Bringing movies into the home: distribution strategies for 17.5 mm Film (1903–08)

Martina Roepke
Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

About 100 years ago, in 1903, Heinrich Ernemann from Dresden introduced the first home cinema system on the German market. It enabled amateurs of the upper class to exhibit films in private homes. Films for home screenings were either purchased from the manufacturer or self-made with a camera for 17.5 mm film. Home cinema in this particular cultural form had a short existence, remaining on the market only for about 10 years.1

We don’t know much about this early form of home cinema, and only a few films on 17.5 mm can be found in film archives.2 But the Ernemann distribution catalogues can tell us about the advent of film in the home context. These catalogues – as I want to show – are not just descriptions of the content of the individual films, but can be seen as pragmatic instructions on how to present, contextualize, and actually ‘read’ the films within this particular exhibition context. In this sense they contribute to the discursive construction of the new medium that had yet to define its place within the emerging mass culture at the beginning of the 20th century.

The ‘Kino’

Ernemann’s little film camera, the Kino, as it was called, was a little wooden box weighing only 800 grams which could be used for shooting, developing, and projection. The films for the Kino were 15 or 30 meters long and came in little cassettes that could be adjusted to the camera that cost 150 Marks, a small fortune at the time. Together with the Kino Ernemann sold a short manual, informative and instructive but also programmatic in character, that heralds the role that the Kino could play within entertainment and education as well as the construction of family memory. The last, it was argued, would become obvious by comparing film to photography: Moving images could capture the expression of the human face more ‘realistically’ than ‘dead’ photography.3

But Ernemann’s Kino in the homes of upper-class amateurs was meant to be more than the replacement of an old medium by a ‘better’ one. It was supposed to be more than ‘living photography’. Ernemann did not only sell the hardware but was active in establishing a film distribution network for the home market, enabling Ernemann-
amateurs to screen not only their own, self-made films, but a whole range of other films that could be ordered from the manufacturer.

Ernemann’s home cinema often is referred to as the first movie system in Germany targeting the amateur exclusively. However, as we will see, the significance of Ernemann’s home cinema system lies in the fact that not only did it encourage amateurs to get at least semi-professionally involved in film production but also led them to bring films produced for different professional contexts into their homes. In the following remarks I want to discuss this early form of home cinema more closely. In doing so I will leave the question of technical novelty and the spirit of invention aside and will first look at the kind of films offered by Ernemann for home screenings. Secondly I will discuss the question how those films were meant to enter the homes and entertain this particular audience of upper-class families. In this context the film catalogues containing detailed film descriptions gain a major relevance. I will offer some ideas concerning the pragmatic function of those texts, propose a reading of selected catalogue passages in order to show how different strategies are at work here, and finally reflect on the status of this new medium, home cinema, within film and media history.

The network

Heinrich Ernemann has been characterized as a ‘businessman’ par excellence, dynamic and ambitious in developing marketing strategies. Beginning in 1898 he manufactured professional and amateur photo cameras in Dresden, and within a few years the cameras were exported to many different countries in Europe. The main reason Ernemann became involved in the distribution of films was probably – as for many manufacturers in those years – to promote his hardware. With the Kino he intended to expand his business and to gain a position within the promising field of cinematography.

However, Ernemann did not produce the films himself, but simply copied films made by his clients in a lab that he ran in Dresden. Where did those films come from?

In the manual that came along with the Kino the clients are invited to sell their ‘best’ films back to manufacturer for public distribution. This can be seen as a strategy to stimulate production that would be honored and recognized by the selection of films for public release. According to the film catalogue from 1904, all films offered were shot with the Kino on 17.5 mm film. This indicates that the assumed high quality of the catalogue films was meant to promote the quality of the raw film as well as of course the camera.

What is interesting here is that the films listed in the catalogue obviously come from very different production contexts, of which family scenes form only a small percentage. Among the contributors were probably local producers, small entrepreneurs, and individuals interested in technology. They used the little camera in all different kinds of production contexts for all different purposes. In addition Ernemann maintained contacts with scientists and researchers and institutions which made use of the Kino for the purpose of documentation, instruction, or propaganda. This group of clients formed a network that contributed to Ernemann’s film programme and included:

- The Technical University in Dresden, where researchers were keen to explore the new medium’s possibilities in a scientific context;
- The Zoological Institute of Berlin (Zoológisches Institut Berlin), where film was used to document animal behavior;
- Institutions of military and sport in Lower-Saxony, which used film to support their public image as well as for training purposes;
- Small entrepreneurs and individuals interested in technology in Dresden who would document events in and around the city;
- Local film producers, producing dramatic, comic, and pornographic films;
- Traveling showmen who used the Kino as a fairground attraction but eventually also acted as traveling film producers;
- Amateurs, wealthy aristocrats, and businessmen who used the Kino camera in their free time and sent in their films from their favorite vacation spots and idyllic family life.

