

# Journalism Research

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# How journalists can learn from Erich Kästner

## The blurred line between journalism and literature in the work of Erich Kästner

by Gunter Reus

Abstract: Reading Kästner can not only also be productive for journalism as a science, but for journalism itself. Committed to a subjective view of things, features articles have always pushed the boundaries of the system (and are still seen in Germany as superficial and flighty as a result), but no other journalist in the 20th Century approached the genre as consistently as Erich Kästner.

“I wander down Johannisgasse and think: it won’t be that bad. Up there, on Augustusplatz, the black mass is standing, pressed together ... Suddenly they start to stagger! A shot! Screams! A series of shots! The crowd comes flooding into the street as if crazed. Someone falls. Others fall on top. On! On! [...] Police rush out of Grimmaische Straße on horseback: with flashing swords and tight reins they gallop across the square. The stragglers among the demonstrators run from them, screaming, their hands in the air [...] St. Jakob Hospital ... The gate is locked. We show our papers. Enter ... Smell of carbolic soap. Secretive hurrying. Stretchers carrying the wounded are squeezed up the steps. Empty stretchers come back out. They are urgently needed. [...] In the polyclinic, smaller wounds are being dressed. [...] A teenage boy is brought into the makeshift ward by a sister. He looks very frightened. Shot in the knee.” (KK: 46-48)[i]

The boy is not called Emil Tischbein, and those hurtling through the streets of Berlin are not child detectives. It is June 6, 1923, and the police are chasing unemployed men through the streets of Leipzig. Four people die in the melee. The report by 24-year-old Erich Kästner is published two days later in the *Neue Leipziger Zeitung*.

Erich Kästner as a reporter? A newspaper journalist and eye-witness working in the public interest? That certainly jars with the image of the author described in so many biographies of Kästner.[ii] In those, he is depicted as the father of children’s literature, who used his “particular access to childish directness” (Hanuschek 2010: 143) to invent characters that resonate around the world to this day; a man who advocated respect for young people and encouraged them to live free from subservience (cf. e.g. Doderer 2002). On the other hand, many biographers see him as a grey-haired narcissist with a disturbed relationship with female directness; who collected and discarded women at will, like so many ideas for his novels; who was not interested in what was happening outside, but in himself; who remained a child his whole life, fixated on his mother and unable to form any other

relationship; a classic case of Peter Pan syndrome (cf. Hanuschek 2010: 43); a “petit bourgeois with wild erotic tendencies” (Schneyder 1982: 110).

Our image of Kästner also includes that of the “useful author” (Schneyder 1982), whose focus is not merely on himself, but who placed great emphasis on morality; whose work as a satirist and comedian rails against all that is bad about humans. This Kästner is the author of pamphlets deploring war and stupidity, writing texts so sharp-tongued and morally rigorous that they take the reader’s breath away even today.

This moralist is antagonized and pursued by the political right as “divisive” and a “cultural Bolshevik” (according to Alfred-Ingemar Berndt, Head of the Literature Department of the Propaganda Ministry, in 1939, quoted in Görtz and Sarkowicz 1998: 222). And we must also remember the Erich Kästner who refused to leave Germany in 1933 despite all that was going on, preferring to struggle through the years of dictatorship (cf. Görtz and Sarkowicz 1998: 163-249 for more detail). We also remember the writer who produced comedy novels after 1933 (cf. Hanuschek 2010: 212-266 for more detail) and films (cf. Tornow 1989); a man considered so harmless and non-political that he earned the nickname “the Heinz Rühmann of literature” (quoted in Bemann 1999: 253).[iii]

As a poet, Kästner enhanced the immaculate form of his poems with a touch of ironic melancholy, achieving unparalleled sales figures. Yet the gatekeepers of post-war German philology long prevented him from entering the pantheon of literature (cf. Bemann 1999: 368; Görtz and Sarkowicz 1998: 326). The situation was not improved by criticism from the left in the period around 1968 (cf. Doderer 2002: 26). Even during the Weimar Republic, Kästner was not only hated by the political right, but also the subject of animosity from Marxist critics. Walter Benjamin, for example, claimed that his “petit bourgeois” poems would do nothing more than make “the kneaded dough of private opinion rise”. According to Benjamin, like Walter Mehring or Kurt Tucholsky, Kästner was nothing more than part of a “bourgeois sign of disintegration” (Benjamin 1980: 280): “The rumbling in this verse is less like revolution and more like a bad case of wind. [...] Kästner’s poems do nothing to improve the atmosphere.” (Benjamin 1980: 283)

All these different sides of Erich Kästner come together to form our image of him as an author. But even that is not the whole story. Erich Kästner is not just a children’s author; not just a poet and harmless humorist; not just a novelist and screenwriter; not just a satirist, pamphleteer and teacher; not just a narcissist and moralist; not just an anti-militarist and melancholic. The author is something more - something that is barely mentioned in all the treatises on his work, yet still deserves to be acknowledged. Erich Kästner is a witness of his time who wrote up-to-the-minute reports for the mass media not, like so many authors, for the money, but by conviction. Just as he wrote his literary texts in line with journalistic criteria, he also gave a literary touch to his journalism. In doing so, he went against the grain of the German tradition, in which the two genres are usually clearly separated and apportioned very different values.

Erich Kästner is the “*écrivain journaliste*” (Brons 2002)[iv] who brought together the fields of

journalism and literature through his own belief and made the principle of the public eye an axiom – not only in his work as a young reporter in Leipzig, but throughout his life. This paper aims to demonstrate this.

