsstelle, which still was not enough.⁶⁹

The situation became more than difficult for the cinema owners. First of all they had to endure the general problems caused by the war, including limited opening hours (half a week) in the first year of the war. They constantly had to replace projectionists, musicians and heads of orchestra coming from and leaving for the front. The possibility of fires arose as the replacement staff was not always sufficiently familiar with the projectors; the use of quite worn-out prints represented an even higher risk as nitrate prints could get stuck in the gate and burn.⁷⁰ During the last year of the war illnesses such as tuberculosis spread around – most of all the Spanish influenza which broke out in spring 1918 and peaked in October, just before the end of the combat operations in mid-November. Most inhabitants were busy searching for food as a result of increased rationing, and thus were less likely to go and see films.⁷¹ Distribution conditions were strained, as the Army had priority in rail transport between Berlin and the Western parts of the country, causing a delay in the shipping of prints.

But they also had to cope with problems caused by the film industry itself, as the film press sometimes complained. Distributors had to prepay for rented prints without any guarantee that the film would be successful. The definitive introduction of the monopoly distribution system (even for one-reelers) in 1915/16 cemented the three-class system (first-, second-, third-run-cinemas). Programs lacked diversity when serials became fashionable, and these were inundating the market in 1916/17. As German film production started very late, it was unable to replace the films delivered by "enemy countries" which were now forbidden. Last, but not least, a lack of materials to fix broken films made projection a daily challenge for cinema owners.

Under then current conditions distributors no longer received enough films to satisfy their clients. New films were rare, and old prints would disappoint the audience waiting for news from the front.⁷² Fewer opportunities for playing optimistic films meant less chance of raising "practical (war-) patriotism" (Leslie Midkiff DeBauche) to strengthen morale, which was considered important by the Army. Without new films

cinema owners certainly lost money, as most people were not interested in seeing a long film twice, especially not in one of the expensive film palaces. Repeating old films made first-run cinemas in the center of Düsseldorf look like third-rate houses (the so called 'Bezirkstheater' on the outskirts of a metropolis) which received films weeks after the premiere. In the worst case, by losing too much money, exhibitors could be forced to close their houses and fire the staff which, as a consequence, would render "several thousand employees without bread, among them many wives of soldiers and war invalids", as the distributors' association stressed in a letter to the Army.⁷³

But in the circumstances theatre directors had to make up their programs out of older, previously-shown films. In autumn 1916, films released in 1913 and 1914 were still being screened – and even these old films, already with a Zensurkarte and being shown before the war, had to be re-censored. New times demand new rules was the Army's idea. The number of prints circulating was restricted, pushing the cinema owners to play more or less everything they could get their hands on. But even these films were difficult to get. Supply became a major problem.

Something had to be done. Probably the municipal authorities thought of their lost profits – every ticket sold brought in tax money for the town.⁷⁴ The Army was convinced that the population needed to be cheered up; in any case, they put a lot of pressure on the Filmprüfungsstelle. In the meantime they allowed films to be shown with only a preliminary certificate of the police administration ("auf Grund vorläufiger Bescheinigung der Polizeiverwaltung Düsseldorf") and a Zensurkarte from Berlin. Then the Deputy General Commander (Stellvertretendes Generalkommando) of the VII. Army Corps sent a letter to the heads of administration in regional towns, dated 28 May 1916, informing them that from 15 June films would require the Düsseldorf censorship.⁷⁵ The letter confirmed: "If a film is to be shown after 15 June 1916 and does not yet have an authorization by the police in Düsseldorf, the cinema owner must submit it to the local police and ask for permission".

