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Fixed and Fleeting: An Exploration of Film Poster Art from Weimar Germany, 1919-1933

by

Melissa Olson Meeks

A dissertation presented to the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Washington University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2015

St. Louis, Missouri
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To my family
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Fixed and Fleeting: An Exploration of Film Poster Art from Weimar Germany, 1919-1933
by
Melissa Olson Meeks
Doctor of Philosophy in German and Comparative Literature
Washington University in St. Louis, 2015
Professor Lutz Koepnick, Chair
Professor Lynne Tatlock, Co-Chair

My research investigates film advertising and poster designs produced in Germany during the
Weimar Republic as significant cultural artifacts revealing the intersections between consumerism and
aesthetics, popular entertainment and fine art. The intent of my dissertation is two-fold. On the one hand, I
reconsider the intellectual debates surrounding the artistic legitimacy of film as argued in the so-called
Kinodebatte of the early twentieth century, an unsettling of the perceived boundaries between high and
low art that remains significant to theorizations and explications of cinema today. On the other hand, my
examination of the film poster aims to complicate the theoretical understanding of the ontology of the film
medium itself by scrutinizing the relationship between still and moving images, the graphic and the
photographic, and between image and text. In pursuing these parallel inquiries, I indicate that the
historical practice of viewing a film was not bound within the confines of a single medium, nor contained
solely within the film itself. Instead, I suggest that during the Weimar period other media, like film posters,
extended the film-viewing experience spatially and temporally by confronting the viewer through a
multitude of marketing avenues displayed in cinematic exhibition spaces, in illustrated periodicals, on the
street, and elsewhere. Based on close visual analysis of poster artifacts and drawing on the work of the
period’s contemporary cultural critics, such as Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, who discuss
advertising as a barometer for measuring social concerns, my project asks what film posters demonstrate
about Weimar culture, how poster art might shape spectator expectations upon viewing a film, and, finally,
how films themselves may incorporate posters or poster-art aesthetics to suggest relationships with the
contemporary urban environment.
INTRODUCTION
Cinema and Film Poster Art of the Weimar Republic

On the edge of the town of Holstenwall, cardboard trees splinter the sky into angular patterns of gray and green, while a spectacled man cuts a crooked path beneath them. His compulsive experimentation with the art of hypnosis has distorted his vision of the world. Stumbling under the weight of a psychological obsession, he raises a hand for protection against a band of letters that flashes suddenly above his head, in the sky, and between the trees to spell out the words, “Du musst Caligari werden,”—You must become Caligari. Blazing like a beacon of warning and revelation, the command encloses the figure at every turn until he flees, tortured, from the frame (Fig. 0.1).

This pivotal scene from Robert Wiene’s classic silent film Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari (1919/20) is emblematic of the film’s famous aesthetic and thematic content. By incorporating stylistic elements that had been birthed through the Expressionist art movement earlier in the century, the scene foregrounds the artistic potential of its medium. Thematically, it conveys social anxieties surrounding psychiatric breakdown that found expression in the film’s murder-mystery plot. Thus, since its release, Caligari has been consistently understood as a reflection of a particularly German type of mental unrest. Siegfried Kracauer and Lotte Eisner both identified it as an indicator of the psychological state of German society in their early and influential works on Weimar Cinema, From Caligari to Hitler and The Haunted Screen, respectively. More recently, both Anton Kaes and Stefan Andriopoulos have described Caligari as evidence of collective post-war trauma and social anxiety regarding hypnosis and psychological treatment practices new to Weimar.\(^1\) In these readings, the above scene implicates the viewer of the film as much as it does the spectacled psychologist played by Werner Krauss. Both Krauss and the audience are subject to the directive to adopt a sinister identity not wholly their own: they must become Caligari and

carry out whatever dubious actions that personality requires of them. As if underscoring their helplessness against it, the flashing suggestion had already been imprinted on the minds of Berlin viewers long before it appeared as an apparition conjured from the projector’s tinted celluloid.