### A useful eye-witness

Horst Pöttker (2010: 114) defined the public sphere as “the highest possible level of transparency and unrestricted communication”. Its role is to enable self-regulation in democratic societies with complex social structures and a division of labor (cf. also Pöttker 1998: 236). The public sphere is a place to freely trade and exchange information on “events and situations” that are “outside the horizon of immediate perception” for some groups (2010: 114). Pöttker describes creating and filling a space like this as the “constitutive role” (1998: 237) of journalism. It enables people to “participate rationally in political decision-making processes and free markets”, while also permitting society to subject “central governing institutions” (e.g. in politics, business or science) to “public scrutiny” (2010: 114).

Creating a public sphere thus means shedding light on situations and processes that would otherwise have remained hidden – and reaching as many people (“the public”) as possible. These two concepts can be seen throughout Kästner’s journalism.

Born into a relatively poor family in 1899[v], Kästner decides to become a teacher early on. During his teacher training in Dresden, however, he is called up to the forces in 1917. Although the war ends before he can be sent to the front, his time spent in officer training is enough to create a lifelong hatred of uniforms, drill and the destruction of personality of army life, ultimately causing him to drop out of teacher training. Yet he continues to see himself as an educator (“The satirical authors are teachers. Crammers. Masters of further education.” (WF: 129). Kästner still wants to teach, but his audience will now be the public. In 1919, he begins frequenting lectures on German and French literature at the University of Leipzig, as well as attending classes at Karl Bücher’s innovative Institute of Newspaper Studies (cf. Bemmann 1999: 48), founded just three years before. The combination of literary and journalistic ambition soon becomes clear as Kästner publishes his first poems and press articles. In 1923 he begins working as a freelance journalist, predominantly for the *Neue Leipziger Zeitung (NLZ)*, and just a year later is appointed editor at *Leipziger Verlagsdruckerei*, initially taking charge of the publisher’s entertainment magazine. Although he switches to the politics desk of the *NLZ* in 1926, having completed his doctorate, his critical comments on current events do not go down well with the publisher.

Attempts are made to get rid of him, and when a scandal is whipped up about the controversial poem “Evening song of the chamber virtuoso”, the publisher uses it as an excuse to terminate his contract. Kästner uses the incident as a springboard and moves to Berlin as a freelance theatre critic and cultural correspondent for the *NLZ*. But he has also long been working for other magazines and newspapers. His aim is clear – he wants to make a name for himself as a journalist in the Weimar

Republic; he wants to be in the public sphere. As he writes in a letter to his mother in November 1926: “When I am 30 years old, I want people to know my name. I want to be respected by 35. And even a bit famous by 40” (quoted in Hanuschek 2010: 93)

His plan works. It does not take long for him to make his name, writing for publications as diverse as *Weltbühne*, *Uhu*, *Simplicissimus*, *Tagebuch*, the *Berliner Tageblatt* and the *Vossische Zeitung*. Although he also writes reviews and essays on the day’s events, Kästner’s main focus is on poems that show the age and its people in a new light. His poems are inspired by newspaper reports and read like journalistic comments on the day’s events – particularly the poems he publishes every week from June 1928 to April 1930 in the left-wing, democratic *Montag Morgen* (cf. Hanuschek 2010: 121). Many of these newspaper poems are included in the four poetry compilations he releases in quick succession up until 1932[vi], achieving sales figures beyond the wildest dreams of modern poets.[vii]

Kästner’s aim is to reach as many readers as possible – “to please the people” (as he said in a discussion with Hermann Kesten, indirectly quoted in Bemann 1999: 346; cf. also Brons 2002: 62). Although, like any author, he is also interested in personal success, his undeniable goal is also to create a public sphere, a time reference, a space for communication accessible to everyone. He believed that literature should have a use, creating transparency around the events of its time. On March 28, 1929, he writes in the *Literarische Welt*[viii]:

“Luckily, there are a dozen or two dozen poets – I almost hope I am among them –, who are trying to keep poetry alive. The audience can read and listen to their verse without falling asleep, because it is of emotional use. It has been written down during contact with the joy and sorrow of the present day; and is intended for anyone who is professionally involved with the present day. The name ‘poetry of use’ has been coined for this type of poem [...]. Verses that cannot be used by contemporaries in any way are merely rhyming games, nothing more. [...] Poets have a purpose once again.” (ZH: 88)

Gradually, he begins to discover other media that can help him to meet his desire for poetry inspired by his own eye-witness accounts (Doderer 2002: 44), and tries to achieve “optimum multimedia use” (Schikorsky 1999: 73). The contemporary poetry that stemmed from his journalism is transformed into chansons for cabaret. In 1929, he writes the radio play “Life in these times” for the broadcaster Breslau, making use of his poems once again. Numerous theaters later stage the play. “Kästner gramophone records” (cf. Hanuschek 2010: 123) begin to appear from 1930. Kästner holds readings in department stores and libraries – a form of public performance that is quite new at the time (cf. Hanuschek 2010: 149). He also publishes his novel “Going to the Dogs” (1931) and enjoys success as a children’s author, with “Emil and the Detectives” (1929) performed in numerous theaters and made into a film. The “*écrivain journaliste*” has a very systematic way of keeping tabs on his success in the various fields, working regularly for a range of media and in 1928 opening his own “sales office” complete with secretary (cf. Bemann 1999: 98; on self-promotion cf. Brons 2002: 111-216). Having long become a successful author and public figure, Kästner now also takes on an official role, campaigning against censorship, the Protection of the Republic Act (Republikschutzgesetz) and the

Emergency Press Decree (Pressenotverordnung) as a member of the “Schutzverband deutscher Schriftsteller” (Protective Association of German Authors) and “Kampfkomitee für die Freiheit des Schrifttums” (Fighting Committee for Free Literature) (Görtz und Sarkowicz 1998: 146). In the lead-up to the Reichstag elections in 1932, he signs an “urgent appeal” against the National Socialist Party, which is publicized on billboards (cf. Hanuschek 2010: 212).

