

Professor Axel Karenberg about dentistry in the cinematographic oeuvre

# Dentists in motion pictures

Portraits of dentists in films represent an important source of historical images. The dentist motif captures scientific and technological developments and reflects common interactions—complete with existing and changing social values. They represent the profession and its popular image—visually as well as sociologically.

## Part 1 (1907–1963)

A number of doctoral dissertations [Gerhards, 1991; Riescher, 2001; Petzke, 2009] have tried to describe the world of dentistry as depicted in the borderlands between reality and fiction. In an in-depth analysis of cinematic representations, we would initially be interested in some rather banal facts: Where did the films come from? When were they made? What film genres could they be assigned to? Next, we would look at the dentistry aspect proper: What is diagnosed or treated, where and how? Is the account authentic? Furthermore, aspects of gender and status would have to be

considered. And looking at the surviving cinematographic oeuvre in its entirety, the most important points of interest would be: How has the image of dentistry in this medium been construed over the decades? What continuities can we trace? What fracture lines can we detect? Organized to examine six time periods in two instalments, this paper attempts to find some answers to these questions.

## German Empire and Weimar Republic (1907–1932)

Looking at Germany, the motion picture industry and modern dentistry are children of the same period: Imperial Germany and the Weimar Republic. The original “cinema of attractions”, consisting mainly of one- to three-minute flicks, was gradually superseded by a “cinema of storytelling” that valued longer narratives. It attracted the attention of production companies and gave rise to job descriptions that are still used today, such as film director and actor [Toeplitz, 1979; Balázs, 1980]. During these years, the dental profession transcended its previous predominantly surgical orientation by integrating restorative and preventive aspects. The growing popularity of infiltration anaesthesia (after 1905) and the introduction of radiodiagnostics (after about 1920) constituted further modernization steps [Hoffmann-Axthelm, 1985]. Dentistry became an academic discipline in Germany during this time, although the dualism of dentistry as an academic pursuit and dentistry as a craft persisted into the 1950. However, after World War I, the status of the fledgling academic discipline was elevated by the introduction of the academic degree of “Dr med dent” [Groß, 2006].

Silent films of the era reflected almost none of this. Only very few German short films with dental



**Fig. 1:** Beim Zahnarzt (“At the Dentist’s”, 1907), still image. Internationale Kinematograph- und Lichtbild-Gesellschaft (Berlin). Image citation of a publicly available copy, Deutsches Filminstitut (DIF).



**Fig. 2:** Hundstage Zahnarzt (“The Dog Days of Summer”, 1944), still image. Deutsche Forst-Filmproduktion GmbH and Wien-Film. Director: Géza von Cziffra. Rolf Wanka and Wolf Albach-Retty as dentists. © Wien-Film. Courtesy of Herbert Klemens, Filmbild Fundus.

motifs have survived (Table 1) – which is not that surprising, given the fact that 80% of all “silent movies” ever made in the world were never archived or have been destroyed [Nowell-Smith, 1998]. Unfortunately, *Fräulein Zahnarzt* (“Miss Dentist”; 1919)—the first film showing a female dentist—is among those which have been lost. One early film that is accessible demonstrates a complete dental treatment in three minutes: *Beim Zahnarzt* (“At the Dentist”, 1907). The technical term is “sound picture” because the hand-cranked projector had to be synchronized with a gramophone playing back a shellac record.

The audience was shown the scene, set in a salon, through the lens of a stationary camera (Fig. 1). The

practitioner wears a professional outfit and has a dental chair, a foot-treadle drill, a tray and a kind of spittoon, and he has a housekeeper around (but not an assistant). He takes a quick look into the mouth of the pain-stricken patient, decisively seizes a forceps and quickly pulls out the first tooth. Then the story gets weird: The practitioner reinspects the surgical area, laughs and quickly removes a second tooth—this time, apparently, the correct one. In the end, the patient, relieved of his pain, pays the fee and leaves the “studio”.