Nevertheless, the local authorities, used to reading the decisions published in the *Amtsblatt*, did not accept the preliminary certificates. Maybe they were not informed by their superiors about the decision of Freiherr von Gayl. So he had to confirm it again.⁷⁶ This temporary solution lasted until 31 July,

Fig. 4. Kino Ulrichplatz. A makeshift military cinema in the woods, unidentified location. [Postcard in author's collection.]



and from 1 August every print had to be accompanied by a Zensurkarte issued by the Filmprüfungsstelle.⁷⁷ Von Gayl's order assured the existence of the Filmprüfungsstelle until the end of the war.

The censors probably continued their work until November 1918, when the war ended and the Kaiser had to abdicate and sought exile in the Netherlands. The People's Commissioners of the new Republic proclaimed on 12 November 1918 that censorship was abolished. The film industry, since 1914 obediently working together with the authorities, stated immediately that censorship was not needed anymore.⁷⁸ On 31 December the official existence of the Filmprüfungsstelle for the district of the VII. and VIII. Armeekorps ended.

Collaboration practices

Astonishingly, the very conservative Army had worked together with an industry that was not only young, but had a bad reputation among the "better classes", as it was considered to disseminate trash and filth ("Schund und Schmutz"). But cinemas were visited by millions of people every week and were a powerful means to educate the population, as the Generals might have read in the press over the years.

The military department of the government in

collaboration with the Kaiser determined the parameters of what could be done, helped by colleagues such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The regional Armeekorps, following Berlin's orders, commanded the local police in collaboration with the district president (Regierungspräsident). Yet, interestingly, the Army rarely interfered with the affairs of the Filmprüfungsstelle. It was left to the civil authorities to establish, organize and accomplish the censorship. Was it because the Army had few soldiers to spare for such a task, and their own regulation office was already too busy checking documentaries and actualities from the front?⁷⁹ Were the Generals convinced that in the Kaiserreich, where people were used to obey, nobody would dare not to follow an order?

It is probable that Freiherr von Gayl and his counterpart, Paul von Ploetz, were largely satisfied with the distributors' association organizing the censorship. Their members acted as "real Germans", doing willingly more than the Army expected from them, and even anticipated orders before they were officially issued. Cinema owner Genandt and his colleagues were practical in their thinking. Not only did they know they could not escape censorship, but they wanted, by all means, to prevent what had happened in Berlin before the war: interdiction by ignorance. For the film industry, censorship always

meant losing money. So they accepted willingly to submit their films to the censorship office, but wanted to be part of the jury to “prevent the worst”.

The Army interfered, however, the moment it had the impression that the Filmprüfungsstelle was not capable of coping with the situation: when masses of unviewed films started to pile up. The military put pressure on the distributors' association, but gave it a chance by prolonging the delay to find a solution. Von Gayl and von Ploetz were not particularly kind – the heads of the Filmprüfungsstelle were mercilessly sent to the front – but must have trusted the cinema industry to solve the problem as this was in their own interest.

It is well known that before 1914, while the German military was often a subject for topical, its representatives were not involved in film matters. This changed during the war. The German Army and the government discovered moving pictures to be a useful instrument for propaganda abroad, and the Minister of Internal Affairs, consequently, founded the Bild- und Filmamt (BUFA) in October 1916 and affiliated it to the Foreign Office.⁸⁰ The role the Army played in the creation of BUFA and then UFA has been studied extensively, but how the Army collaborated with distributors and cinema owners has been relatively little studied to date.

This regional study of the Düsseldorf situation

is, of course, but one example to shed some light on this largely unexplored territory. But one hypothesis can be advanced already: the successful collaboration between the military and the film industry on local censorship from 1914 onwards, and the effect of lack of prints on the morale of the population, might have played a role in the Army decision to get more deeply involved with film.

More research about, for instance, the collaboration of the Army and the film industry in Munich and Stuttgart needs to be done, and even the practical aspects of the Berlin censorship board's activities in the 1910s has to be looked into more deeply. One should not forget the considerable cultural gap between the various regions and the German capital, which may have led also to differences in censorship practices. To study the everyday routine of such boards and the role that the many ordinary people – cinema owners, distributors, police officers, etc. – played in this process during the war years is important in order to understand how this “special relationship” between the film industry and the Army, which ultimately led to the creation of the Ufa, started to develop.

