

THE TRANSITION FROM SILENT TO SOUND FILM IN A SMALL, MULTI-LINGUAL COUNTRY. LUXEMBOURG AS A CASE STUDY

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Preliminary Remarks

Luxembourg serves as a very interesting case study in the history of the transition from silent to sound film. It is a small country but has always been multilingual. While Luxembourgers have originally had only one mother tongue – Luxembourgish –, most of them (between the wars as well as today) acquire a more or less sufficient command of both French and German in school. Luxembourg has been and still is in this sense a multilingual country. This plurilingualism has its various limitations, however, since not all Luxembourgers command the different languages with the same degree of proficiency. Despite a traditionally deep-rooted francophilia among a large strata of Luxembourgish society, many Luxembourgers used to have – and still have – a better grasp of German, which is explained by the fact that Luxembourgish is a Germanic language and is much closer to German, although there are hundreds of words in the vocabulary that originate and/or derive from French. It must be assumed that in rural areas and among the lower social strata knowledge of French is likely to be less widespread as among the bourgeoisie or the intelligentsia, who usually command French very well. This was also true before the Second World War for the many craftsmen who spent some time in France in order to specialize their respective craft (which was called the “Tour de France” of craftsmanship) or for those numerous Luxembourgish women who worked as servants in French households, mostly in Parisian, before returning to their native country, usually to get married: their knowledge of French was far better than the other members of their social classes.

This is an important prerequisite to keep in mind in order to understand the specific situation in Luxembourg in the early 1930s. Research is complicated by the fact, that a small country like Luxembourg was, to be sure, a solid market for film exploitation, despite that it did not have a fully fledged film culture. In the early 1930s there was no indigenous feature film production in Luxembourg. The earliest documentary films which were truly Luxembourgish evolved only in the second half of the decade.¹ Moreover, film criticism was not highly developed in Luxembourg in the early 1930s. Two film magazines which were founded in the 1920s, *Le Film Luxembourgeoise* and *Hollywood*, had ceased publication by that time and the daily newspapers often limited their film reviews to a meager few lines. The largest Luxembourgish daily, the Catholic *Luxemburger Wort*, started their weekly film section as late as 1934. Other newspapers, however, ran reviews of films, playing in Luxembourg, on a more or less regular basis. Still, many films and film-related topics were largely neglected. So what was lacking in Luxembourg was a regular platform upon which to reflect and discuss film-related issues theoretically.

The Theoretical Debate

Nonetheless, even before the first screenings of sound films commenced there was a lively debate in the Luxembourgish press on new technology. In this discussion the commentators made a distinction between what they called sound films, or films with music and noises, and talking films, or films with dialogue. Even if the resistance against sound films was not very radical, there was harsh criticism against talking films on the side of the “cinephiles.”

Evy Friedrich, a young critic and co-founder of the first Luxembourgish film magazine, was the most outspoken adversary against talking pictures. He feared, like many of his contemporaries, that the language of film itself would suffer. In his opinion the cinema had to remain a silent art. “The ‘cinephile’ will never appreciate the talking picture. [...] I can in no way imagine a Chaplin, a Jannings, a Nielsen stuttering in front of us. It would be worse than theater; it would turn the cinema into filmed theater.”² According to Friedrich the spoken word could only do damage to the cinema, and he regretted that the Americans put so much weight onto this new invention. His verdict was irrevocable: “The talking picture does not belong to film art (‘cinégraphie’), film art is silent.”³ In a different context Friedrich wrote: “What has been the important thing about silent movies was to express with the face what would have to be expressed with words, sentences: the verbalization of the murmurs of the soul. Mimic and gesticulation were the meters by which to measure the talent and artistic meaning of each and every film artist. [...] The silent film has thus brought forth the various human and artistic values that have not been expressed in words till today.”⁴

One of Friedrich’s colleagues at the socialist newspaper *Tageblatt* wrote in 1928: “Silent films and sound films are never going to be rivals. Both will develop independently from one another. The silent film stands for internationality, popularity with the masses and unlimited possibilities of facial expression. It is a true art for itself.”⁵ Talkies could not possibly give something interesting to an audience interested in art cinema. On the contrary, art films would lose on their aesthetic and artistic values. Instead, the author maintained, the newsreels would be the future realm of the talking picture: “The sound film reporter will be the reporter of the future. In the field of news coverage the sound film will become an outclassing competitor for the press.” Moreover documentaries and educational films would benefit from sound: “As a mean of education and propaganda its possibilities are unlimited. Filmed interviews will give petty bourgeois audiences an opportunity to listen to the voices and opinions of great men as if they were present.”⁶ This opinion was shared by most Luxembourgish opponents of the talkies.