Another work, created shortly after World War I, takes us all the way into the realm of slapstick. The protagonist of *Emil hat Zahnschmerzen* (“Emil Has a Toothache”, 1921) unsuccessfully tries to treat his own complaints with heat. Of sheer necessity, he has to consult a dentist, who with a devilish grin immediately reaches for his forceps. The rest of the procedure remains hidden to the audience, even though contemporary cameras were already able to pan and zoom. To create a comical situation, the dentist extracts the wrong tooth again. This is followed by fisticuffs on the part of the patient, who refuses to pay and chases his tormentor into the street.

These are the only two German silent films on the subject that are still accessible today. The second one in particular established the image of the dentist of a comic, an image that had come to German cinema from Hollywood. The dominant motif was extraction without anaesthesia—a common representation of dentistry at the time in many countries [Gierok, Mirza and Karenberg, in press]. The existing focus on the surgical aspect reflects the general entertainment setting, where sensation-hungry spectators gloated over the sorry fate of afflicted fellow souls, being greatly (and grossly) entertained by drastic visual effects and coarse situational comedy.

### Nazi Germany (1933–1945)

The early 1930s were a time of many profound changes. The National Socialists, the Nazi party, set out to call all the tunes, not only in cinematic art but also in the medical and dental associations, which were quickly brought into political line. The professional dualism within the dental profession continued, and non-academic dentists (18,000 in 1933) clearly outnumbered academic dentists (10,000) [Rinnen/Westemeier/Groß, 2020]. Innovations mainly concerned the radiological field (with panoramic images) and dental technology (where a heat-curing acrylic, Paladon, was introduced in prosthetics).

| No. | Title  | Year | Director        |
|-----|--|------|-----------------|
| 1-1 | Beim Zahnarzt<br>("At the Dentist")  | 1907 | ?               |
| 1-2 | Zahnarzt wider Willen<br>("Dentist Against his Will"; film has been lost)                          | 1917 | ?               |
| 1-3 | Karlchen beim Zahnarzt<br>("Karlchen at the Dentist's"; film has been lost)                        | 1919 | Emil Albes      |
| 1-4 | Fräulein Zahnarzt<br>("Miss Dentist"; film has been lost)*   | 1919 | Joe May         |
| 1-5 | Wenn Zahnarzt Krause spazieren geht<br>("When Dentist Krause Goes for a Walk"; film has been lost) | 1921 | (animated film) |
| 1-6 | Emil hat Zahnschmerzen<br>("Emil Has a Toothache")   | 1921 | Albert Lastmann |
| 1-7 | Weekend im Paradies<br>("Weekend in Paradise"; film has been lost)                                 | 1931 | Robert Land     |

**Table 1:** Feature films with dentist motif (1907–1932).

\* Featured dentist is a woman

Today, Nazi films are commonly associated with propaganda, but in fact the "light entertainment" produced on the assembly line in the UFA studios, depicting a world far away from people's quotidian toils, played a much greater role in Nazi film policy in quantitative terms [Lowry, 1994]. The eleven films on the subject of dentistry that were shot during the "Third Reich" fall into this entertainment category. Seven of them have survived (Table 2); a female dentist appeared at the very end of this period, in *Meine Herren Söhne* ("Dear Messrs. Sons", 1945). However, the director did not show her practicing her profession.

In 1937, the fast-paced screwball comedy *Kapriolen* ("Capers") brings well-known actors Gustav Gründgens and Marianne Hoppe together in a dentist's waiting room, where they spontaneously fall in love. During the subsequent treatment of the young man, there is no talk of an extraction but of a "gold filling". The dentist himself became the source of erotic sizzle in a shallow comedy that opened in theatres nine months before the end of the war. The main characters in *Hundstage* ("The Dog Days of Summer", 1944) are Peter and Paul, two friends and colleagues. Paul has married his assistant, and his stand-in Peter is flirting with a patient (Fig. 2). In both films, the hyper-realistic contemporary-looking surgeries with hydraulically adjustable dentist's chairs, treatment units with Doriot articulated linkage, a tray, lamp, spittoon, etc., have a remarkable effect—a big leap forward from the silent film era. Technology as a secular trend in dentistry had arrived in the feature film. In retrospect, however, the attempt by the set designers to maintain the illusion

of normality and progress in war-torn Germany by depicting an ultra-tidy and almost futuristic practice on the set seems frightening.