Weeks prior to the film’s release on February 26, 1920 at the fashionable Marmorhaus, the Caligari idiom had come to suggest wide-spread mania. As part of a revolutionary advertising campaign, the city had been plastered with vibrant posters designed by renowned artists in the jagged style of the Expressionists, inviting immediate and sustained critical commentary. The posters have since been recognized as major works in design history and are accruing value among art collectors.\(^2\) One poster by Otto Arpke and Ernst Ludwig Stahl (known together as Stahl-Arpke) received one of the highest monetary estimates in the extensive Hans Sachs poster collection recently put up for auction after having been seized by the National Socialists in 1938.\(^3\) This poster succeeded in communicating the compelling aspects of the film, its high art ambitions and its exploration of psychosis as communicated by the distressed figure in the frame much in the way of the emblematic sequence described above. The exaggerated desiccation around the joints and tendons of the figure’s face and hands resembles the portraits of E. L. Kirchner, Erich Heckel, and Max Pechstein, who had been using techniques influenced by the emotive paintings of Edvard Munch and Gauguin earlier in the century. In the postwar period such artists crafted dark portraits reflecting their experiences of personal and collective trauma.\(^4\) The Caligari poster evokes


\(^3\) The Sachs poster auction is only one example of a number of recent events attesting to a surge of interest in film poster collection. In July 2011, an auction of vintage movie posters hosted by Christie’s of London accrued over 400,000 pounds, an unprecedented profit for concept art works. See “Results: Vintage Film Posters,” [Christies.com](http://www.christies.com). More recently, in December 2012, Heinz Schulz-Neudamm’s premier poster for Fritz Lang’s Metropolis (1927) sold for over 1 million dollars, only failing to break the previous world record price paid for a film poster because it came bundled with other film memorabilia. See Kelsey, “Rare ‘Metropolis’ Poster,” [http://www.reuters.com/](http://www.reuters.com/).

\(^4\) See Selz, German Expressionist Painting, 52-69; and “German Expressionism,” [http://www.moma.org/explore/collection/ge/styles/early_influences](http://www.moma.org/explore/collection/ge/styles/early_influences). The poster style most closely resembles woodcut prints made by the Expressionists E. L. Kirchner, Max Pechstein, and Erich Heckel, which also emphasized their reproducible medium and carried an apocalyptic tenor.
those very paintings. Integrated on a background of acute angles, the claw-like hands in Stahl-Arpke’s poster cling as if for survival to the serrated edges of Caligari’s hand-lettered name, producing a tenor of existential despair (Fig. 0.2). Poster critics of the Weimar period referred to such seamless interweaving of textual and graphic media as a defining principle in modern poster art. It was thought to make the message penetrate more deeply into viewers’ subconscious. Here, the unsettling fusion of the text’s enigmatic message with the poster’s violent imagery articulates the overwhelming strength of the film’s mysterious central compulsion.

Reworking the call as a catchphrase to pique viewer curiosity and drive people to the theaters, the poster compelled patrons to “become Caligari” — sometimes without reference to the title of the film or its exhibition plans. Effectively, the poster asked the city to be on alert, to track down the meaning of the phrase by seeking out supplementary advertisements. A souvenir booklet disseminated at the theater describes the effect of the poster campaign and especially of this tagline on the city of Berlin:


According to the booklet, the poster proliferated in closely packed public spaces, providing a common though ambiguous language for people anonymously thrown together. The unique campaign became a significant part of the communal experience of urban life that would subsequently shape the act of movie-going for audiences. When Werner Krauss finally made his crooked walk through the landscape of mental disintegration, the film would seem an echo of the poster. In that moment, it would not only give meaning to the poster’s enigmatic phrase, but gesture toward an open affinity between film and advertising in the

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5Advertisers in Germany were slower than those in France, England, and the United States to adopt the use of illustrations in posters, preferring the straightforward messages of text-only posts. By the 1910s, however, the integration of text and image had become a critical aspect of good design. See Swett, Weisen, and Zatlin, Selling Modernity; and Aynsley, Graphic Design in Germany.