Sound films, consisting of noises and mainly music, met with less resistance, since they guaranteed smaller movie theaters better musical accompaniment. The critic “Luxophile” maintained that audiences in provincial movie houses, where the piano accompaniment of silent films tended to be lousy, were being served with music as well with sound films without dialogue as were the audiences of the big movie houses in the bigger cities.⁷ Evy Friedrich would concede in 1931: “The great advantage of the sound film is that it allows original scores, performed by great orchestras to be played in small cinemas. This is the only justification for the sound film.”⁸

The most respected journalist and literary writer, Batty Weber, who was also one of the most outspoken advocates of the film medium in Luxembourg during the 1920s, underlined in January, 1929, that sound did not bear advantages for the cinema: “Most

of the films today considered good, very good, exceptional, would sink into the pit of petty bourgeois kitsch, if their plots were made to be carried by talk and response.”⁹ His weightiest argument was, nevertheless, socio-political, rather than artistic: “The film of today is the most democratic cultural tool, which doesn’t make a difference between big cities and rural areas, between New York and Schlindermanscheid. [...] *Gold Rush* and *Quo Vadis* were not presented in Luxembourg differently than in New York and Paris. This beautiful equality would be disrupted by sound films.”¹⁰ Moreover the author feared that the movie theaters in the small country of Luxembourg could not afford the installation of sound equipment and that Luxembourgish audiences would be deprived of the films that were being shown in the big cities of the world. The democratic element of the cinema would thus be the first victim of the sound film.

Yet, the sound and talking picture did not only have adversaries. Months before the first screening of a sound film in Luxembourg, Nic Molling, the journalist and founder of the short-lived film magazine *Hollywood* (1928-29), wrote: “I believe in the talkies. I believe that the synchronized sound, talking, and noise film will be the film of the future. This under the condition, however, that the talking picture not be confused with the legitimate stage play. [...] In films the moving image remains essential.” Molling attacked the adversaries of sound: “It is dangerous to be pedantic or doctrinaire, and they who deny the talking picture its right to exist even before they have seen or heard a good or even a bad one are indeed doctrinaire.”¹¹

The resistance to the new technology subsided in 1930-31, after some technically satisfactory screenings of sound films had been launched. Batty Weber belonged to those who changed their minds following these screenings. In 1930 he wrote:

*I stirred against sound film so often in this paper, that I should be ashamed that I am now writing in favor of it. It always had its set-backs, even if one wrote about something that was known only from hearsay. Meanwhile I had an opportunity to see a good sound film, Ich glaub’ nie mehr an eine Frau. Richard Tauber is singing; he’s in the role of a tenor turned boatsman who has gone through bitter experiences with a woman. [...] The synchronization was perfect. The voice did not come from a specific corner of the room, while the singer’s mouth was opening and closing on the center of the screen. Voice and mouth were in unison. If the singer left the screen, the voice went with him. Moreover it was not disturbing that the voice was bigger-than-life; the characters were the same, after all. Only the tone of the voice was a little bit non-human, it sounded ironclad, monumental. In a legitimate theater of the same size the actors would hardly be comprehensible in the back rows. Here, everybody could understand everything.*¹²

In 1931 Weber maintained that the invention of the sound film was within the logic of film technology and that the development of this technology had not yet come to its end: at this point he even predicted the coming of color and 3D-projection.¹³

It goes without saying that Luxembourgish musicians were amongst the adversaries of sound films. They argued that film sound deprived young listeners from the experience of live music and obliged them to get used to mechanized music instead: “How could any youth or grown up person preserve their senses in light of these appalling noises? Who could still be enthused by music, if one is confronted from early on with grossly distorted tones which deadens people’s feelings for the pure sound or timbre of

an instrument?”¹⁴ Audiences who seemed to like sound films despite the lousy musical quality were strongly criticized by the musicians: “These audiences display a frightening lack of education and artistic taste should they go on tolerating these unworthy assaults on our distinguished cultural heritage.”¹⁵

First Experiments

A first attempt at introducing sound films to Luxembourgish screens was the presentation of *Lilac Time* (1928, *Ciel de Gloire*, George Fitzmaurice) at the movie theater L'Écran in February/March, 1929. Public reactions were mixed:

*The movie house L'Écran has – without having planned this – puzzled its audiences by announcing Ciel de Gloire as the first sound film in Luxembourg. It would have been right to call it a film with synchronized sound effects. [...] The audience, to be sure, had the opinion that sound film had to be a talking film.*¹⁶

Another critic was more enthusiastic: “*Ciel de Gloire* is the first partly synchronized sound film to be screened in Luxembourg. The experiment is very effective and brings to us, in a tangible and harrowing manner, the reality of the tragic air battles of the World War.”¹⁷ In the same year, 1929, two other American war films “with synchronized sounds” were shown in Luxembourg: *Wings* (1927, William A. Wellman) and *The Patent Leather Kid* (1927, Alfred Santell).