Despite this work, he underestimates the Nazis and their barbarity (cf. Bemmann 1999: 217; Hanuschek 2010: 212). He looks on in disbelief as his books are burned on May 10, 1933, and is arrested and interrogated by the Gestapo in December of the same year. But Kästner decides against leaving Germany, for reasons he is to explain under the heading “Shrewd but still brave” in the youth magazine *Pinguin* in January 1946. Again, his decision is based on journalistic considerations - he believes that he has a duty to report as an eye-witness (cf. also Enderle 1966: 62; Schneyder 1982: 137f.; Görtz and Sarkowicz 1998: 173f.):

“All Americans who have had to deal with me officially have asked me why I stayed in Germany even though my work was banned for almost twelve years. [...] And not all Americans who asked me officially approved of or understood my answer. I said to them: “An author wants to and must experience how the people to whom he belongs bear their fate in difficult times. Going abroad then is only justified when one’s life is in acute danger. In addition, it is a professional obligation to take any risk, if it enables one to remain an eye-witness and to make written records one day.”” (WF: 25)

But despite the best of intentions, Kästner is unable to work as a journalist in Germany between 1933 and 1945 - nor does he write about his experiences during this period later. It is a failure on his part. In the foreword to “Notabene 45. Ein Tagebuch” (1961) - a diary that contains only sporadic entries for the period between 1941 and 1945, concentrating instead on his escape towards the end of the war - Kästner admits that he has failed in his duty to report as an eye-witness:

“I can no longer remember why I broke off my work so quickly, and did so three times. Apart from all kinds of reasons that can no longer be found, the fact that everyday life is a boring affair, even during war and terror, despite the black sensations one endures, must have played a role. Simply accepting and surviving it is hard enough. Keeping accounts of it on time, year after year, required more patience than I have.” (SB: 303)

It is a strange explanation - and even stranger given the fact that, after the war, Kästner polished and edited his diary to make it an ideal basis for journalistic work (cf. in more detail Görtz and Sarkowicz 1998: 249 and afterword of SB: 710f., 794; also Hanuschek 2010: 311-317). Indeed, Kästner adjusts to life under the regime better than one would expect of such a vehement anti-fascist and anti-militarist. There is undoubtedly a shadow over Kästner from 1933 onwards as, although his work is banned in Germany, he is able to earn a decent living throughout the war from film adaptations of his work abroad and 26 translations of his books (cf. Hanuschek 2010: 225). The Nazi regime even leaves him in relative peace to work as a novelist, which he does prolifically for a considerable period (cf. Hanuschek 2010: 228). He never writes a positive work about the Nazis and is certainly courageous, writing “more than audaciously” (Görtz and Sarkowicz 1998: 223) under a

pseudonym, even within Germany. At the same time, he makes multiple attempts to be included in the Reichsschrifttumskammer (Imperial Chamber of Literature) and, in July 1942, is awarded “special dispensation for professional practice” under the pseudonym Berthold Bürger, when Goebbels is looking for a screenwriter for the film “Münchhausen”. Once his work on the film is completed in 1943, however, the Nazis ban him from working as a writer at all, including publishing abroad (cf. in detail Görtz and Sarkowicz 1998: 227-235).

Kästner allows the regime to use him more than he would later admit to himself and others. Despite this, it is to his credit that his dedication to the principles of a democratic public sphere immediately returns after 1945. Having fled through Tyrol to Bavaria, he takes on management of the culture section of the *Neue Zeitung* (a very high-circulation paper published by the US military government) that October. He is to remain in this post until 1948, and to continue as an author for the paper until 1953. From 1946, he also publishes the youth magazine *Pinguin*. In an article entitled “Everyday stuff” in July, he explains his return to journalism and once again emphasizes how important he feels it is to create a public discourse, create transparency about the happenings of the day, and make it possible for people to behave socially:

“Why do I slave away instead of simply strolling in the woods with my delicate hands entwined behind my back? Someone has to do all the everyday stuff, and because there are not enough people who want and are able to. We gain nothing from the fact that poets now write heavy novels about war. The books will be printed and read in two years’ time, if paper is available then, and until then – heavens! – until then the world, including Europe, of which Germany lies at the heart, might have burst open and been minced up. Anyone who now stands aside instead of getting involved must have stronger nerves than I do. Anyone who thinks about his Collected Works instead of his daily work must reconcile it with his conscience.” (WF: 82)

It is the start of a very prolific period for Kästner. He writes observations on culture and society for newspapers and magazines, begins working as a cabaret writer, screenwriter and playwright again, and publishes children’s books. He also enters public life again, holding speeches and taking on the role of President of PEN, honored and respected both in Germany and abroad. With even greater dedication than before 1933, he campaigns against militarization and rearmament (cf. “Retrospective preliminary remarks”, WF: 192), as well as against nuclear proliferation and burgeoning right-wing tendencies. In a speech at Zirkus Krone in 1958, he attacks Adenauer and Strauß. In another on Munich’s Königsplatz, he speaks to opponents of nuclear weapons at their Easter March 1961 (SB: 662-667). In 1968, he takes part in a demonstration against the Vietnam War. But then his enthusiasm begins to wane. “Now I sit at the window, armed with a whisky, enjoy the view of the fields and garden (roses!) and marvel.” (in a letter to Friedrich Michael, July 21, 1970, DN: 507). An alcoholic in his later years, Erich Kästner dies of cancer in Munich in 1974.