Overall, in Nazi cinema, the appearance of the dentist figure in comedy solidified. without the professional activity itself appearing as a comic element. In almost half of the surviving films, the dentist even played the lead. Nevertheless, treatment scenes were brief—something that also characterized later productions. Tooth extractions, previously dominant, were replaced by a tooth-preserving therapy, and in one case, even a prosthetic treatment was suggested. In Nazi film policy, comedies were meant to distract from a grim reality and to simulate a normal life, which included visits to the dentist.

### Post-WW II (1946–1963)

In the years immediately following the war, the two parts of Germany started moving in different directions. This also included the beginning of the coexistence of two film worlds, with a Hollywood-oriented film industry in the West and Deutsche Film AG (DEFA) in the East. Although many productions seem rather shallow and affirmative in retrospect—"amusement without depth"—these were still golden years. Peak figures of almost 10,000 film theatres with more than a billion visitors nationwide speak for themselves; the average German went to see a picture more than ten times a year, helped by the breakthrough of colour [German Film, 1945–1990]. The reconstruction of dental care also proceeded separately in the West and in the East [Gross, 2019]. There were the Federal Associa-

| No.  | Title   | Year | Director                |
|------|---|------|-------------------------|
| 2-1  | Liebe und Zahnweh<br>("Love and Toothache"; film has been lost)                             | 1934 | Georg Jacoby            |
| 2-2  | Wette um einen Kuss<br>("Bet You a Kiss"; film has been lost)                               | 1936 | Jürgen von Alten        |
| 2-3  | Vier Mädels und ein Mann<br>("Four girls and one man"; film has been lost)                  | 1936 | Peter Paul Brauer       |
| 2-4  | Der Prüfstein<br>("The Touchstone"; film has been lost)                                     | 1937 | Ernst Martin            |
| 2-5  | Kapriolen<br>("Capers")   | 1937 | Gustaf Gründgens        |
| 2-6  | Der Maulkorb<br>("The Muzzle")  | 1938 | Georg Jacoby and others |
| 2-7  | Großalarm<br>("General Alarm")  | 1938 | Robert Land             |
| 2-8  | Die unheimliche Wandlung des Alex Roscher<br>("The Uncanny Transformation of Alex Roscher") | 1943 | Paul Ostermayr          |
| 2-9  | Gefährlicher Frühling<br>("Dangerous Spring")   | 1943 | Hans Deppe              |
| 2-10 | Hundstage<br>("The Dog Days of Summer")   | 1944 | Geza von Cziffra        |
| 2-11 | Meine Herren Söhne<br>("Dear Messrs. Sons")*  | 1944 | Robert A. Stemmler      |

**Table 2:** Feature films with dentist motif (1933–1945)

\* Featured dentist is a woman

tion of German Dentists in the West and its counterpart, the German Society of Stomatology, in the East. On both sides of the Iron Curtain, the academic/non-academic dualism, with non-academic dentists being integrated into the dental profession. Technical developments once again centred on radiology (panoramic radiographs), and functional orthodontics also took off [Baltes, 2013].

The frequency pattern of about "one dentist film" per year continued unchanged in post-war cinema, preponderantly in the West (Table 3). This was the beginning of the era of famous film dentists (Werner Finck, Heinz Rühmann), even more famous film patients (Romy Schneider, Hans-Joachim Fuchsberger) and dentist scene in dramaturgical focus, for example in the comedies *Witwer mit fünf Töchtern* ("Widower with Five Daughters", 1957) or *Die Zürcher Verlobung* ("The Zurich Engagement", also 1957). At last, active female film dentists appeared in two everyday comedies—50 years after women were first admitted to the study of dentistry.

Senator Thomas' visit to the dentist in *Buddenbrooks* ("The Buddenbrooks") will be familiar mainly to literature aficionados. The novel had first been adapted for the screen in 1923, but without the notorious dentist Brecht making an appearance [Pommer, 1923]. A historicising remake followed in 1959, which now took up the dental treatment—or rather

attempted treatment. It is almost common knowledge among dentist readers that it was not a genuine oral problem that had prompted Thomas Buddenbrook's visit to the practice, but rather some cardiac pain that projected into the right mandibular region. Dr. Brecht could therefore possibly be blamed for a misdiagnosis and an extraction that was not performed *lege artis*, with fracturing of a molar and three broken roots—but hardly for the senator's cardiac death shortly thereafter. In this filmic representation of the rare "Buddenbrook syndrome" [Moog, 2003], slight discrepancies arise between the literary model and medical reality: in the novel, four residual roots remained *in situ*, while in reality, the pain more often radiates into the left mandibular region.

