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Berlin, 15/09/2017  
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**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the UFA  
on 15 September 2017  
in Berlin**

Thank you for your kind words. I'm impressed! A hundred years of film and television history in just eight minutes. And they roll into one in one moment at the end. Brigitte Helm, her eyes, her gaze – that shot in Fritz Lang's film Metropolis has become a form of icon of the modern era – it embodies an era, brings back memories and yet her expression baffles us: What is this expression telling us? Or is it asking something? Are we seeing incredulous amazement, a sceptical look at the past or a hopeful gaze into the future?

Perhaps it's both. And I see my task here tonight as something similar; to look back but also to take a moment to look to the future. I'm delighted to be here and to have the chance to reflect on a century of history, on the history of the UFA as a company, on the history of film, but also on the present situation in Germany and Europe. Dear Wolf Bauer, Nico Hofmann – thank you for giving me this opportunity, thank you for the invitation.

Anyone who looks back at history as we have just done, pressing the fast forward or rewind button, wants to stop and pause on one image. But which? Where should they start? Which date, which event should they choose from 100 years of UFA history?

Anyone who starts reflecting on the UFA quickly gets the feeling that they've got lost amongst the Babelsberg Film Studio's storerooms, amid furniture, tableware and sundry everyday items from all eras.

It's tempting to give it a wide berth, to opt for an overview that makes sense of it all, but then there are all the details, the treasures and the junk. And you notice that the UFA has never been moulded into a shape without immediately breaking out of it.

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For my generation, it is a kind of cinematographic family photo album; there's the grandmother, who knew the words of every Zarah Leander hit by heart, mothers, and sometimes even fathers, who sought escapism from reality in cinema during and after the war.

Then there was my generation who were at odds with the UFA during their student years, criticising it, holding that "granddad's cinema is dead". And the great period of German director-as-author film belongs in the family album, too. And then there are the now grown up children for whom GZSZ is a great deal more than simply an unfamiliar acronym for a well-known television series called 'Good Times, Bad Times'.

In good and in bad times – that encapsulates the UFA. And what it once was is still alive, too – an illusion of it is, at any rate. It has become film, time captured on cinema film and, contrary to our at times unreliable memory, retrievable: the great stars of the UFA, the directors, producers, yes even the political script editors and their financiers. Some attract our admiration, melancholy perhaps, and some even disgust and fury.

Great emotion certainly, and the attribute "great" might be the thread that runs through the disparate history of the UFA. The UFA was not always great, in either financial or even artistic terms, but from the outset it has striven to be. The desire for greatness and significance still accompanies the UFA today. You might find yourself furrowing your brow when thinking about confusing, hard-to-fathom and uncontrollable conglomerates, about ominous fusions of state and company interests. But all of these featured in the company's history and must be taken into account by anyone recounting the journey of the UFA.

Anyone who does so, however, will notice that the greatness of the UFA, or at least the memory of past greatness, has ensured its survival. We would not be here tonight if it were not for this pursuit of former greatness or renewed significance. And indeed, you'll be hard pushed to make film or television without a certain reserve of self-confidence or desire for recognition...

The historical UFA, that many of us here still think about because it continues to cast a shadow today, was great – in its success as well as in its failures. That seems clearer in Fritz Lang's Metropolis than in nearly any other creation. Lang wanted the greatest film of all time and the UFA received the biggest invoice in its history; when everything was cashed up in 1927, the cost totalled seven million Reichsmark for 758 actors, 36,000 extras, 750 children, 25 "Chinese", 200,000 costumes, 3,500 pairs of shoes, 75 wigs, light and colour, wood and plaster. An incredible sum for an unprecedented effort.

The original estimate was 1.5 million – Metropolis was thus literally a kind of Tower of Babel, in any case the kind of miscalculation, that we are still marvelling at in Berlin today.

“Take ten tons of horror, pour in a tenth of sentimentality, cook it with a sense of social justice and season it to taste with mysticism. Stir the whole thing with seven million Reichsmark and you’ll get a first-class, tremendous film” wrote the satirical weekly paper *Simplicissimus* at the time. For the UFA, not even ten years old at the time, the film was a disaster. It drove it to the brink of bankruptcy; the film was mutilated on the editing table and proved a flop in terms of both reviews and box office sales.

The fact that it has even been preserved for us, that we now consider it a piece of our common cultural heritage, is something we have cineastes with good memories to thank for, above all the Friedrich Murnau Foundation, which spent decades working for and on the restoration of the film.

This work provided us with a depiction of the period, a film that celebrated the modern, and at the same time introduced us to its inherent discomfort. A memory of the time when both disaster and promise took root. And a notion of that mixture of fear and fascination in the eyes of Brigitte Helm. The mood of the 20s is reflected in Lang’s *Metropolis*: “People’s minds and souls were reeling”, wrote UFA biographer Klaus Kreimeier.

In Lang’s *Metropolis*, we’re right in the middle of history and yet there in some ways things have now gone full circle. In our time, too, there is but a thin line between disaster and promise, downfall and redemption. We’re learning that spirals of escalation and the apparition of doomsday scenarios can undermine even established and supposedly safe democracies. The media play a part in such developments; media groups with mass audiences have power. They can reach many people and achieve a great deal, of good as well as of bad, now as in the past. The bigger and more influential they are, the greater their responsibility is, yet so is the danger that they will fail to live up to it.