Looking at this network of contacts, we get the idea that Ernemann took advantage of the success of his Kino inside established institutions, among professionals as well as amateurs and within only a couple of years he managed to build a huge network. Since Ernemann accepted apparently everything that was out there on 17.5 mm no matter what it was and where it came from to serve his own commercial interests – this can be described as a ‘all-you-can-get’-strategy.

The films

The films available for home screening could be selected from catalogues which came along with the camera equipment. Films of special interest or for specific audiences were offered in extra catalogues. For instance, scientific films were offered to scientists and researchers, and films for a male audience, not recommended for family viewing, were also offered in separate catalogues. Ernemann promised to update the film catalogues regularly and also offered to supply films on special topics on request.

In 1903 only nine films, 3 to 12 meters long, were listed in the manuals that came along with the Kino. But the film lists from 1905 already contained 125 films of between 7 to 30 meters with a maximum of 40 meters and the latest film list I have from around
Networks of entertainment: Early film distribution 1895–1915

1908 offers about 300 films. These films were listed under different categories. Between 1903 and 1908 the categories were, with slight changes, the following:

- Humorous films
- Historical films
- Military films
- Technical Films
- Sport
- Streets and cities
- Animals and ethnography
- Children’s life
- Diverse
- Magic

A special film list announced scientific films and films for Herrenabende (not recommended for family viewing). These catalogues reflect not only the diversity of Ernemann’s film supply. In addition to the length, title, and topic of the films, the catalogues also included short descriptions of all films, and sometimes suggestions were made on how to exhibit them.

The catalogues

The catalogues contained a wide range of films, all of which had been circulated earlier in different contexts and had addressed different audiences: scientists, family fathers, fairground publics, and members of different societies. In those contexts they had been working to produce different effects, such as amusement and surprise, scientific knowledge or memory. When they entered the Ernemann distribution system for home cinema, they were detached from those contexts in order to function within the new context: a specific form of upper-class entertainment. This means that in order to make home cinema work at that particular moment, films from all those different contexts mentioned above had to reach an audience with particular expectations and experiences.

What has been repeatedly pointed out by scholars of early cinema also applies to home cinema in this formative period: here, films were more or less open texts, mute strips of moving images, and their readings depended on the specific contexts of exhibition, for instance the narration of a presenter or explanatory written material. The analysis of Ernemann’s distribution catalogues is a fruitful method to study such processes. The pragmatic function of the film descriptions is to guide the reader through the lists of titles and facilitate selection. Furthermore we can assume that they formed the basis for what the audience was told before or during the projection. Given this pragmatic function, I take the film descriptions to be both selection devices for the operator and reading devices for the audience. With the following examples I will briefly illustrate this double function, thereby closely analysing different textual strategies, their rhetoric, and cultural function.

Let us first look at the military films. Many of the films are described as showing marching soldiers and parades. Others depict exercises, like crossing a river with horses. It is likely that those films were shown to high-ranking military officers or political representatives but also to a fairground public to demonstrate the strength and discipline of the soldiers. Furthermore within military institutions themselves those films might have been served instructional purposes.

Looking closely at the descriptions of those films in the catalogue, we can identify different textual strategies to relate them to the experiences and expectations of the home audience. For instance, the strategy of describing the films as very interesting for ‘everybody who once was a soldier’. This strategy addresses the spectator as someone having very specific experiences in relation to the event depicted. It opens the film up to at least two possible readings: the first possible reading would involve relevant expert knowledge, enabling the spectator to identify the exercises in the film and eventually judge them by their precision or degree of difficulty; a second possible reading could be described in terms coined by Roger Odin as the mode by which family films are perceived, one which involves personal memories of the spectator leading him back to his experiences of the time passed in the military. Both readings, the expert reading and the home-movie-reading of the military film, rely on a very specific prior experience on the part of the spectator. But they differ fundamentally in the way this experience is activated by the catalogue text.