The first public screening of talking films in Luxembourg was launched on September 11, 1929, at the Ciné Marivaux: “Tonight. Acting, music making, singing, *talking films*. The distinguished Nicolas Amato in *Ramona – Perette et son pot au lait – Etincelle de Music Hall*.” The Vitaphone sound system was used, and it combined a film projector with a phonograph.

The Marivaux program, however, could not stop the war of opinions. One spectator reported:

Finally the evening had come. They went to the Ciné Marivaux full of confidence. To their surprise they must have realized that the tickets had gone up by 2, 3, or sometimes by 4 Francs. Alas. The beautiful spectacle will recoup them abundantly. The screening room is getting packed. It's 8:53, the room is getting dark and the usual opening program – a news-reel, comedy shorts... – are flitting across the screen. Then the lights go out for the third time; all eyes are tensely focused on the white wall. After a long cue of titles and text cards Nicolas d'Amato, disguised as a Marquis, the hero of the first “film parlant”, Perette et son pot au lait, appears. He is holding an open book in his hands. On the pages two human beings become alive and start moving. D'Amato is opening and closing his mouth without anything coming out of it, until after a while a phonograph voice, which is not at all in synch with the images, starts emitting all kinds of sounds such as p'tit, p'tit and pot au lait. The first number and thus the first disappointment was over. It lasted not even 5 minutes. Number 2 starts: Etincelle de Music Hall. At the beginning nothing again, than the same non-synchronicity with the images. Eventually, we see Amato in close-up and while he is opening his mouth for a sweet melody, powerful noises are ringing through the hall. The audience is receiving all this with laughter and giggling. The third part then has its turn: Au Pays de Ramona.

*Again, at first it doesn't work, but then the Gods have mercy and at least this little thing is able to satisfy its audience a little bit.*¹⁸

The reviewer of the *Luxemburger Zeitung* maintained:

*Of the three pieces shown one worked well, one fair and one didn't work at all. This is not fault of the management who was attempting to show the audience how all this looks, despite the fact that the whole thing is still in its early stages. But it seems the silent film is very likely to dominate the screens for a long time to come.*¹⁹

Despite the many set-backs in the synchronicity between images and sound and the intelligibility of the dialogue, the *Escher Tageblatt* was less pessimistic: "The progress that is depicted in this film technology, cannot be overlooked. The faults and failures are not bigger than in any other novelty; think of photography, the phonograph, the radio etc. It will be interesting to watch the further developments."²⁰ Although the first screening of sound films in Luxembourg which had been advertised with such a great ballyhoo, ended in a fiasco, subsequent screenings went far better technically and were the reason for Luxembourgish reviewers to rectify their first opinions: "It is my duty to mention that the screening on the first day met with major problems. Subsequently everything worked alright, however, and the three films are fascinating and deserve our attention."²¹ Still, it is not quite clear if these disastrous technological problems were entirely responsible for the delay of the introduction of sound films to Luxembourgish screens.

The introduction of sound or rather talking films to Luxembourg was implemented, in fact, with a short delay (compared to the neighboring countries). Since the country is so small, its audiences tiny in number, and because of the extraordinary costs for the installation of sound equipment, Luxembourgish cinema owners hesitated for some time before they engaged in the financial adventure of equipping their movie theaters with sound technology. A few barely convincing experiments took place in 1929, but the cinema owners waited until it became apparent that sound technology would carry through internationally; only after that did they invest into the innovation more readily.

As of April/May 1930, when Luxembourgish movie theaters were fitted with good technical equipment, thus guaranteeing the transmission of a satisfactory sound (optical sound), audiences were finally enthusiastic. Good technical screening conditions and the programming of good and impressive sound films in a language Luxembourgers could understand drew large audiences to the Luxembourgish movie theaters. Popular genres, such as comedies and musicals were additionally instrumental for the audience's growing interest in sound films.