In the comedy *Meine Tochter und ich* ("My Daughter and I", 1963) (Fig. 3), Heinz Rühmann, playing dentist Dr Robert Stegemann, not only restores the teeth of his anxious patient in one sequence, but also heals her wounded soul: "Bravery is the overcoming of our fear", "Now we're almost there", "it already looks quite nice", "just a few minor corrections".

It is somewhat daring but nevertheless plausible to compare a rehabilitated dentition with the rebuilt Federal Republic and the post-war reconstruction, with a dentist taking stock of the post-war years—

| No.  | Title   | Year | Director                    |
|------|---|------|-----------------------------|
| 3-1  | Affaire Blum<br>("The Blum Affair"; DEFA)                             | 1948 | Erich Engels                |
| 3-2  | Die Frau von gestern Nacht<br>("The Woman from Last Night")*          | 1949 | Arthur M. Rabenalt          |
| 3-3  | Peter als Zahnarzt<br>("Peter as a Dentist"; film has been lost)      | 1950 | Hans Böhlke                 |
| 3-4  | Meine Nichte Susanne<br>("My Niece Susanne"; film has been lost)      | 1952 | Wolfgang Liebeneiner        |
| 3-5  | Liebe im Finanzamt<br>("Love at the Tax Office"; film has been lost)* | 1952 | Kurt Hoffmann               |
| 3-6  | Heute heiratet mein Mann<br>("Today my Husband is Getting Married")   | 1956 | Kurt Hoffmann               |
| 3-7  | Besondere Kennzeichen: keine<br>("Distinguishing Marks: None"; DEFA)  | 1956 | Joachim Kunert              |
| 3-8  | Alter Kahn und junge Liebe<br>("Old Barge, Young Love"; DEFA)†        | 1957 | Hans Heinrich               |
| 3-9  | Die Zürcher Verlobung<br>("The Zurich Engagement")†                   | 1957 | Helmut Käutner              |
| 3-10 | Witwer mit fünf Töchtern<br>("Widower with Five Daughters")           | 1957 | Erich Engels                |
| 3-11 | Der Maulkorb<br>("The Muzzle")  | 1958 | Wolfgang Staudte            |
| 3-12 | Die feuerrote Baroness<br>("The Scarlet Baroness")†                   | 1958 | Rudolf Jugert               |
| 3-13 | Ein Engel auf Erden<br>("An Angel on Wheels")†                        | 1959 | Géza v. Radványi and others |
| 3-14 | Buddenbrooks<br>("The Buddenbrooks")†                                 | 1959 | Alfred Weidenmann           |
| 3-15 | Drei Kapitel Glück<br>("Three Chapters of Happiness": DEFA)           | 1961 | Walter Beck                 |
| 3-16 | Die Türkischen Gurken<br>("Turkish Cucumbers"; film has been lost)    | 1962 | Rolf Olsen                  |
| 3-17 | Meine Tochter und ich<br>("My daughter and I")                        | 1963 | Thomas Engel                |

**Table 3:** Feature films with dentist motif (1946–1963).

DEFA = Deutsche Film AG, East Germany  
 \* Featured dentist is a woman  
 † Film appears to actually have shown in English under this title [translator's note]

full of privation but a stunning economic success. Or in other words: a successful restorative treatment becomes a symbol for the successful political and social restoration in the Federal Republic of Germany and the values associated with it.

Looking back at the years 1948–1963, we can conclude that the dentist role in films remained moderately popular in both parts of post-war Germany, with the comedy genre remaining at centre stage. In the West, the figure of the mature, jovial but competent practitioner emerged; this too is definitely a reflection of the times. Tooth preservation was now in focus, extractions were rarely shown, almost being considered an anachronism.

(Read Part 2 in our next issue.)

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