## **Inalienable demands**

“There are no more poets,” wrote Kästner in an obituary for Rainer Maria Rilke in the *NLZ* on December 30, 1926. “There are only writers.” (SB: 52f.) Perhaps he was thinking even then of the amalgamation of literature and journalism that would characterize his life’s work. Not that belletristic authors who have a public profile and are involved in society are particularly rare – but Kästner still stands out. After all, German literary history has barely produced any other examples of authors who, in their commitment to “unrestricted communication” (Pöttker 2010: 114), orientate themselves so closely on journalistic quality criteria even in their literary works.

It is difficult to define exactly what makes high-quality journalism. It is a bundle of normative attributes with different interests behind them – the expectations of democratic theory, the expectations of the media consumers, profit expectations of the media companies, and the experience and views of the journalists (cf. Meier 2007: 225; Ruß-Mohl 1992). All these interests come together, compete with one another, and are subject to processes of transformation. However, both researchers and practitioners (cf. Wellbrock and Klein 2014) agree on a range of quality criteria that the “profession for public discourse” (Pöttker 2010) needs in order to fulfil its “constitutive role” (Pöttker 1998: 237). They include the following:[ix]

- **Topicality** = up-to-date information; also includes how useful the information is in informing the consumers’ actions and decisions (“actus”);
- **Accuracy** = statements and facts are consistent, except in satirical formats, for example, which deliberately distort them;
- **Credibility** and **authenticity** = sincerity, trustworthiness; an approach that makes every effort to reflect reality;
- **Fairness** and **consideration of personality** = individuals affected by the reporting are handled with respect;
- **Balance** and **completeness** = depth of research, accuracy of observation, all important aspects are taken into account;
- **Independence** = journalists are free from external influences and interests;
- **Impartiality, objectivity** = distance from the object in the reporting, reporting of facts, no siding with particular interest groups, except in comment pieces
- **Comprehensibility** = information is presented in a clear and concise way that everyone can understand;
- **Usefulness, value** = the information can be used in the consumers’ everyday lives;
- **Aesthetics** and **attractiveness, sensuality** = a form of presentation that attracts interest and attention and looks good;
- **Entertainment value** = presentation that is not too complex and is considered pleasant;
- **Originality** = a particular identity, creative features that make the provision stand out from other sources of information;
- **Transparency** and **reflexivity** = insight into methods and working conditions, including the fallibility and limitations of journalists; quotation of sources;
- **Interactivity** = a willingness to discuss with the media’s audience;



- **Variety and universality** = a wealth of topics and perspectives.[x]

With only a few exceptions,[xi] all these quality criteria can be found in Kästner's work as a journalist. But what makes the author truly special is the fact that they are also found in his fiction, and especially in his poetry.

The most obvious criterion is **topicality** (including **relevance**). Werner Schneyder (1982: 165) notes that, among Kästner's work, there is "barely anything that represents an occurrence of daily political or regional relevance". If at all, this may apply to his straightforward reporting, but there are examples to disprove even this. One is the report on the demonstration on June 6, 1923 (KK: 46-48), mentioned at the beginning of this article; another is a mood piece in which Kästner captures opinions on the referendum on the expropriation of the princes in front of an advertising hoarding in Leipzig in June 1926 ("Around the hoardings". KK: 252-253). Schneyder is wrong to imply that Kästner generally does not often refer to daily politics or to regional events that directly affect people. In fact, Kästner frequently does just that, right from his time as an editor in Leipzig. In more than a dozen articles for the *NLZ*, he takes on both the Mayor of Leipzig and politicians in Berlin (cf. in detail Brons 2002: 223-243). The topics he tackles during this period are as wide-ranging as the murder of a worker in Germersheim by a French officer (KK: 268-269), the ban on the film "Battleship Potemkin" (KK: 278-279), disarmament negotiations in Geneva (KK: 282-283), and Mussolini (KK: 287-289).

On July 6, 1927, Kästner begins his work for the *Weltbühne* ("Kirche und Radio"; SB: 37-38) with an article unambiguously in the style of "day-to-day journalism", as his biographer Helga Bemann (1999: 69) writes. His features from the streets and everyday life in Berlin (cf. GG 1 und Schikorsky 1999: 44f.) and his large number of reviews (cf. GG 2) on plays and films up until 1933 (cf. also Zonneveld 1991) also shine a light on the times and serve as examples of his topical journalism. Interestingly, Kästner himself recommends that theaters learn from the journalist qualities of topicality, research and **completeness**, highlighting the "advantages of reporting" ("The political melodrama", November 28, 1930; GG 2: 253) and its "authenticity" ("Dramatic reporting", December 16, 1928; GG 2: 150) on the stage (cf. Zonneveld 1991: 65-71) in the *NLZ*.