Show Boat

The screening of the American film *Show Boat* (1929, James Whale) on April 19, 1930, at the Ciné Marivaux was lauded by the Luxembourgish press as a big event. The critic Marcel Kemmer wrote: "When the Americans released the first sound and talking film three years ago, Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer*, this marked the beginning of a new era in the history of cinematography. I would refer to *The Show Boat* as Luxembourg's *Jazz*

Singer. It is the first feature film of its kind to be shown in our country.”²² The *Luxemburger Zeitung* applauded the Marivaux’s initiative but regretted that sound films were still in short supply in Luxembourg: “It is a bad thing that a ‘singing and music playing’ film is still treated as an ‘event for Luxembourg’, while sound films are constantly flocking the screens in all neighboring countries.”²³

In contrast to the short features presented in September, 1929, the quality of the sound seems to have been satisfactory this time: “The rendition of the sound can, all in all, be called good. Laura La Plante sings her rendition very well, nearly faultlessly even.”²⁴ Of course, there is the occasional reserved response: “At the beginning it feels strange and odd. All the more so, since the voice sounds bigger than life as do the other noises (the bubbling of the water, the clacking of the horses’ hooves, the knocking at doors etc.). It is maybe the apparatus which could be tuned differently, or maybe it’s the acoustics – be it as it may, more ‘piano’ would be advisable, though.”²⁵

Despite the minor faults to which these commentaries referred, and which were abundant during this first period, the sound film prevailed in the long run. Ever since the most important cinema owners acquired sound equipment in 1930 despite the huge investment in cost, audience responses seemed to be very positive indeed. As of May/June a first sweep of sound films ran through Luxembourg: *The Iron Mask* (1929, Allan Dwan), *Noah’s Ark* (1929, Michael Curtiz), *Submarine* (1928, Frank Capra), *The Singing Fool* (1928, Lloyd Bacon), *The Pagan* (1929, William S. Van Dyke), *Lady of the Pavement* (1929, David Wark Griffith), *Wild Orchids* (1929, Sidney Franklin), plus the German productions *Der blaue Engel* (1930, Joseph von Sternberg) and *Dich hab’ich geliebt* (1929, Rudolf Walther-Fein).

For these early sound film screenings the Vitaphone system was used which combined a projector with a phonograph. This technology had major technical disadvantages especially concerning the synchronization between sound and images. The first cinema to implement optical sound was the Métropole-Palace in the second largest city of the country, Esch-Alzette. The splendor of this system quickly developed into a major sales and advertising tool, as one can see from the following ad:

*Important! The Pacent Sound Film Apparatus at the Métropole-Palace is the first in Luxembourg. It was delivered by the Pacent Reproducer Corporation of New York and costs around half a million. It is equalled only by its American companion Western Electric brand. Since all the other competitors are using record systems, the Métropole-Palace will be the first movie house in Luxembourg to present SOUND FILMS, which is sound on the filmstrip and not on records.*²⁶

However, the other movie houses caught up quickly and installed this technically superior equipment.

As of September, 1930, the number of sound films shown in Luxembourg went up significantly, despite a considerable raise in admission fees. Sound films turned out to be economically profitable. If it took the smaller movie houses another year or two to acquire a sound equipment, audiences in the bigger cities enjoyed a selection of two or three sound films per week. In 1930 the following sound films – among others – hit Luxembourgish screens: *Le Collier de la Reine* (1929, Gaston Ravel), *Nuits de Prince* (1929, Marcel L’Herbier), *Weary River*, *Spite Marriage* (1929, Edward Sedgwick), *Say it with Songs* (1929, Lloyd Bacon), *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930, Lewis

Milestone),²⁷ *King of Jazz* (1930, John Murray Anderson), *Melodie des Herzens* (1929, Hanns Schwarz), *Der unsterbliche Lump* (1930, Robert Liebermann), *Der Korvettenkapitän* (1930, Rudolf Walther-Fein), and *Das Rheinlandmädel* (1930, Johannes Meyer).

In 1931, 17 of the 36 Luxembourgish movie theaters were able to project sound films.²⁸ One year later, this figure goes up to 24. Which systems all movie houses were using remains unknown. But according to a statistical inquiry, the following sound systems were in use in the early 1930s: Nalpas (8), Pacent (6), Tobis (6), Western Electric (2), Zeiss-Ikon (1) and Kinoton (1).²⁹

The Language Barrier

The international problem of language barriers looked different in Luxembourg. The language conditions specific to Luxembourg allowed for rich and versatile film programming, even though the original relative balance between American, German and French films, which characterized the Luxembourgish market during the 1920s, was disrupted early on in the 1930s. The multilingualism of the country, which made it possible to show two versions of the same film back to back, the lack of a quota system, as well as the reliance on subtitled and dubbed films guaranteed 1930s Luxembourgish audiences a larger array of films to choose from (at least as far as the national origin of the films were concerned) as compared to the neighboring countries of France and especially Germany.