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Notes

1. Michael Hammond, *The Big Show. British Cinema Culture in the Great War 1914–1918* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), 38, 66, 71, 75, 84, 98, 218–219, etc.; Nicholas Hiley, “The British Cinema Audience”, in Karel Dibbets and Bert Hogenkamp (eds), *Film and the First World War* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995), 160–170, here page 160; Heide Schlüpmann, “Die Erziehung des Publikums”. Auch eine Vorgeschichte des Weimarer Kinos”, *KINtop 5* (1996): 133–146; Antje Strahl, *Rostock im Ersten Weltkrieg. Bildung, Kultur und Alltag in einer Seestadt zwischen 1914 und 1918* (Berlin etc: LIT Verlag, 2007).
2. See Herbert Birett, *Verzeichnis in Deutschland gelaufener Filme* (München etc: K.G. Saur, 1980). In this important book of thirty years ago, Birett revealed the consequences of the military intervention for the cinema business in Germany, and published a series of original documents showing the “official” side of the historical events: the orders given and laws published by the authorities such as the Ministry of War, the war press office, generals, etc. See also his *Lichtspiele. Der Kino in Deutschland bis 1914* (München: Q-Verlag, 1994). On his website <http://www.kinematographie.de/HENNIG.HTM>. Birett writes that on 5 May 1906 a censorship order was issued by the police in Berlin concerning all films to be shown in cinemas. Other German states followed this example.
3. Organisations responsible for the pre-censorship (Vorzensur) were the Polizeipräsidium in Berlin for Prussia and the Landesprüfungsstelle in Munich for Bavaria.
4. In 1910, Westfalen had 4,125,000 inhabitants (see http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Provinz_Westfalen, last visited on 14 March 2010), and 7,121,000 lived in the so called Rheinprovinzen (see <http://www.gemeindeverzeichnis.de/gem1900//gem1900.htm?rheinprov/rheinprov1900.htm>, last visited on 14.3.2010). In 1913, 67,000,000 people lived in the entire Deutsche Reich (see http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hochindustrialisierung_in_Deutschland, last visited on 14 March 2010).