Working again after 1945, Kästner continues to track what he had once referred to as "problems of chronic topicality" ("Yesterday's dictatorship", *NLZ*, August 24, 1926, SB: 41). In the *Neue Zeitung*, he writes about the living conditions and food situation in the ruins of Munich and tackles subjects like the theory of collective guilt, the Allies' demolition policy, and cultural reconstruction (cf. Wagener 2003; Schikorski 1999: 118f.). He attends the Nuremberg Trials on November 23, 1945 ("Beams of light from Nuremberg", SB: 493-500) and, in early February, reports on the presentation of a film made by US camera teams in concentration camps ("The worth and worthlessness of man", February 4, 1946, WF: 67-71).

Kästner's poems cover just as wide a range of contemporary subjects - something that is certainly

not typical of poets. Indeed, the “contemporary and newspaper poet” (Bemmann 1999: 69) adopts the journalistic category of “topicality” (albeit with a moralistic tone) in poetry, before transferring his poetry back into the journalistic medium of the press, and finally publishing it in book form. After publication of Kästner’s fourth volume of poetry, “Singing between two stools”, the critic of *Die Literatur* magazine writes the following:

“He looks at the private life of the economic crisis, at the refuse of the bankrupt profit economy, into the bulging eyes of violence. In effective verses that set themselves to music as soon as they are read, he opens the reader’s eyes to the inconsequence of himself and others. Unremarkable newspaper notices become reporting ballads [...]” (quoted in Bemmann 1999: 195)

Many of these texts are written as “comment poems” for Leopold Schwarzschild’s weekly *Montag Morgen*. Once a week for almost two years, the paper publishes a poem by Kästner, usually based on what he has read in the news. The more than 100 texts touch on everything from sporting events to the weather and the stock exchange, from colorful events and funny stories to “Coalition talks by Imperial Chancellor Hermann Müller” (Hanuschek 2010: 121), from debates in the League of Nations to the “Chorale of the Ruhr barons” (cf. Bemmann 1999: 126f.). „Plus que toute autre collaboration, celle de Kästner au Montag Morgen ,collait’ à l’actualité“, writes Brons (2002: 167). One example of his many forays into day-to-day politics is an ironic comment poem on the Reichstag’s postponing the construction of a second armored cruiser just six days before passing its annual budget:

“Get the cruiser! We need it.

And do not threaten with the government finances.

Those who have ships, gain colonies.

We could plant the unemployed there

In larger batches.

Then we would be rid of the socialists.

We send them overseas.

There would be space there. The world is large.

Now nothing will come of it. What to do...

Farewell, armored cruiser B!”

(February 24, 1930, ZH: 345)

As another perfect example of reporting on daily politics, on October 1, 1930, *Weltbühne* publishes Kästner's poem "Singing on the far right" (ZH: 248-249), a strong attack on the National Socialists following their success in the Reichstag elections on September 14.

After the war, Kästner's comment poems are largely replaced by chansons and couplets for cabaret, still following the journalistic principles of topicality and relevance. As he writes in his song "The little freedom", the period itself holds the pen. The cabaret show of the same name opens in Munich on January 21, 1951, with the title song sung before every performance:

"The title of the program - THE LITTLE FREEDOM -

actually sounds like we know what we're talking about.

The title of the program - THE LITTLE FREEDOM -

is not ours. The title was written by - time!" (WF: 189)

In his self-characterization "Kästner on Kästner", a speech at Zurich's PEN Club after the war, Kästner talks about "the three inalienable demands" he makes of himself: sincerity of feeling, clarity of thought and simplicity of words and phrases (WF: 326f.). "Sincerity of feeling" touches on more quality criteria that Kästner adopts from journalism: **credibility** and **authenticity** - in other words, reliability, incorruptibility and trustworthy information. The extraordinarily high sales of Kästner's work during his lifetime are irrefutable evidence that his audience believes he has this quality, for a variety of reasons, some of which are further quality criteria in themselves. Firstly, Kästner always knows how to pick topics relevant to everyday people. After all, he was a member of the working class himself - his father was a craftsman who was forced to work in a factory for financial reasons. Journalists today are often accused of being members of an elite, far removed from the real lives of the people they write about, so that their work lacks credibility. But Kästner's audience trusts him. The everyday life he describes and comments on is the everyday life of millions of people.

Wagner (2003: 221f.) writes about Kästner's reports and essays from the ruins of Munich after the Second World War - a time of food shortages and homelessness. "In vivid images and clear comparisons, Erich Kästner recorded the important facts, while his readers considered his sympathy and encouragement credible and authentic, given their shared range of experiences." Kästner tries to reflect this shared range of experiences right from his first forays into journalism. In an article for the *NLZ* on February 17, 1923 he reports from the Kleines Theater in Leipzig on a Shakespeare performance with Fritz Kortner. But instead of writing a traditional review from the auditorium, he stands on the stairs outside and listens to what the cloakroom and toilet attendants, porters and carriage drivers waiting for their shifts to end have to say during the performance:

“And we hear Kortner scream once again: ‘She must be dead in a minute,’ says the porter, ‘it’s quarter to eleven already. About time too. My mom’ll be waiting for me.’ ‘You’ve got a good woman there,’ says Emil the carriage driver. ‘Haven’t you?’ asks the cloakroom attendant. Emil looks cold and shifts from one foot to the other.” (KK: 9)