If we look even closer, we see that the catalogues actually contain quite a wide range of different textual strategies by which the audience’s involvement is guided and structured. Staying with the military films for a moment, we find them in some cases described as ‘interesting also for laymen who never have been in the military’, a strategy pretty much in opposition to what I described earlier. How a spectator lacking the relevant experience could possibly enjoy military films becomes clearer in the case of the film Kavallerie-Potouille im Wald (The cavalry in the forest). Here the catalogue promises that the audience would enjoy the film because of the beautiful landscape in which the exercise takes place. The reading proposed here shifts the focus of attention onto what is actually instructional really only in the films’ immediate context, namely the landscape. In foregrounding the medium’s capacity to depict the landscape in which the exercise takes place as ‘beautiful’, the reading suggested puts the film in the pictorialist tradition of landscape painting and photography, one that the home audience is likely to appreciate.

Yet another way of attracting the audience to military films is applied in the case of Schwimmübungen einer Kavallerie-Abteilung (Swim-exercises of the cavalry). The film apparently shows the exercise of cavalrymen in a boot that maneuvers horses through water. The film is described as ‘very exciting because the audience would expect the boat to sink and the horses to escape at any moment’. What is interesting here is that it is not the perfection of the exercise presented nor the bravery of the soldiers that is evoked in the mind of the spectator, but the worst-case scenario which is actually not seen in the film: the sinking of the boat. This textualization of the film dramatizes the events depicted, by stimulating the imagination and creating eager expectations about what could happen – an involvement of the spectator which is typical for many fictional genres.

Let us take another example, the film entitled Im Affen-Tier (The monkey-theater). This is a film that was probably made by a traveling showman to be shown on the fairground itself and eventually was taken over by Ernemann later. In the catalogue we can read about this film:

‘The monkey theatre has always been a popular attraction at fairgrounds and markets. Our film shows the crowd watching with obvious delight the funny monkeys, which perform as ropedancers and jugglers.’

What is interesting here is the way the catalogue description frames this fairground spectacle for the home audience by highlighting certain aspects of the scene. Most importantly: it is not the monkeys, that are placed in the center of the home audience’s attention, but the fairground audience watching the monkeys, that is highlighted for the film audience. What becomes obvious is that the pure production of a fairground
spectacle seemed not to be appropriate to attract the home audience. Instead of inviting
the film audience to enjoy the monkeys' dance, the catalogue puts the audience at a
distance from the acrobatic performance. Considering the social class in which home
 cinema took place at that time, the textual strategies at work here can be seen as
establishing a mode of reading that allows a manifestation of cultural distinction.16

The cultural positioning of the audience is also clear in the following example, the
description of a family film, listed under the rubric Children's life in the catalogue. While
family films can be seen as central building-blocks of a particular family's collective
memory, they obviously require a new framing for an audience that bears no relation-
ship to the people in a film that was simply chosen from the catalogue. A film Die ersten
Eifersuche mit dem Löffel (First attempts to eat with the spoon) shows — according to
the description — twin babies at the table:

'According to the twins spoons belong to the more unpractical things that one
could imagine. How much better one could eat without a spoon! This image shows
us how the twins are trying their best to adopt to our culture and to become
acquainted with the way we use the spoon.17

This catalogue description puts the presumably well-known struggles of family life at
an ironic distance from the audience and seeks to initiate reflection on the amusing
difficulties of bringing up little children. In this way it reframes the event depicted for
the audience and actually turns watching the babies making a mess with their food into
watching the process of civilization itself: This is what learning to live in a culture is
all about.18 A similar strategy is at work with the film Die ersten Schritte (First steps)19
which offers the spectator the opportunity to see 'see the pure happiness of a mother
on the face of the young woman'.20 The home cinema audience of cause lacks any
personal relationship and emotional involvement for the viewings of family films. For this particular audience watching
someone else's family film it is the mother that is put in focus by the distribution
catalogue. Her smile is linked to the abstract concept of 'motherhood' as an value
accepted within the audience, thereby contributing to the ideological notion of the
nuclear family as the basis of happiness.

Conclusion

Above we have identified a couple of textual strategies at work in the Ernemann
distribution catalogues, all of which aim to make the films offered 'readable' by an
home audience: Reference to prior experience of the spectator (here: military experi-
ence) or to familiar forms of visual representations (here: the landscape); dramatization
of the events depicted and emotional involvement (here: the sinking of the boat);
identification with general values related to the events depicted in the film (here:
motherhood); reflection on cultural achievement and the social position of the spec-
tators (here: eating manners). Those strategies, I have argued, were the result of a
specific distribution strategy, one that was born from the idea of exploiting the different
spheres of production for the home market. The 'all-you-can-get-strategy' by Ernemann
brought into the homes almost everything that was 'out there' on 17.5mm — even
pornographic films. It was left to the amateur to make an selection out of what he had
to offer, and Ernemann carefully guided him in this cultural transfer. In this sense the
descriptions are more than descriptions; they are little pedagogical narratives, directed
towards the audience that had yet to learn not only to handle the camera, but also how
to 'read' films within the home context. My analysis of those texts relied on this
character of a 'Gebräuchsanweisung'in this broader sense, devices on how to select,
present, and read films in the home context.