In the late 20s and early 30s, the two were closely connected for the UFA. 1927, the year in which *Metropolis* premiered, was a watershed moment in the history of the UFA. Alfred Hugenberg of the German National People’s Party became the firm’s majority shareholder. He protected the UFA from bankruptcy and prescribed it newly developed ‘talkies’, talking films. He ensured its survival – but his leadership led the UFA to become dependent on the state and morally bankrupt.

In the last few years of the Weimar Republic, the UFA reinvented itself. It celebrated the technical innovation of film with sound with a

veritable firework display of revue and operetta-genre films and it accompanied the dying Weimar Republic – singing and dancing – into the abyss. When the Cabinet of the social democratic Reich Chancellor Hermann Müller resigned in March 1930, Josef Sternberg's film "The Blue Angel" premiered in Berlin's Gloria Palast on Kurfürstendamm. When the Nazi Party entered the Reichstag with 107 MPs the following September, and when the global economic crisis reached its nadir of 1931-32, the soundtrack was provided by the songs from "The Three from the Filling Station" and "The Congress Dances."

This was the moment when the UFA became great. Yet it is not the name Alfred Hugenberg that stands for this greatness, for this innovative and creative strength, but rather that of Erich Pommer. He was the most important producer of those years. He ensured economic success and artistic quality alike. When, at the end of 1932, the UFA shed its Jewish staff in an act of anticipatory obedience – even before Joseph Goebbels arrived – they were accompanied by Erich Pommer, his directors and staff as well as all the traits of the UFA of those years – irony, self-will, wit and spirit.

In 1933, the UFA under Alfred Hugenberg was ripe for the takeover. When he took office, Joseph Goebbels was met by the first nationalistic film, Dawn. He was particularly enthused by one sentence from this patriotic submarine drama: "We Germans may not understand how to live, but dying, that's something we can do marvellously".

A pithy first sentence, that was to be followed by the full intellectual, cultural and moral devastation of Germany over the next 12 years.

Yet the period between this first nationalistic film Dawn and the last, Kolberg, which premiered before the war ended in January 1945, by no means saw only propaganda films and anti-Semitic hate campaigns. Although there were some, and it was just a coincidence that the film Jud Süß ("Süß the Jew") wasn't made by the UFA; its creator Veit Harlan was one of its best paid directors. But Joseph Goebbels preferred well-made entertainment films which attracted the masses. This escape route, the escapism of those years, was key for the survival of our mothers and fathers, but also for that of the regime. Every film of 1933 to 1945, including Goebbels's favoured light entertainment, served to bring the Germans round to the goals of National Socialism, to keep their spirits up and ultimately to encourage them to persevere. And the moral bankruptcy of the UFA was the greatest damage.

How could this happen? Why did the first Republic fail? How did the Nazis get into power? Why did an entire generation of Germans subscribe to their criminal ideology? And why were there so few

exceptions to this rule? Many people have addressed these questions over recent decades. Yet no one did so in a manner that provided as good publicity as Nico Hofmann, who was brought on board at the UFA by Wolf Bauer in 1998.

In 2013, the mini TV series *Generation War* caused quite a stir and is now one in a long line of films depicting recent history. It was preceded by other great films and TV films of this nature, including by others, Bernhard Wicky for instance, or Eberhard Fechner, yet that is probably exactly what made Nico Hofmann's quite unique, radically subjective way of addressing topics have such an impact. He managed to do what Frank Schirrmacher once expected him to do – he brought the TV nation that was slowly dispersing together in front of the screen, not to watch history in films but to see themselves in history.

That is, in my opinion, a highly respectable way of taking on one's historical responsibility, including of addressing the company history of the UFA. Wolf Bauer knew why he wanted to have Nico Hofmann at his side and he knew why he had now handed over responsibility to him. Making history the subject – just as has been done recently in the *Charité* series – appeals to audiences, it's a recipe for success. And of course, there is a risk in that. It is true here that anyone who reaches many people can have a profound impact. They can open eyes, as the US television series *Holocaust* did. They can create images and coin terms. But they can fail in this responsibility, too. The history of the UFA shows evidence of both.

No one had thought that the post-war UFA would live to see its 100-year anniversary for a long time. It has fortuitous circumstances, at times brought about by its own chutzpah, to thank for that. Above all however, it has Wolf Bauer to thank; his entrepreneurial courage, his talent as an artist and salesman. And it has you to thank, ladies and gentlemen – the staff of the UFA, its companions and comrades-in-arms, and all your many talents, in front of as well as behind the camera!

How many breaks and breakthroughs has the UFA experienced and survived over the course of its history! What great material for a screenplay! And, who if not you – the UFA – would dare to serve us up such stories. I for one certainly want to see them.

That is why you must continue striving to attract great audiences, to create great stories, great emotion. Stay brave and take on difficult subjects in an open and imaginative, passionate and combative manner, and please, continue to captivate us over the next hundred years.

Congratulations to you all!