Then the auditorium doors open and the well to-do of Leipzig head for home chatting about expensive operations, delivery contracts and occasionally about Fritz Kortner (“simply wonderful”). There is no question where Kästner’s sympathies lie, nor can he resist a touch of typical Saxon sarcastic humor (nor is it a coincidence that the carriage driver is called Emil). His poetry, too, is full of people that will be familiar to millions: ordinary workers, the unemployed, widows, bar ladies, drinkers, flower sellers, injured war veterans, waiters – people looking for their place in bourgeois society. Kästner the poet is familiar with them because Kästner the roving reporter knows them (cf. report “Rice with chicken at 5 am”, December 2, 1928, GG 1: 272-277). He does not depict them as heroes, but nor does he talk them down (criterion of **fairness**). Instead, he observes in detail and looks for the peculiarities and incidents around which reality crystalizes. Although he also has a slightly moralizing tone, his readers can accept his reports as the truth. Even his poetry is based on real facts and meets the criterion of **accuracy**, albeit with actual events sometimes compromised and broken down for aesthetic reasons. In his “Ballad on the instinct to imitate” for the *Weltbühne*, he describes a real-life incident in a Berlin backyard, in which seven children hanged one of their friends on a carpet pole (March 24, 1931, ZH: 207-208). In the poem “Senior in uniform” for the same publication (June 30, 1929, ZH: 139-140), he remembers the glorification of war in at his teacher training college in Dresden and gives the real name of the principal; the names of his fallen former classmates are probably also real (cf. Hanuschek 2010: 55).

Credibility comes from referring to facts, but also from **transparency** and **reflexivity**, in terms of insight into one’s own working methods, with their strengths and weaknesses. A relatively new quality criterion in journalism, it is nevertheless seen in Kästner’s work, at least in places. In the American documentary film already mentioned, featuring footage from concentration camps (“The worth and worthlessness of man”), he strives to find the facts behind the horror for the *Neue Zeitung* (accuracy):

“And like this, in these camps, the victims were not just murdered, but commercially ‘counted’ down to the last grain and gram. The bones were ground and sold as fertilizer. Even soap was made. The hair of the dead women was stuffed into sacks, shipped and turned into money. The gold fillings, crowns and bridgework were broken out of the jaws and, melted, sent to the Reichsbank. I spoke to a former prisoner who had been employed in the ‘dental laboratory’ of a camp like this. He told me about his work in detail. The rings and watches were collected by the barrelful and flogged. The clothes went into the rag mill. The shoes were piled up and sold.” (February 4, 1946, WF: 68)

At the same time, however, he admits that these facts test him to his professional limits and, indeed, that he feels he has failed as a journalist:

“I am simply not capable of writing a coherent article about this unthinkable, infernal insanity. The

thoughts flee as soon as they get close to the memory of the film images.” (WF: 67)

Kästner takes a similar approach to his report “Beams of light from Nuremberg” in the *Neue Zeitung* (November 23, 1945, SB: 493-500). He describes the arrival at the trial building and conjures up street scenes and the outdoors as if to distract himself. Once he enters the building, he goes beyond simple reporting once again to project how a man might later describe the building for tourists. He then returns emphatically to factual descriptions by passing along the row of Nazis in the dock like a cameraman, recording their clothing and attitudes, before listing the charges by the Americans and French. He turns his attention to his press colleagues in the foyer during a break in proceedings, mentions the charge made by the Soviets and British almost in passing, and then, when the session is suspended, goes home. Once again, the effect is that of a journalist trying to avoid having to record the banality of the horror:

“My heart hurts after everything I have heard ... And my ears hurt too. The headphones were a size too small. [...] Drive home on the freeway. [...] I look out of the window and can see nothing. Just thick, milky fog ...” (SB: 499f.).

Kästner never returned to the courtroom at Nuremberg.[xii] The tone of his poetry and stage writing is never triumphant, often melancholy and disappointed – a characteristic that can be considered further proof of his insight into the limits of his work.

One particularly noticeable feature of the Nuremberg report is the matter-of-fact way in which Kästner records the appearance of the Nazis in the dock – and this is not the only example of extreme distance from the object. The 1923 report “June 6”, quoted at the start of this piece, ends not by denouncing the police, but with a statement by a policeman on the violence, including that of the demonstrators (KK: 48). It would certainly be difficult to claim **impartiality** as a consistent trait of Kästner’s work. Like any commentator, features writer or satirist, he takes sides – against arrogance, stupidity and undesirable social developments. But he never loses his **independence**, thus reinforcing his credibility. Although he advocates the election of a united front of the KPD and SPD in 1932 (cf. Hanuschek 2010: 212), and becomes involved in the Bavarian SPD’s schools policy shortly before his death (cf. Hanuschek 2010: 404), he never supports a party for very long, and there is never a trace of party politics in his articles or poems. In 1930, he is invited to write an article about the achievements of the Soviet Union for *Das neue Rußland* (“Dropping in on Russia”, SB: 256-259) – a work he later finds embarrassing. He manages to avoid all parties in the Weimar Republic (cf. Görtz and Sarkowicz 1998: 167) and rejects all doctrines of salvation (cf. Kordon 1996: 109-112). The director Erwin Piscator, whom he admires as a man of the theater, is frequently accused of what Kästner calls the “communist craze” (quoted in Görtz and Sarkowicz 1998: 96). In an interview with the journalist Adelbert Reif in 1969, Kästner admits:

“I hate ideologies, whichever type they might be. I am a committed individualist. I rejoice over all social progress... In addition, I am a left-wing liberal, which doesn’t actually exist anymore. And I am a member of a party that doesn’t exist either, because if it did exist, I wouldn’t be a member.” (quoted in Hanuschek 2010: 403)

We have already seen here that Kästner aims to give his texts **usefulness** and **value**. Like any journalist, he sees himself as an observer of his age, educating his audience by providing them with information and context. We can only speculate about how else he is useful to them, but perhaps millions of readers found refreshing his admission that he struggles with the dilemma that faces all satirists: having to expose bad things in order to promote the good. Perhaps they were moved by the wishes he often attached to his poems and articles. For example, the aforementioned 1926 article "Around the hoardings" ends with the phrases: "The trembling old man asked: 'Where is the justice?' May 20 million Germans answer him!", KK: 253). Or perhaps they simply found comfort in the fact that there was someone out there who was interested in how ordinary people lived.