5. The source material which has been used for this article is kept at the municipal archive, Düsseldorf: III 7799 Filmzensurstelle Düsseldorf (1915–1916), XVI 1726 Kinodarbietungen, Schaustellungen, Mus. Darbietungen, sonstige Belustigungen, Tanz etc. and III 2144 Errichtung einer Bild- & Filmstelle sowie Lichtbildervorführungen (1922–1926).
6. As early as *Afgrunden* (Urban Gad, 1910), Joachim Gottschalk, a producer and distributor from Düsseldorf, had subdivided the Deutsche Reich into zones, according to only one cinema owner a temporary monopoly to exploit the film. It was not until 1925 that the official division into five distribution centers occurred and Düsseldorf received its "title" (see Rudolf Pabst (ed.), *Das deutsche Lichtspieltheater in Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft* (Berlin: Prisma-Verlag, 1926), 125.
7. See <http://www.verwaltungsgeschichte.de/duesseldorf.html>, last visited on 18 February 2010. See as well Clemens von Looz-Corswarem, "Düsseldorf als Garnisonsstadt", in Jörg Engelbrecht and Clemens von Looz-Corswarem (eds), *Krieg und Frieden in Düsseldorf. Sichtbare Zeichen der Vergangenheit* (Düsseldorf: Grupello Verlag, 2004), 35–88.
8. See Uta Hinz, "Düsseldorf im Ersten Weltkrieg", in Jörg Engelbrecht and Clemens von Looz-Corswarem, *ibid.*, 246.
9. While in 1910 Düsseldorf had 359,000 citizens, the census of 5 December 1917 showed that 390,793 people lived here, of which 14,339 were soldiers and 1,684 were prisoners of war. See <http://wapedia.mobi/de/D%C3%BCsseldorf?t=3>, last visited on 24 March 2010.
10. See Uta Hinz, "Düsseldorf im Ersten Weltkrieg", 248. These women now controlled their own money, which made them financially independent from their fathers or husbands.
11. See *Reichs-Kino-Adreßbuch* (Berlin: Verlag der Lichtbildbühne, 1924/25). The statistics show that Düsseldorf had the following number of cinemas: 10 in 1910, 15 in 1912, 18 in 1914, 22 in 1917, 13 in 1920, 12 in 1922, 15 in 1924 and 1925. In my own research I could find just 13 cinemas for 1914 and 15 for 1917. As advertising was difficult during the war (the smaller cinemas did not want to spend money on it), and other sources seem not to have survived, it is possible that more projection places existed.
12. Letter from Provinzialverband für Rheinland-Westfalen (Adersstraße 24) to Stellvertr. Generalkommando des VII. Armeekorps Münster on 6 September 1915. All quotations from German sources in this article are my translation.
13. See Leslie Midkiff DeBauche, *Reel Patriotism: The Movies and World War I* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1997), quoted in Michael Hammond, *The Big Show*, footnote 6 on page 252.
14. See "8. Kinematographen, Lichtbilder usw.", in *Jahresbericht des Statistischen Amts der Stadt Düsseldorf für die Jahre 1915 bis 1918 mit Vergleichszahlen aus früheren Jahren. Ergänzungsheft zu den Statistischen Monatsberichten der Stadt Düsseldorf* (Düsseldorf, 1919), 99–100. For 1914 see "7. Kinematographen, Lichtbilder usw.", in *Zur wirtschaftlichen und sozialen Entwicklung Düsseldorfs im Jahre 1914. Jahresbericht des Statistischen Amts der Stadt Düsseldorf. Ergänzungsheft zu den Statistischen Monatsberichten der Stadt Düsseldorf* (Düsseldorf, 1915), 43–44. The records in the municipal archive give further information:

Year	No. of inhabitants	Cinema tickets sold
1913 (last year before the war)	402,300	1,779,878
1914 (first year of the war)	417,100	1,611,719
1919 (first year after the war)	407,350	2,833,893

At the end of the war, most of the cinemas were still running for some time, as the demand for film entertainment was considerable. But owners were forced to close their cinemas due to many factors: the revolutionary period (Räterepublik) starting on 18 November 1918, the occupation of a part of the town by the Allies beginning in December 1918, strikes in January 1919 and during the following months, bringing chaos and insecurity, street fights between the ultra left and extreme right wingers, and not least, money problems and misery as direct effects of the war. For more information see <http://wapedia.mobi/de/D%C3%BCsseldorf?t=3> as well as http://www.duesseldorf.de/stadtarchiv/stadtgeschichte/gestern_heute/b_12_stadtgeschichte.shtml, last visited on 28 March 2010.

15. Figures for "number of shows" include the total recorded in two distinct taxation categories: *pauschsteuerpflichtige* and *billetsteuerpflichtige*. The reason for this distinction is unknown.
16. Towns having Royal Police (königliche Polizei) could profit financially from this new legislation, but the ordinary municipal police did not. See the order published by the minister of finance (Gebührenordnung des Finanzministeriums) voted for on 2 July 1914.
17. According to Michael Rademacher, specialist on German administrative history, Berlin in 1910 had 2,071,257 inhabitants of whom 1,689,118 were Protestants and 243,020 Catholics. See his homepage: http://www.verwaltungsgeschichte.de/p_berlin.html, last visited on 18 February 2010.
18. See letter from police administration to Provinzialverband on 7 June 1916. It is said that Arthur Rosenthal