The most important thing to mention here is the fact that the introduction of sound films in Luxembourg brought about major changes to the film market itself. While Hollywood imports dominated the market during the silent era, American films lost this leading role for quite some time but did not completely disappear from Luxembourgish cinemas thanks to multiple language versions, hybrid films and some dubbed films. It wasn't until 1936/37 that Hollywood regained its former status, which came about by the means of a pragmatic mix of dubbing and subtitling. The American diplomat George Patt Waller reported in 1937 to the State Department: "American films are greatly enjoyed in Luxembourg. There is no prejudice against them, and as they are always 'dubbed' in German or French, audiences accept them on their own merit."

Likewise, the number of French films shown in Luxembourg dropped while German imports started dominating the Luxembourgish screens. In fact, in the early 1930s Luxembourgish movie theaters predominantly played German films and only exceptionally French ones. In 1932, the owner of the movie theater L'Ecran, which had specialized in French films since its foundation in 1928, even decided for a time to screen predominantly German films and to program French films only as exceptions. This triggered a lively debate in the press: one reviewer for the liberal *Luxemburger Zeitung* applauded the decrease of US-imports: "Whichever direction the sound film will take [...] one consequence is that it – thank God – liberated us from the American cinema."³⁰ On the other hand, Batty Weber, literary author and the editor-in-chief of the newspaper, warned against the consequences of the fading of French films on Luxembourgish screens: "It will be deeply regretted if French films disappear from our screens or are shown only exceptionally. We would be foregoing one of the most powerful means to preserve our national cultural mix and to communicate it to the masses."³¹ Moreover, he maintained in a different context: "Every citizen of Luxembourg who is conscious of

the spiritual conditions of the existence of their homeland will feel that it is not only their right, but their duty, to see to it that our cultural balance not be biased by a strain of one side.”³² Weber saw one reason for the decline of French films in the fact that “certainly numerous of the spectators in this country won’t be able to follow the French film dialogue completely.”³³

Weber is not the only one to regret the decline of French films in Luxembourgish cinemas: in 1932, Jean-Marie Durand, a free lance contributor to the *Luxemburger Zeitung*, was completely disillusioned. He wrote: “Our popular theater (the cinema) speaks German, has even become German [...]. And we were thinking quite naively that the sound film would familiarize the Luxembourgish audience with the French language and mentality.” Durand saw the main reason for the decline of French films in Luxembourgish cinemas as bad and “insufficient promotion” for French films. At the same time he explains the success of German films in Luxembourgish cinemas as the result of “the immense and systematic promotional hype which was created around each and every tiny production coming from the Ufa-studios.” For Durand, the French producers were guilty of this situation since “they would not want to realize, that quality alone did not suffice and that large promotional campaigns were needed to secure big successes.” This assessment holds true even today.

Indeed, German film production had reached an artistic and popular peak in its domestic market and was generally considered superior to French products: films like *M – Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder* (1930, Fritz Lang) or *Der blaue Engel* but also the numerous and successful musicals like *Liebeswalzer* (1930, Wilhelm Thiele), *Das Land des Lächelns* (1930, Max Reichmann) or *Zwei Herzen im 3/4-Takt* (1930, Géza von Bolváry), which could easily compete with American specimens of the genre, attracted Luxembourgish audiences in large numbers. Although French productions did not disappear completely from Luxembourgish screens in the early 1930s, this thanks in large part to multiple-language versions, and although there were also reasonable successes with films like *Le Million* (1931, René Clair) or *Sous le toits de Paris* (1930, René Clair), this could not hamper the triumphal procession of German films on Luxembourgish screens up to 1937/38. This phenomenon can not be explained alone by turning to the affinity the Luxembourgish language has with German; it certainly also had to do with the highly efficient advertising campaigns that German producers launched, supplying Luxembourgish cinema owners with all kinds promotional materials: film stills, biographies of the stars, trailers etc. Moreover, as one critic put it: “The German companies regularly supply the Luxembourgish press, and at no cost, with elaborate materials on their productions, and the papers in turn are always on the look out for stories that could interest their readers, readily making use of these materials, and all the more so, since the companies also supply opulent illustrations.”³⁴

As of 1933 the movie theater L’Ecran started to show French films in larger quantities again, which was welcomed by Jean-Marie Durand in June, 1933:

*This time it must pull through. It’s a suitable moment. With their systematical reduction of the lowest common denominato, the Nazis pose a first handicap for German [film] production, and international audiences tend to be distrustful. The French cinema, on the other hand, which was inspired by the legitimate theater for too long, seems to have found a way to gain some leeway. If one believes the reviewers, this year a great deal of ‘big films of the year’ will be produced on the Seine.*³⁵

Durand suggests that the Alliance Française invite their members, “to practice their francophilia in the movie theaters. Then the French cinema would quickly become good business for the cinema owners who would no longer be totally dependent on German films as they were last year.”³⁶

It is difficult to say if Durand’s invocation was successful. It is certain, however, that after a period of decline French films were making new ground on Luxembourgish screens during the 1930s. As of the 1935/36 season the number of French films shown in Luxembourg City began to rise significantly again. By the end of the decade the French film recovered in Luxembourg as far as quality was concerned. In 1938, of the 345 films shown in Luxembourg-City 151 (43,8%) were American (three times as many as in Germany in the same year).³⁷ Thus the large number of American films dubbed in French; 85 (24,6%) German and 88 (25,5%) French!