Literature, and especially poetry, can be seen as a compact, encoded form of speaking that the reader has to decode before he can fully understand. Journalism is the opposite: with a pragmatic focus on everyday life and transferring information, it avoids codes and aims for immediate **comprehensibility**. Erich Kästner, however, never accepts this conflict between the two genres - an unusual position for a German author. He wants to achieve immediacy - or, as we would say today, accessibility - in his fiction, too: "simplicity of words and phrases" (WF: 327) is one of the aforementioned "inalienable demands" he makes of himself at a meeting of PEN in Zurich. He thus states one of the main criteria of comprehensible language that can also be found in communication research.[xiii]

Erich Kästner sticks to these principles his whole life. In all his work - in all the reports, reviews, satires, stage writing, or novels - there is not a single text that contains unreasonable sentence constructions or vocabulary that seems foreign or stilted. Needless to say, the same goes for his children's books, which by the late 1960s are in use as set texts in school German lessons in twelve countries, including the Soviet Union (cf. Bemann 1999: 370, 319). The American Association of German Teachers praises the "comprehensibility of the texts" as far back as the 1930s (Görtz and Sarkowicz 1998: 217).

The principle of "simplicity" applies just as much to Kästner's poetry. Just a single quoted poem - here his "Open letter to workers" from the *Weltbühne* - is enough for anyone to immediately recognize the typical Kästner sound:

"There have to be bosses.

There have to be workers.

A tidy house, a tidy mind.

Chest out and stomach in!

Bosses wear stout

Stomachs under their jackets.

Most of that mob is stout,

And they only go to bed sideways.

They are fat by conviction.

And just looking at them

forces us others to bow.

Corpulence becomes a religion!

In their round hands they

hold cigars ready to fire.

Each of their magnificent forms

looks as if it were two.

Some say (albeit rarely),

they understand our distress.

And we little workers

just eat up their garbage.

Breathing is not expensive,

they say, and nutritious too!

And then they evade taxes

and drum on their stomachs. [...]“

(January 1, 1929, ZH: 80-81)

Kästner's poetry often uses the principle of "one sentence per line". In the first stanza of this poem, he follows it to the letter. Right from the start, unmistakable satire[xiv] is combined with a language that could not be more concise and that is easy for anyone to understand. Before the barking, Prussian tone can become tired as a stylistic tool, however, the speaker's perspective changes. The line skip at the start of the second stanza, the first comma in line 7 and the first "and" in line 8 all give the trochee a little more space to breathe and a more fluent melody ("and ... and"). These features are supported by alliteration, line skips and conversational polysydeton. Ordinary people now have their voice, and they pull no punches. The poem becomes a march, with parataxis and simple sub-clauses with everyday language ("eat up", "garbage") - simple, but with a musical rhythm. It does not take any decoding to understand; it is self-explanatory. The reader is carried along and can, indeed wants to, join in.

Kästner is not hard to read. That is one indication of **entertainment value**. The readers have always attested to this in Kästner's case. In fact, his first job was for the entertainment magazine of Leipziger Verlagsdruckerei. His friend Hermann Kesten called Kästner's style "entertaining and exciting" (quoted in Bemmann 1999: 69). According to his biographer Sven Hanuschek (2010: 161), "Kästner may still be read because he serves both the modern need for entertainment and the demand for 'weight' and 'depth'."

The few references to the "workers" poem alone are enough to demonstrate the effort the author put into the **aesthetics** of his texts, and thus their **attractiveness** and **sensuality**. This time, journalism borrows from literature: a concept that goes without saying in literature is applied to reports and essays. Another look at the quote that starts this essay reveals the rhythm Kästner gives his text on the street demonstrations in Leipzig. The alternating rhythms and scenes in his report from the court in Nuremberg is another example, as is the way he composes his report on the American concentration camp documentary in prose stanzas that all begin with the phrase "it is night", like a leitmotif (WF: 67-71).

### **Productive irritation**

There is just one more journalistic quality on the list: **originality**. A look at everything that has already been said - and especially the specific form of the daily poem - might be enough to prove its presence. Erich Kästner makes (latently) up-to-date journalism in poetry form his trademark. In doing so, he expands the horizons of both literature and journalism. Indeed, he allows the horizons of both genres to merge and demonstrates that this need not be a detriment to literature nor to journalism. Kästner's work is miles away from the modern form rightly branded "gonzo journalism" (for example by Tom Kummer, cf. Reus 2004), in which the readers are deliberately kept in the dark



about where the facts end and fantasy begins. And it may also shake up the paralyzed, 'systemic' theory of journalism. That is exactly what makes reading Kästner so productive for the further development of journalism as a science.

But reading Kästner can also be productive for journalism itself. Committed to a subjective view of things, irony and freedom to wander, features articles have always pushed the boundaries of the system (and are still seen in Germany as superficial and flighty as a result), but no other journalist in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century approached the genre as consistently as Erich Kästner. He created templates for a type of journalism that is today under more pressure than ever from all sides, forced to fight for legitimation, appreciation and attention.