- first proposed creating the Filmprüfungsstelle. See letter from police administration to Generalkommando des VII. Armeekorps, 31 January 1916.
19. See letter from Düsseldorf's police administration to the president of the police in Berlin on 20 July 1916.
 20. Spectator, "Die Düsseldorf Zensurstelle in Gefahr", *Der Kinematograph* (4 September 1918).
 21. It seems that Düsseldorf had some kind of censorship office from about 1910 but little is known of this. Indeed, almost nothing is yet known about pre-war censorship, as hardly any source material has been found. Herbert Birett, to whom I owe this information, has studied film censorship in Germany for more than thirty years, but could not find any censorship cards. But he has found traces of censorship activities. See Herbert Birett's website (<http://www.kinematographie.de/VDFART.HTM#ART2>, last visited on 18 February 2010). Only J. Rosen, *Le cinématographe. Son passé, son avenir et ses applications* (Paris: Société d'Édition Technique, s.d., c. 1911), 117, mentions censorship practice: 'A Düsseldorf (Prusse), chaque programme doit passer sur l'écran de la Préfecture de police qui autorise la projection en public ou la refuse, s'il y a lieu'.
 22. A distributor had to pay 10 Marks per reel (see note of Provinzialverband, mid-April 1916).
 23. See "Verhandlungen des Vorstands des Provinzialverbandes für Rheinland und Westfalen am Donnerstag, den 16. Sept. 1915", kept at the Stadtarchiv Düsseldorf (III 7799 Filmzensurstelle Düsseldorf (1915–1916)). It is not known when they started the negotiations, as the documents kept at the municipal archive cover only parts of 1915 and the years 1916 and 1917.
 24. All information on the Film(vor)prüfungsstelle is based on documents kept by the municipal archive of Düsseldorf, if not noted otherwise. The documents can be found in III 7799 Filmzensurstelle Düsseldorf (1915–1916).
 25. As I could not find any official documents I don't know when exactly this happened.
 26. The *Amtsblatt der Königlichen Regierung zu Düsseldorf*, 30 October 1915, had already published a "Bekanntmachung der Militärbehörde, Nr. 1038", about a decree by General von Gayl on 21 October that posters and films had to be approved before they could be shown.
 27. Key film industry names were August Baltes (director of the Asta Nielsen-theatre), Eduard Gottschalk (producer and distributor, director of the company Filmmanufaktur), F.R. Dietrich (distributor, Filmverleih Düsseldorf), Hilda Blaschitz (author and film critic, Rheinischer Frauencub), Dr. Lorenz Pieper and Dr. jur. Padberg (Lichtbilderei M. Gladbach), Fritz Genandt (director of the Residenz-theatre), A. Szillard (director of the Rheinische Film-Gesellschaft).
 28. See the letters between September and November 1915 in III 7799 Filmzensurstelle Düsseldorf (1915–1916).
 29. *Düsseldorfer Tageblatt* 3 November 1915.
 30. Freiherr von Gayl in his announcement of 21 October 1915 mandated that 10 November 1916 had to be the first day of the new regulations.
 31. See "Kurzer Bericht über die Sitzung der Kinozensoren am 17. Januar 1916" (short report on the meeting of the film censors on 17 January 1916).
 32. Note by [Thelemann] on 3 December 1915.
 33. Letter from Bernstein, Provinzialverband, to police inspector Gauer, Filmprüfungsstelle, on 20 April 1916.
 34. Letter from Provinzialverband to Filmprüfungsstelle at police administration on 20 December 1915.
 35. Ibid.
 36. Letter from Schmitz to supervisory school authority on 2 February 1916.
 37. Letter from Rosenthal and colleagues of the Provinzialverband to Filmprüfungsstelle on 14 January 1916. Rosenthal left on 18 April. His successor, Zimmermann, a distributor from Bochum and secretary of the Provinzialverband, was not accepted by everyone. Those who rejected him believed his company would profit from his new job. The police were suspicious about his qualities, too, as Zimmermann had pronounced himself earlier against censorship (see letters from police administration to Generalkommando des VII. Armeekorps Münster, 22 January 1916 and 31 January 1916). He was replaced by A. Bernstein in February 1916. When Bernstein was forced to go back to the front, cinema director Fritz Genandt took over his job at the start of December 1916 (see letter from Bernstein to Mayor Robert Lehr, 8 March 1916, and note by Gauer, 12 December 1916). For more information on Rosenthal see http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Rosenthal.
 38. Causing transportation costs to be paid for by the Provinzialverband (distributors' organisation). Note by [Thelemann] on 8 December 1916 and letters from Provinzialverband to Filmprüfungsstelle on 9 January 1916 and 11 January 1916.
 39. Letter from Rheinische Film-Gesellschaft to Filmprüfungsstelle on 7 March 1916.
 40. Letter from police administration to Provinzialverband on 10 June 1916 and letter from Rosenthal et al., Provinzialverband to Filmprüfungsstelle on 14 January 1916.
 41. Letter from Governor Francis Kruse to his colleagues and to all police administrations on 26 October 1915.