These figures can sketch only a rough image of the situation as far as the popularity of French films was concerned. Since we do not have statistics on the total gross of individual films, it is very difficult to find out which production country attracted the most spectators. One of the rare clues we have is the prolongation of a few films. For example, in 1938 the following films were prolonged in Luxembourg-City movie theaters (which indicates they had an extraordinary success): the German film *Das indische Grabmal* (1938, Richard Eichberg), the French films *La Grande illusion* (1937, Jean Renoir) and *Paix sur le Rhin* (1938, Jean Choux), the German and French versions of *Les Gens du voyage/Fahrendes Volk* (1938, Jacques Feyder) and the American animated film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937, prod.: Walt Disney) which was prolonged for two weeks!

There were a number of French films subtitled in German which certainly helped to boost the French cinema in Luxembourg. Another reason for the growing success of French films was the considerable increase in their aesthetic quality during the second half of the 1930s. The success French films enjoyed in Luxembourg-City in the late 1930s should not obscure, however, the fact that in the rest of the country, especially in rural areas, German films (whether they were American films dubbed in German or German films proper) were still extremely popular.

Language Version: The Special Case of Luxembourg

Ginette Vincendeau suggests that it is true for most countries and territories that cinema audiences were presented with only one language version and that they were not familiar at all with other language versions. Luxembourg seems to be a very interesting exception to this: Luxembourg is one of the rare countries where audiences were entitled to two different language versions per film. The specific linguistic situation of the Grand Duchy provided the parallel programming of French and German language versions.

Between September 1930 and December 1933 at least fifty films were distributed in Luxembourg as multiple-language version (MLV). Since there was no censorship in Luxembourg during the 1930s, we do not have precise figures about the number of films that were available on the Luxembourgish market at the time. In the first period, the two language versions (German and French) of a film were screened at the same time in the same screening room. These were primarily German-French co-productions

which were shot in Germany or (to a lesser degree) France. Moreover there were a few German and/or French versions of American films shot in the USA. To name a few examples: *The Trial of Mary Dugan* (1931, Bayard Veiller, Arthur Robison, Marcel de Sano), *Big House* (1930, George Hill, Pál Fejós, Ward Wing), *Nothing but the Truth* (1931, Victor Scherzinger, Karl Anton, Manuel Romero, René Guissart), *Anna Christie* (1930, Clarence Brown, Jacques Feyder), *His Glorious Night* (1929/30, Lionel Barrymore, Carlos Borosque, Jacques Feyder) and *The Unholy Night* (1930, Lionel Barrymore, Jacques Feyder).

The first film that was distributed in Luxembourg in two versions was *Die Nacht gehört uns/La Nuit est à nous* (1930, Carl Froelich, Henry Roussell). Although the quality of the sound provoked a good deal of criticism, the reviewer for *L'Indépendance Luxembourgeoise* congratulated the cinema owners on their decision to have programmed the film in two different versions. The language versions allowed the cinema owners to attract those Luxembourgers who were more fluent in German as well as those who felt more in line with the French language and, more generally speaking, with the French culture. The French version was thus not especially geared toward the relatively small number of French people living in the Grand Duchy at the time and who would have spoken neither Luxembourgish nor German.

La Nuit est à nous was screened as often as its German counterpart. After a relatively short period of time, however, it turned out that German versions generally attracted larger audiences which led to a growing number of German versions to be screened in Luxembourgish cinemas. While French versions usually ran for two or three days, German versions played for four or five days a week. Sometimes cinema owners tried to convince their audiences to take interest in two versions of the same film. In the case of *Atlantic* (1930, Ewald André Dupont, Jean Kemm) the Ciné de la Cour put up an advertisement which indicated that “although both versions narrate the sinking of the Titanic, the German version has a love interest which is very different from that of the French version. *Therefore one must see both.*”