6“A few weeks ago a new catchphrase emerged in Berlin: ‘You must become Caligari’. From the advertising columns, in the subways, in the big cafes, it rang out everywhere in dazzling colors, and the call proliferated. In the nightclubs and bars and on the streets, friends and acquaintances spoke the categorical imperative without anyone understanding what the words actually meant. When recently someone asserted that I was already Caligari, I decided to uncover the meaning of these words. (...) In the Declaateliers in Weißensee, I picked up the trail.” Translation mine. Groth, “Du mußt Caligari werden,” 2.
early twentieth century. As Michael Cowan has indicated, the animated letters above Krauss’s head provide a direct visual allusion to the electric advertising displays that illuminated Berlin’s cityscape, thus unveiling a palpable link between advertising and film aesthetic.\(^7\) A reporter for the *Kinematograph* keenly picked up on this intimation when he remarked, “Eingeweihte fragten: ‘Sind Sie auch schon Caligari?’ So ungefähr wie man früher fragte: ‘Sie sind wohl Manoli?’”\(^8\) As Cowan reminds us, “Du bist Manoli” was a turn of phrase meaning “you’re crazy” that lasted well into the 1920s.\(^9\) It referenced an early exemplar of electric advertising: a gigantic, rotating wheel in white light that advertised tobacco, but came to operate as a symbol for the insanity of life in the urban center. After a wartime ban on such advertising was lifted in the 1920s, similar ads became much more prevalent throughout the city.\(^10\) By recalling the mental persuasiveness of this cutting-edge advertising display, *Caligari* invites viewers to engage with the hallucinogenic properties of both the cinema and its poster advertisements.

During the Weimar Republic, both film and advertising were suspected of coercing viewers toward actions without their awareness or consent.\(^11\) The *Caligari* poster and film made those anxieties explicit and further evoked the post-war swell in mental disorders such as neurasthenia and hysteria. Advertising and movie-going spearheaded the constant stream of distraction and overstimulation held responsible for such mental disarray. These suspicions raised ethical questions about film and poster art

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\(^7\) Cowan, “Taking it to the Street,” 465.


\(^9\) Cowan, “Taking it to the Street,” 465.

\(^10\) For a comprehensive analysis of the Manoli advertisement in the context of urban overstimulation, see Killen, *Berlin Electropolis*, 27. Janet Ward more broadly discusses the historical and cultural significance of electrical advertisements in Berlin. Among other examples, she describes the impact of the animated electrical display for Persil soap in 1929, which offered an illuminated mini-narrative of a shirt being washed in the night sky. See Ward, *Weimar Surfaces*, 117.

\(^11\) By 1914, the association between hypnosis and advertising had become common place; see Henatsch, *Die Entstehung des Plakates*, 70. One article from the influential advertising journal *Das Plakat* parses out three different types of suggestion, the most pervasive and strenuous of these being “Massensuggestion” — mass suggestion — which works through repeated and/or powerful messages in advertising and news media with or without the viewer remaining conscious of their effects; see Fleischhack, “Kunst und Suggestion,” 458-64. Andriopoulos names several turn-of-the-century scholars that examine the relationship between “suggestion and film” and/or “suggestion and advertising.” Among these, Hugo Münsterberg, a psychologist and one of the earliest cognitive film theorists, did not rule out the possibility that in unique instances viewing “unwholesome” photoplays might be connected with the compulsion to commit crime; Andriopoulos, “Suggestion, Hypnosis, and Crime,” 27.
that in turn gave rise to censorship laws restricting experimentation in both of these fields.\textsuperscript{12} Playfully igniting these reservations, \textit{Caligari} advertisers went to great lengths to make the message appear with the frequency of a mental obsession. Newspapers and trade magazines were peppered with black and white reproductions of the poster, which stood out against the minimal graphic components that constituted the vast majority of print advertisements.\textsuperscript{13} The illustrative quality of these ads marked a moment in which marketers began to transcend the boundaries of set type, the medium of the so-called \textit{Schriftplakat}, which had been the norm in the nineteenth century. In a number of complementary advertisements, the command gave the impression of being paused mid-spiral as if boring into the subconscious of the reader (Fig. 0.3). The text appears to take on the incessant circular motion of the cinematic reel, re-imagined as the hypnotist’s “vortex-like” helicoid.\textsuperscript{14} Thus, \textit{Caligari} cues its audience to the suggestive powers of visual media, using an extensive intermedia web of inferences in which viewers could not help but become ensnared.