42. Letter from police administration to police inspector Gauer on 21 January 1916.
43. Letter from Pieper to Lehr on 23 February 1916.
44. Ibid. Also letter from Flender to police administration on 22 February 1916.
45. Letter from Mosterts to Lehr on 1 February 1916.
46. The second part of the memorandum insisted that the legal basis for the evaluation of the impact was given by the "Allgemeine Landrecht für die preussischen Staaten Th.II Tit. XVII-§ 16" which says, "the necessary arrangements for public control, security and orderliness as well as for the prevention of any danger for the public or its individual members is a task assigned to the police" (my translation). By that, the police made it clear to the jury that the power was in their hands, not in the hands of the Provinzialverband.
47. See XVI 1726 Kinodarbietungen, Schaustellungen, Mus. Darbietungen, sonstige Belustigungen, Tanz etc. Note from Freiherr von Gayl, 3 May 1917. The ban was lifted after some cuts ordered by von Gayl on 21 September 1917.
48. See Herbert Birett, *Lichtspiele. Der Kino in Deutschland bis 1914* (München: Q-Verlag, 1994), 93.
49. Letter from Fritz Genandt, Provinzialverband to Robert Lehr on 30 June 1916.
50. Ibid.
51. Hammond, *The Big Show*, 119, quotes a contemporary source: "There is no doubt that scenes showing German dead, and several of our own boys in the position they have fallen, will make many people who have relatives 'out there' feel the lump rise in their throats." (From "Somme: Impressions of the Great Battle Picture", *The Film Renter*, 16 September 1916).
52. See the decree by the Stellvertretende Generalkommando des VII. Armeekorps published by the Munich head of police on 15 January 1915, in Herbert Birett, *Verzeichnis*, 610–611.
53. In 1917 Berlin censored it again and allowed it to be screened for children. The parameters had obviously changed. See Herbert Birett, *Verzeichnis*, 198 and 409.
54. Letter from Berlin police chief to Düsseldorf police chief on 10 July 1916.
55. Ibid.
56. Herbert Birett, *Verzeichnis*, 254.
57. Sabine Lenk, "Lichtblitze", *KINtop*, no 1 (1992): 49.
58. Herbert Birett, *Verzeichnis*, 617.
59. Letter from Flender to the police administration on 24 March 1916.
60. Reports by the police titled "Zum Bericht der Polizei-Verwaltung Düsseldorf vom 6.4.1916. - P.A.51/61 – und dem Begleitbericht vom 14. April 1916 - IC 2311 - und dem Bericht der Polizei-Verwaltung Düsseldorf vom 4. April 1916 - P.A. 38/16 - Begleitbericht vom 15. April 1916 - IC 2232".
61. Letter from Zimmermann, Provinzialverband, to Gauer, police administration, on 31 May 1916.
62. See Alfred Rosenthal, "Rheinische Jahresbilanz", *Der Kinematograph*, 24 January 1917.
63. Letter from Gauer to Provinzialverband on 19 May 1916.
64. Letter from Genandt and Zimmermann (Provinzialverband) to the Generalkommando des VII. Armeekorps Münster on 21 July 1916.
65. Letter from Zimmermann, Provinzialverband, to Gauer, police administration, on 31 May 1916.
66. Letter from police administration to Provinzialverband on 7 June 1916.
67. Letter from Zimmermann, Provinzialverband, to Gauer, police administration, on 31 May 1915, and letter from Rosenthal and Genandt, Provinzialverband, to Gauer, police administration, on 25 May 1915.
68. Letter from police administration to the Governors in Düsseldorf, Münster, Minden, Arnsberg, no date given.
69. Letter from Filmprüfungsstelle at the police administration to all committee members on 9 June 1916.
70. Note of police inspector Blase, member of fire department, on 24 November 1915. He ordered that the police had to check projectionists in order to see whether they possessed a professional certificate according to the police decree of 6 October 1910.
71. See Uta Hinz, "Düsseldorf im Ersten Weltkrieg", 250–251.
72. Hammond, *The Big Show*, 98, regarding Southampton in 1916: "[T]he cinema's function as a place for getting up-to-date information and actual pictures of the front did not diminish." Nevertheless, on page 105 he writes that, in general, at the end of 1915 "the 'topical' subjects were no longer in favor", quoting a contemporary journalist who argued that "the public is tired of seeing pictures without any story interest".
73. Letter from Genandt and Zimmermann, Provinzialverband, to the Generalkommando des VII. Armeekorps Münster on 21 July 1916.
74. These entertainment taxes (Lustbarkeitssteuer) were another reason for the massive complaints from the film industry about this heavy burden. Genandt used this argument in a letter to the Generalkommando des VII. Armeekorps Münster on 21 July 1916.
75. Sent to Münster, Minden, Arnsberg, Düsseldorf, and Koblenz, as well as to the Fürstliche Lippische