Perhaps as a sign of unspoken reverence for this great 20<sup>th</sup> Century journalist, the Berliner newspaper *tageszeitung* prints current affairs in the form of a poem every Thursday.[xv] Other media try to combine and develop art and journalism in other ways, such as in graphic novels, comic reports, newsgames and multimedia formats. Perhaps these attempts are the future of journalism, perhaps not. But Erich Kästner, the great "écrivain journaliste", must be honored as the originator of it all.

### About the author

**Reus, Gunter Dr.**, apl. Professor, born in 1950, Institute of Journalism and Communication Research, Hanover University of Music, Drama and Media. – Journalism deserves greater recognition (especially in Germany) as a cultural achievement. What has long fascinated me about the work of Erich Kästner is the natural and exemplary way in which allegedly systemic boundaries between literature and everyday journalism can be overcome. E-Mail to the author.

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### Footnotes:

[i]In this essay, texts by Erich Kästner from different sources are quoted, marked with initials and listed at the start of the bibliography. Ellipses (...) are used by Kästner in his original texts as a stylistic device. Only those in square brackets "[...]" denote an omission by the author of this essay (G.R.).

[ii]The key monographs on Erich Kästner all play their part in this image, albeit with varying focuses and levels of distance. They include the highly detailed depiction by Germanist Sven Hanuschek (2003); the well-documented biography by journalists and Kästner publishers Franz Josef Görtz and Hans Sarkowicz (1998); and the easier-to-handle depictions by freelance authors Helga Bemann (1999) and Isa Schikorsky (1999), youth author Klaus Kordon (1996) and youth literature researcher Klaus Doderer (2002). The reflection by journalist and cabaret artist Werner Schneyder (1982) takes

a more critical, essay-style approach, while the illustrated monograph by Kästner's partner, journalist Luiselotte Enderle (1966) glosses over and sugarcoats many details.

[iii]Only "Going to the Dogs" (1931), much of which reads like a report from a city, stands out from a series of rather vapid light novels.

[iv]It is no coincidence that the only monograph that considers Kästner a *journalistic author* was published in France, where literature is a much more integral part of society than it is in Germany. The main topic of Brons' dissertation is not specific to journalism, but is useful as an overview and inventory of all Kästner's journalistic work. As well as Brons, Johan Zonneveld (1991) and Benjamin Wagener (2003) have also produced work on Kästner as a journalist, albeit with more limited topic areas and time scales. Zonneveld looks exclusively at Kästner's theater, literature and film reviews up to 1933, while Wagener takes a cursory look at the topics of Kästner's articles for the *Neue Zeitung* in Munich from 1945 to 1946.

[v]The following depiction of the major events in Kästner's life follows on from the relevant monographies named in footnote 2.

[vi]"Herz auf Taille" (1928), "Lärm im Spiegel" (1929), "Ein Mann gibt Auskunft" (1930), "Gesang zwischen den Stühlen" (1932).

[vii]The first volume, "Herz auf Taille", had an initial print run of 2,000 – unusually high for poetry. Yet another 5,000 copies soon had to be printed (cf. Bemann: 101). By the start of 1930, this first volume of poetry, like the second volume "Lärm im Spiegel", was approaching 30,000 copies (cf. Bemann: 121). The fourth volume "Gesang zwischen den Stühlen" from 1932 had an initial print run of 5,000. These sold out immediately, with the publisher printing a further 7,000 copies that year (cf. Bemann: 194).

[viii]Kästner added the text to his volume of poetry "Lärm im Spiegel" (1929) as a "Prosaic incidental remark".

[ix]I base this on Meier (2007: 227) and the "Consens Map" by Wellbrock and Klein (2014: 399). Neither list is exhaustive (this would not be possible given the slippery nature of the term "quality"), but they undoubtedly contain the core criteria.

[x]Wellbrock and Klein (2014: 399) also list "professionalism" and "legality" – criteria that apply to any profession and are thus not a specific sign of quality.

[xi]"Interactivity" is a comparably recent quality criterion that has only gained professional recognition through the advent of the Internet. "Variety" and "universality" refer more to the media offered in general, rather than the work of individual journalists. Although the topics Kästner was able to address were limited by his role as a features writer, he did cover a wide range of different social subjects through his observations on everyday life.

[xii]In the foreword to “Notabene”, Kästner attempts to provide insight into how he worked after the war, but fails to meet the standards of sincerity and authenticity (see above).

[xiii]In their standard reference work “Sich verständlich ausdrücken”, Langer et al. (2015) name the criteria “simplicity” (including short, simple sentences and everyday words) and “structure, order”, both of which should be used as much as possible, as well as the criteria “brevity, precision” and “inspiring additions”, which should be included in moderation. Recommendations based on the research of Werner Frühs (1980) also include clear, non-complex sentence structure and a lack of pretentious vocabulary.

[xiv]This is directed against claims and positions of power, not against people, and therefore does not violate the principle of fairness towards individuals.

[xv]Most recently three days before completion of this manuscript, on February 16, 2017, when Reinhard Umbach commented on the Federal Administrative Court’s verdict on the deepening of the Elbe with a poem on page 20 (in iambic tetrameter like Kästner): “Schierlings-Wiesenfenchel, blühe!/Du, der Flora schönstes Kraut!/Nähre weiter Elbstrand-Kühe,/weil’s auf dir sich so gut kaut. [...]”.

*NB: All quotations translated by Sophie Costella.*

**Translation: Sophie Costella**