At the center of this web, the film poster sits with its viscid threads reaching out into multiple directions. It draws together diverse elements of visual culture associated with high-art painting, commercial advertising, the illustrated press, traditional theater, variety shows, and, of course, film. As this example for \textit{Caligari} proves, poster artifacts provide rich illustrations of the visual and historical context into which Weimar films were introduced. When revisited, these advertisements have the potential both to refine and expand our understanding of the films they once promoted. Yet only a few scholars of

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig03.png}
\caption{Advertisement for \textit{Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari}. \textit{Film-Kurier} no. 32 (February 7, 1920).}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{12} For instance, Konrad Lange, a key figure in Germany’s film reform movement, argued that uneducated youth were helpless against the suggestive power of the cinema and proposed restrictions on cinematic form in order to limit its immersive potential. See Lange, \textit{Das Kino in Gegenwart}, 29; and Lange as discussed in Andriopouloas, “Suggestion, Hypnosis, and Crime,” 26; and Hake, \textit{The Cinema’s Third Machine}, 139-141.

\textsuperscript{13} “Caligari Advertisement,” \textit{Film-Kurier}, n.p.

American film have begun to write about the role of poster ads in the film industry, and although several exhibits within Germany have featured the movie poster, no substantial scholarly work has been conducted on the relationship between poster art and Weimar cinema aesthetic.  

The absence of a study devoted exclusively to German film posters is especially surprising given the fact that German designers at the turn of the century have long been recognized for their contributions to the field of graphic arts. As early as the 1890s, Peter Behrens and Lucien Bernhard among others helped to develop an internationally renowned modern German poster style, while a number of innovative and prominent German journals, such as Pan, Jugend, and Simplicissimus, gained an international following when they began treating design as an art form. Additionally, the spheres of graphic design and filmmaking experienced quite a bit of professional cross-over. Walther Ruttmann, avant-garde director of the highly acclaimed Berlin, die Sinfonie der Großstadt (Berlin, Symphony of a Great City, 1927), worked as a poster designer before World War One, while German designer Paul Leni, for instance, worked as a set-designer and film director. Nonetheless, a comprehensive exploration of the aesthetic similarities between poster and film from that period does not exist. Furthermore, though few today would doubt the cultural significance of political propaganda as developed during the First- and Second World Wars, we are only just beginning to understand how political propaganda worked in tandem with developments in film and commercial advertising. The film poster provides the logical key to understanding how these spheres were made to interconnect, suggesting the recurrent politicization of film content. Perhaps more than any other visual artifacts, these posters display the set of social and cultural meanings that have been added to the design in order to make it representational of the society in which it was produced and consumed.

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16 See Aynsley, “Gebrauchsgraphik,” 53-72; Aynsley, Designing Modern Germany; Eskilson, Graphic Design: A New History, 95-116; and Drucker and McVarish, Graphic Design History, 150-173.


18 Cowan’s recent exploration into the mutual dependency of advertising and film provides a notable exception. Although his work centers on the role of advertising films, rather than advertising posters, he does much to reframe our thinking about permeable boundaries of “moving image culture” during the Weimar Republic. See “Taking it to the Streets,” 463-479; and “Advertising, Rhythm and the Avant-garde,” 49-73.

