

WILHELM VON LEDEBUR**Cinematography in the Service of the Police**

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In Fritz Lang’s *Fury* (1936), a group of rioters is forced to confront their own involvement in a mass crime when a film projector is brought into the courtroom. Fifteen years earlier, this article from a criminological trade journal already explored the potentials of cinema—still held under suspicion by conservatives such as Wilhelm Stapel (see chapter 7, no. 103)—as a tool of surveillance and juridical evidence. Published two

years after the ratification of the Weimar Constitution, the text is still laden with memories of recent communist uprisings. Wilhelm von Ledebur (1859–1930) was a Prussian politician and government official who had served as Landrat (chief executive) of the Lübbecke district from 1895 to 1917.

As is well known, photography has long been a tool in the service of the police; it constitutes an indispensable aid for identifying and searching for criminals, and it has proven very useful in the collecting of all sorts of clues. Today, one cannot imagine the police in a civilized country performing its job successfully without the aid of photography. Hopefully, the time is near when cinematography as well will count among the technological resources of the German police—and this not simply in isolated instances but as a general rule.

Even if, for reasons of financial speculation, film still functions mostly as a medium of leisure and entertainment, more and more people are nonetheless recognizing that it can also render invaluable services in the domains of science and practical life.

Along with my personal experience of the disturbances of 1919, the recent communist revolt—which the swift intervention of our police managed to squash, but which unfortunately could repeat itself at any moment—led me to pursue the question of whether the police might benefit from cinematography. I arrived at an unequivocally positive conclusion for three reasons. (1) Films made by police “in the field” during social disturbances will constitute an important means of deterrence, while also providing evidence and helping in criminal manhunts. (2) The scientific police film offers an invaluable tool for the training of police officers and guards. (3) Warning films made by or in consultation with the police can help to enlighten the public about the great dangers posed by career criminals.

These thoughts are not completely new. For years, the leader of the Berlin police records department, Dr. Hans Schneickert, has been promoting crime awareness films in speeches and publications.¹ On the other hand, as far as I am aware, the police have never had films made during social disturbances in Germany. Among the rare writings in this domain, a short news item contributed by Schneickert to Gross’s *Archiv* (volume 41, page 354) deserves to be quoted here:²

In their coverage of the recent disturbances and riots carried out by wine growers in France, the newspapers report that on April 12 (1911), just as the revolt in Champagne had reached its height, a series of films was made in Ain (in the Marne department), which showed with absolute precision and clarity the savage acts of plundering committed during the wine growers’ revolt. The public prosecutor in Reims then showed these films to eyewitnesses from the scene of the revolt, which allowed the ringleaders and the guilty plunderers to be identified and immediately arrested. In addition, some of the people already being held in custody, who had denied their participation in the illegal revolt up to then, were found guilty when they were recognized in the cinematographic images [. . .]

There should be no useful technological tool that is not employed in the service of the police, whether it be permanently acquired as a piece of equipment or secured through contractual loan.

The cinematographic camera is one such tool. At the beginning of my remarks, I characterized film recorded by the police as a deterrent, a source of evidence, and a tool of identification. I believe that cameras can offer a certain locally effective form of deterrence and that they can function a bit like the muzzle of a machine gun when aimed threateningly at rebellious subjects. However this is true only once a film successfully

used in court proceedings has demonstrated and made known the formidable evidentiary power of this apparatus.