Despite its uniqueness, the practice of double programming language versions was only seldomly taken by reviewers as an opportunity to compare two film versions in terms of their content, quality or mentality. Only now and then does one find telling comments on various films. For example, when the movie theatre Capitole screened the French version of *Die Drei von der Tankstelle, Le Chemin du paradis*, on its opening night in March 1931, the newspaper *Freie Presse* regretted that the film was shown in its French version “since this operetta was purely German in character and that it was much more natural with a German cast. The charming leading lady, Lilian Harvey, who appears in both versions, could not assert herself fully in the French version.”³⁸ The French language newspaper *L'Indépendance Luxembourgeoise*, on the other hand, maintained that Lilian Harvey and Olga Tschechowa acted very well and that they spoke a very charming French.³⁹

When the two versions of *Marius* were shown (1931, Alexander Korda – the German version had the title *Zum goldenen Anker*), the Luxembourgish intellectual, Joseph Hansen, wrote in *L'Indépendance Luxembourgeoise*: “What is missing from the German version is exactly that which contributes to the atmosphere of the film: the accent of Marseille.”⁴⁰ The *Luxemburger Zeitung*, in turn, underlined the qualities of the German version and its actors: “The German version has only first-class stage actors from Berlin, Bassermann, Lucie Höflich etc., etc.”⁴¹

The reviewer of the Catholic weekly *Luxemburger Volk* is the only one to compare the different language versions on a regular basis. Usually he prefers the French version. On *Heut küsst Paris/Rien que la vérité* (1931, Karl Anton, René Guissart) he comments that the French version was “more frivolous, but wittier and technically more faultless in its dramaturgy.”⁴² On *Die Herrin von Atlantis/L’Atlantide* (1932, Georg Wilhelm Pabst) he writes: “The French version gains through its pleasant language which is well suited to the topic, and it further gains through a logically tighter structure of some scenes. Then again it loses for the lack of discreetly subtle and delicate reserve.”⁴³

The American production of *Anna Christie* (1930, Clarence Brown, Jacques Feyder), the first Greta Garbo vehicle for which no French version was filmed, was distributed in Luxembourg in a German version, the polyglot Garbo herself in the lead. Thanks to the language version the Luxembourgish audience was privileged to witness Garbo’s long awaited and eventually successful transition to sound film. *L’Indépendance Luxembourgeoise* comments:

*And then her voice [...] Greta Garbo, this extraordinary creature; she could not have a banal voice in our imagination. And so it is in reality although we have imagined something quite different. Greta Garbo has a quiet, deep, almost masculine voice which underscores the dramatic effects of her acting style. The ring of her voice and the Scandinavian accent do not have a negative consequence on her formidable acting.*⁴⁴

The reviewer remarks that “apparently” Feyder’s German language version was “infinitely the better one.”

As of the 1932/33 season, the number of language versions dropped considerably. The reason for this is mainly that producers started renouncing this solution to the language problem since other solutions turned out to be ultimately more practical and less expensive.

Subtitles and Dubbing

Neither subtitles nor dubbing had bad press in Luxembourg, as was the case in countries like France or Germany. Relatively early on, Luxembourgish cinemas offered American films in dubbed versions – some in German, others in French – to no protest of the audience (as was also the case in Germany⁴⁵ and France⁴⁶). When *City Streets* (Rouben Mamoulian) was shown in a dubbed version, *L’Indépendance Luxembourgeoise* wrote that this “necessary trick” was executed quite “well and skillfully so that it was hardly apparent.”

At first, the popular and attractive American films, such as *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *The Sign of the Cross* (1932, Cecil B. DeMille), *The Champ* (1931, King Vidor), or *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1932, William S. Van Dyke) were to be seen with German dubbing. Eventually, however, the French dubbed versions were carried through, instead.

The pacifist German film *Westfront 1918* (1930, Georg Wilhelm Pabst), ran alternately in its original German and its dubbed French version. British and American films were usually screened with simultaneous French dubbing and German subtitles which were imported from Alsace. These films may have been produced in Joinville, where

Paramount had set up a dubbing facility as early as 1930. Thus, these films were more easily accessible for those Luxembourgers who were not in full command of French.

French films ran mainly in their original versions and were infrequently subtitled in German. German dubbing of French films was very rare. As of 1933 there were occasionally English-language films subtitled in French.

Since the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg is so small, the possibility of dubbing a film in Luxembourgish was not even considered. The fact that dubbing and subtitles were so easily accepted (even with English-language films) in Luxembourg may be explained by the country's very special linguistic and cultural situation (being placed between two cultures), a circumstance that made Luxembourgers highly accustomed to hearing and speaking foreign languages.