19 See Welch, Germany, Propaganda and Total War; and Cull, et. al, Propaganda and Mass Persuasion.
political messages through which the film industry made its new products accessible and attractive to potential viewers. Many film scholars, therefore, reference poster art and visual advertisement as a means of grounding their historical analysis of cinematic texts and their reception, but very few have examined the poster as an aesthetic object in its own right. How much more could be understood about the visual associations presented in Weimar films if more specifics were known about the production and reception of their advertisements? This dissertation looks beyond the use of posters as anecdotal evidence and moves to flesh out the unique properties of film poster aesthetic, examine its place within a wider range of Weimar visual culture, and hypothesize what responses posters invited in would-be movie-goers.

To date, collectors and contemporary designers remain most cognizant to the vast visual treasury that early film posters impart. A number of recent book publications on film posters have been released with these readers in mind. However, the analytical component in these volumes serves primarily as a loose framework around which a few prominent images are continually recirculated.20 Often they overlook advertisements for less-recognized films, and, although only a small fraction of the thousands of posters produced in the interwar period have survived, still a great number of those artifacts that are archived remain unexamined. To bridge this gap, I reviewed the archives of the Deutsche Kinemathek in Berlin, which holds over 1500 images of posters from before 1945, some of which provide the only remaining record of popular film productions from the interwar period. In addition, I conducted research through emerging collectors’ forums on the internet that allow digital poster images to be shared among users.

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20 See King, *A Century of Movie Posters: From Silent to Art House*; Bagshaw, *The Art of Italian Film Posters*; McCluskey, *Imaging Blackness: Race and Racial Representation in Film Poster Art*; Cushing, *Revolucion! Cuban Poster Art*; Nourmand and Marsh, *Horror Poster Art*; and Branaghan, *British Film Posters: An Illustrated History*. Of these titles, Branaghan’s text provides the most comprehensive study of the history of a single national film poster art with careful attention placed upon the role of poster art in the film industry and the biographies of individual artists, whom Branaghan had the opportunity to interview. On-line and in print the Reel Poster Gallery of London provides invaluable visual resources on original posters. See [http://www.reelposter.com/index.html](http://www.reelposter.com/index.html) and Kehr, *The Art of the Modern Movie Poster: International Postwar Style and Design*. Other valuable on-line resources include Movie Poster Database, [http://www.movieposterdb.com/](http://www.movieposterdb.com/); and, on German posters, Filmportal, [http://www.filmportal.de](http://www.filmportal.de). Movie Poster Database allows users to exchange digital images or purchase them through credit points. The content is socially vetted, but, although I have yet to find any misinformation there, I recommend that the information be verified by cross-checking with archival and historical sources. The Filmportal, a department of Deutsches Filminstitut, is less comprehensive, but more reliable.
These sites have provided access to a great many poster examples that until very recently had remained obscure.\(^{21}\)

By evoking the emergence of German design at a critical moment when technological and cultural developments gave rise to commercial graphic design, film posters encourage us to reconsider media developments in the new millennium. Today, as burgeoning interactive advertisement practices record our interests and pursue us along the winding paths of cyber-flânerie, we see the origins of contemporary practices in the Weimar period when visual advertisements set out to gain an ever-closer proximity to our very thoughts, reading our minds in some instances and suggesting our responses in others. Such efficient communication required and requires a full arsenal of visual and textual media and a clear understanding of the way in which they act upon viewers to function. During the Weimar period, this meant that advertisers relied upon multivalent modes of suggestion and inference. Film posters from this period attest to the symbiotic relationship between film and poster art that developed as a result of this close interrelation.

This introductory chapter outlines the kinship between poster art and film during the Weimar Republic as voiced by artists, professionals, and enthusiasts in both industries. These individuals saw the development of both media as integral to Germany’s reputation both locally and internationally. They were aware of the role of posters and cinema as a primary means through which society reflected on its own fears and anxieties and expressed its desires and hopes to the international community. As I will show, these film and poster critics give us important insights not only regarding the communicative properties of each medium, but the crumbling barriers between mass culture and fine art. In this way, my study touches on one of the most critical and enduring debates within modernism. As Andreas Huyssen succinctly states, “modernism’s insistence on the autonomy of the art work, its obsessive hostility to mass culture, its radical separation from the culture of everyday life, and its programmatic distance from political,