Ernemann's Kino remained on the market for only a short time. The distribution
of 17.5 mm film stopped in 1908, the production of the Kino in 1913.21 While films in
the professional circuit increased in length from 1906 on, Ernemann's films had — due
to technical problems posed by the center perforation — to remain short. It is very likely
that Ernemann was able to survive in the years around 1905 by buying some old copies
from film producers that had gone out of business. But soon the films distributed must
have looked pretty outdated and uninteresting. Although the manufacturer promised
regular updating of offerings we do not really find many change in the last film
catalogues of 1907 and 1908. It seems the film supply stagnated at that moment. Home
 cinema as cinema became less interesting — for the audience and for the manufacturer
— because 'cinema' was being transformed from a traveling business into a local
institution.

Ernemann's home cinema was launched before 'the institutionalization of cinema' had
taken place in Germany, and this is what makes it an interesting case in yet another
respect. The cultural form of what later became cinema was still to be defined, and
there were different social and institutional contexts where the potential of the new
technology was tested. Films were exhibited in many different cultural spheres, like
universities, schools, laboratories, royal palaces, varieties, fairs, as well as in the
homes of upper-class amateurs. In this context the film descriptions from the Ernem-
mann distribution catalogues can be seen as contributing to a discursive construction
of a new medium, home cinema. This construction of home cinema as a new medium
relies on two main ideas: the amateur as both producer and consumer of films and the
program as presentational format for the home audience. Those two aspects enabled the
home audience to watch themselves right next to the parade of the Kaiser — a sort of
media experience which can be seen as the significant contribution to the emerging
film culture early home cinema had to offer.

This vision of a new medium, home cinema, reminds us of other new media at other
times, most obviously television and the internet, media that emphasize the program,
and give the spectator the possibility to fill in this program with his own productions.
However, home cinema in this particular cultural form did not survive the competitive
struggle among visual technologies at the beginning of the last century. In this sense the
discursive construction of early home cinema does not only contribute to the
history of cinema but can in a broader sense also contribute to the process of media
diversification and cultural change that we have been facing during the last hundred
years.

Notes

1. For a history of the Ernemann company, see Göllner, Peter, Ernemann Camera: Die Geschichte des
Dresdner Photo-Kino-Werks (Hildchewen: Witting Fachbuchverlag 1995), which devotes only a
few pages to the Kino.

2. For a short discussion of the Ernemann-Kino in Germany see also Kuball, Michael, Familienkino:
Geschichte des Amateurfilms in Deutschland (Reinbek/Hamburg: Rowohlt 1979). For information
about an ongoing research project on Ernemann's Kino initiated by the author and Henk Verhees
in cooperation with the Dutch Smallfilmarchive: http://www.inter.nl.net/users/ernemann/


4. Göllner, Peter, Ernemann Camera: Die Geschichte des Dresdner Photo-Kino-Werks. (Hildchewen:

5. Ibid.

6. Amateurs from the mid-1920s on discussed vividly the possibilities of professional involvement
by selling their films, for instance to the 'Deutsche Wochenschau', and re-emerging at least part of
their production costs. At the basis of this discussion lies a definition of the concept of amateurism, that would, according to some member of the amateur film movement of those years, exclude all forms of commercial activities. See for a detailed discussion of this point Roepke, Martina, *Privat-Vorstellung. Deutsches Heimkino vor 1945* (Hildesheim: Ohms-Verlag, 2006).

10. Ibid., Film No. 416.
11. Ibid., Film No. 416.
12. Ibid., Film No. 435.
13. Ibid., Film No. 435: 13 (author’s translation).
14. Ibid., Film No. 589.
15. Ibid., Film No. 589:24 (author’s translation).
17. *Films für den Erenmann-Katalog: Kinetograph für Amateurs*, Film-Liste No. 12, Film No. 583: 27.
18. For a detailed account on this view see Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation I-II* (Frankfurt/Mann: Suhrkamp 1969).
20. Ibid., Film No. 455: 26.
21. Around that time Pathé in France and Edison in the US had launched small film systems that used safety film. The 17.5mm Einledigfilm from Erenmann was a non-safety format. For a detailed account on Edison’s attempt to enter the home market see Singer, Ben, ‘Early Home Cinema and the Edison Home Projecting Kinetoscope’, *Film History*, 2, 1988: 37-69.