The example from France shows that film can play a significant role in investigations and court proceedings. One should not underestimate the impression that completely objective images can make on professional and lay judges, on the accused, and on witnesses. And here I would also point to the important questions of testimonial psychology. Even in the most typical trial of a career criminal, the key witnesses are under enormous pressure because they fear a violent revenge on the part of the accused, especially when we are dealing with women, children, or people lacking natural courage. They are aware that the condemned criminal might take revenge on them after serving his often all-too-short prison sentence. This fear of stating the truth is especially intense when those on trial are participants in communist disturbances. In this case, the accused often consist of men who would not hesitate before committing any act of violence; these fanatical personalities, committed to the destruction of our entire bourgeois society, are members of a powerful organization with branches throughout Germany and will employ even the most reprehensible means to reach their ends. Among their ranks dwell the most dangerous career criminals; they compensate for their losses by storming jails and prisons; Russia supplies them with money, weapons, and human material. The havoc wrought by such elements in Russia, Hungary, and parts of Germany cannot but convince anyone who has become the object of their wrath that he or she must fear a vendetta. This unfortunate influence on witnesses is only strengthened by the fact that they often have to testify against persons from their own towns, for example, in the case of looting; if they come from a small town, it is obvious that a true testimony can bring with it a whole host of unpleasant consequences for them. Terror in every form, whether expressed in acts of violence or harassment, threatens proper legal investigations principally through the direct and indirect influencing of witnesses. For this reason, witness statements are often murky and subjective in trials dealing with revolts. Of course, this fact is attributable not only to fear of revenge but also to a host of other psychological factors.

In addition to confessions and testimonies, a watertight chain of evidence is also extremely valuable. For this reason, I consider it an ideal form of evidentiary proof when, to the extent possible, one can show a film during the main proceedings that links the crime with the criminal, the witnesses, and the entire milieu.

How much easier and more accurately one can then arrive at a judgment; how much more quickly the accused and the witnesses will tell the truth; how greatly the witness's memory will improve; how much clearer an idea the judge, the prosecutor, and the defense attorney will have of the entire scene and sequence of events constituting the object of the trial! Through the objective testimony of film, the image of the crime—which today can be reconstituted only with great effort through endless witness accounts and in legal proceedings often lasting for weeks—will be available to judges with a significant savings of time and money. Here, the pause mechanism recently invented for projectors, along with slow-motion technology, will prove its necessity once again. I am only saying, of course, that such factors allow us to imagine a significant simplification of trial proceedings. That incriminating films could help in investigations carried out by the police and public prosecutors is obvious enough.

Good film images can also aid in manhunts, just as normal photographs of a suspect being pursued by the police figure prominently on the wanted posters. Reproductions of the film portrait or of the entire film can be made available to all police authorities. One can easily imagine a situation in which a film would show the image of a criminal long sought by the police for his involvement in a street fight, a demonstration, acts of looting, the distribution of seditious pamphlets, or general street rioting. Establishing his pres-

ence at the time and place of the action would already be a worthwhile endeavor, and from the type of action he can be seen carrying out on the film, from the people with whom he interacts, and from his physical appearance, one could then draw important conclusions that would help in the hunt. In this connection, we should also point out that wanted posters offering rewards for the capture of the suspect and showing a few of his pictures blown up to a large scale could feasibly be inserted into the advertising section of a cinema show. Through fixed contracts with large cinema companies, the police could assure that this tool for manhunts be employed alongside others in especially difficult cases or with particularly dangerous criminals.

Insofar as policemen are not themselves outfitted with the necessary camera equipment, there are two ways to acquire film recordings. The first is by making an announcement, after a crime has been committed, that the police will buy any films or photographs shot at the crime scene. As is well known, our filmmakers and photographers are always hard at work wherever something is “happening” and rarely worry about the dangers. Among other photographs from the rebellion in Central Germany contained in issue 14 of *Die Woche*,³ there is one in which a number of photographers can be seen attempting to sneak up on a communist hideout. They don’t appear to be under fire, for the only thing causing them to bend over is the weight of their unwieldy cameras.

The other way to acquire film recordings is to contract professional filmmakers and photographers who would be sent into action as social disturbances arise.

Both methods could also be combined since it will often be to our advantage to introduce as evidence all usable photographic and filmic materials related to the criminal actions in question.

Notes

1. Schneickert (1876–1944) was a prolific author of books on criminology and the head of the records department of the Berlin police.

2. The Austrian criminologist Hans Gross (1847–1915) founded the *Archiv für Kriminalanthropologie und Kriminalistik* [Archive for Criminology] in 1898 and was its editor.

3. *Die Woche* (1899–1944) was a weekly illustrated paper published by the August Scherl Verlag.