The screening of English-language films with French dubbing and German subtitles seemed to be the best solution for Luxembourg at the time (this is due to the fact that, among others, the number of American films playing in Germany dropped constantly, from the 1933/34 season onwards).⁴⁷

Bilingual Films

In the early 1930s there were a few bilingual films in which the several German and French characters spoke their respective languages while their dialogue was not dubbed. This is true for *Hallo! Hallo! Hier spricht Berlin!* (1931, Julien Duvivier) and, more obviously for *Kameradschaft* (1931, Georg Wilhelm Pabst), a film that dealt with the solidarity between German and French coal miners. The reviewer of *L'Indépendance Luxembourgeoise* wrote about this film, in which all actors spoke their respective language, such that the characters were especially "impressive". If the bilingualism of the films caused problems with audiences in Germany or France, it was ideally suited for the unique linguistic situation of Luxembourg.

From a commercial point of view, it is clear that bilingual films didn't stand a chance of survival on an international market. Bilingualism, to begin with, only worked for films with little dialogue, or for plots that could be easily understood without it.

[Translation from the German by Uli Jung]

- 1 These are the documentaries of the first professional Luxembourgish film director, René Leclère. Cf. Paul Lesch, *René Leclère. Pionnier du cinéma luxembourgeois* (Luxembourg: CNA, 1999).
- 2 *Le Film Luxembourgeois* (August 10, 1928).
- 3 *Le Film Luxembourgeois* (December 14, 1928).
- 4 *Le Film Luxembourgeois* (August 10, 1928).
- 5 *Escher Tageblatt* (November 23, 1928).
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Luxemburger Zeitung* (August 18, 1929).
- 8 *Füllhorn* (May, 1931).
- 9 *Luxemburger Zeitung* (January 9, 1929).

- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Hollywood* (January 18, 1929).
- 12 *Luxemburger Zeitung* (March 6, 1930).
- 13 *Luxemburger Wort* (April 10, 1931).
- 14 *Luxemburger Zeitung* (April 28, 1930).
- 15 *Luxemburger Wort* (April 28, 1930).
- 16 *Hollywood* (March 1, 1929); *Hollywood* (March 8, 1929).
- 17 *Luxemburger Landes-Zeitung und Freie Presse* (February 16, 1929).
- 18 *Luxemburger Landes-Zeitung und Freie Presse* (September 18, 1929).
- 19 *Luxemburger Zeitung* (September 11, 1929).
- 20 *Escher Tageblatt* (September 13, 1929).
- 21 *L'Indépendance Luxembourgeoise* (September 16, 1929).
- 22 *Luxemburger Landes-Zeitung und Freie Presse* (April 22, 1930).
- 23 *Luxemburger Zeitung* (April 23, 1930).
- 24 *Luxemburger Landes-Zeitung und Freie Presse* (April 22, 1930).
- 25 *Escher Tageblatt* (April 25, 1930).
- 26 *Escher Tageblatt* (April 19, 1930).
- 27 *All Quiet on the Western Front* – along with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* – was probably the most commercially successful film in Luxembourg between 1896 and 1940. Cf. Paul Lesch, “La Réception au Luxembourg des adaptations cinématographiques de *Im Westen nichts Neues* et de *Der Weg zurück* au cours des années 30”, in *Erich Maria Remarque Jahrbuch/Yearbook*, no. 14 (2004), pp. 10-33.
- 28 *Le Tout-Cinéma 1931* (1931-32 season).
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Luxemburger Zeitung* (January 29, 1932).
- 31 *Luxemburger Zeitung* (October 2, 1932).
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 *Luxembourg* (April 27, 1935).
- 35 *Luxemburger Zeitung* (July 4, 1933).
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 Cf. Markus Spieker, *Hollywood unterm Hakenkreuz. Der amerikanische Spielfilm im Dritten Reich* (Trier: WVT, 1999).
- 38 *Luxemburger Landes-Zeitung und Freie Presse* (March 30, 1931).
- 39 *L'Indépendance Luxembourgeoise* (March 31, 1931).
- 40 *L'Indépendance Luxembourgeoise* (April 16, 1932).
- 41 *Luxemburger Zeitung* (April 16, 1932).
- 42 *Luxemburger Volk* (October 23, 1932).
- 43 *Luxemburger Volk* (April 21, 1933).
- 44 *L'Indépendance Luxembourgeoise* (March 3, 1931).
- 45 Joseph Garncarz, “Die bedrohte Internationalität des Films“, in Sibylle M. Sturm, Arthur Wohlgenuth (eds.), *Hallo? Berlin? Ici Paris! Deutsch-französische Filmbeziehungen 1918-1939* (München: text+kritik/CineGraph, 1996), pp. 127-140.
- 46 Roger Icart, *La Révolution du parlant vue par la presse française* (Perpignan: Institut Jean Vigo, 1988).
- 47 M. Spieker, *op. cit.*