- Regierung Detmold and the Fürstliche Schaumburg-Lippische Ministerium Bückeberg.
76. See letter from police administration to all committee members on 9 June 1916.
77. Ibid.
78. "Eine Zensur findet nicht statt. Die Theaterzensur wird aufgehoben." ("There will be no censorship. The theater censorship will be abolished".) in Point no 3 of the "Aufruf des Rats der Volksbeauftragten an das deutsche Volk vom 12. November 1918", published in *Deutscher Reichsanzeiger und Preußischer Staatsanzeiger*, no. 277, 23 November 1918, quoted on <http://www.stmuk.bayern.de/blz/web/100081/02.html>, last visited on 5 April 2010.
79. See "Anweisung für Kriegs-Photographen und Kine-matographen", 28 December 1914, in Herbert Birett, *Verzeichnis*, 606–607.
80. In the Stadtarchiv Düsseldorf is a copy of a letter from the Ministry of War, dated 18 August 1916, and entitled "Geheim!" (Secret), as well as a later letter dated 12 October 1916. Both show that those in charge invited the municipalities and administrative districts to provide information about interesting events that could be filmed and used as propaganda for the Deutsche Reich in foreign countries.

**Abstract: Censoring films in Düsseldorf during the First World War,
by Sabine Lenk**

During the First World War, the town of Düsseldorf, with its rapidly expanding local cinema industry, became the headquarters of military film censorship in the west of Germany. Unique documents held by the municipal archive show the practical side of this laborious work as well as the close collaboration between army and film industry. Before 1914, the German military were hardly interested in cinema. This changed radically during wartime, which (among other reasons) may be a consequence of some high-ranking generals' personal experience of what a serious lack of motion picture prints meant for the morale of the population.

Key words: First World War, Düsseldorf, motion picture censorship, Germany

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