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\(^{21}\) See Movie Poster Database, [http://www.movieposterdb.com/](http://www.movieposterdb.com/); Movie Poster Collectors, [http://www.movielpostercollectors.com/](http://www.movielpostercollectors.com/); and the Cinema Poster Archive, [http://cinemaposterarchive.com/](http://cinemaposterarchive.com/). While meticulous collectors have made the internet an invaluable resource for poster research, it can be challenging to identify the source and therewith the authenticity of the digital reproductions of posters found online. As a result, I have not used any images that could not be vetted by a reputable source or by my own research into corroborating accounts of posters in trade magazines and other historical materials. All image captions provide further information for source verification.
economic, and social concerns was always challenged as soon as it arose.” Under this definition of modernism, Huyssen rightly identifies the avant-garde as a subversive response to this “great divide.” However, in the early twentieth-century, contemporaries also cited experiments in poster art and film to confound the high art rejection of mass entertainment. In Germany where the divide had been exceptionally distinct, films and posters were routinely required by financiers to appease patrons of fine arts with the suggestion of aesthetic autonomy. Nonetheless, they became prominent vehicles not of art for its own sake, but of what Paul Fortunato calls the “consumer culture ritual,” which allowed individuals to construct their identities through the consumption of aestheticized objects and experiences. These objects borrowed freely from a broad spectrum of styles—modern, traditional, antiquated, and innovative—and, as we will see, from media of varied properties: text and image, graphic and photographic, stasis and motion. I examine film and poster art as testaments of what Miriam Hansen has called vernacular modernism, in which mass culture entailed “a changing fabric of everyday life, sociability, and leisure,” allowing for “different forms of mimetic experience and expression.” Complex, inclusive, and yet efficient, film and its posters provide an alternative to persistent conceptions of modernism as a period of aesthetic division.

0.1 THE MODERN POSTER


22 Huyssen, After the Great Divide, vii.

23 Fortunato, Modernist Aesthetics, 143.


25 Here I answer Mary Gluck’s recent call for a “more inclusive, democratic alternative to the discourses of the Great Divide,” Popular Bohemia, 4. Her work on nineteenth-century Parisian modernism provides a useful overview of the strains of thought that “nourish” the opposition between mass culture and fine art. Gluck, Popular Bohemia, 1-23.

26 “A great task stands before the poster: to assert itself in a time of greatness. To induce suspense in a world full of suspense. To arouse interest within a whirlwind of interests.” Translation mine. Halbert, “Plakat und Patriotismus,” 20.
The myriad of contradictions and agitations that we have come to associate with the Weimar Republic, increased commercialism, artistic modernism, political tumult and, as Peter Gay characterizes it in his seminal history of the period, Weimar’s “striking mixture of cynicism and confidence,” are all manifest in its poster advertisements. In the streets, political posters illustrated contentious struggles to gain support from diverse masses, while splashy displays competed for buyers of new technologically reproduced goods. Posters drew from diverse visual sources in high art and popular entertainment to create a repertoire of messages that both challenged and supported one another, forging of a new visual language and crafting a collective notion of urban space. As Susan Sontag explains, “the form of the poster depends on the fact that many posters exist — competing with (and sometimes reinforcing) each other. Thus posters also presuppose the modern concept of public space — as a theater of persuasion.”

In Weimar Germany, the stage was set with a constellation of vibrant images whose sheer multiplicity helped to define urbanity. Originating in the great metropolitan areas of the German-speaking world, Munich, Vienna, and most prominently Berlin, prolific posting embodied the press of the crowd by covering whole sides of buildings and in some cases prompting public outcry in both the cities and provinces. Thus, early design scholars saw it as a social imperative to encourage “good” poster aesthetic across the country. In the nineteenth century the Berlin Kunstgewerbemuseum, for instance, organized traveling exhibitions throughout Germany in order to educate citizens on the value of design aesthetic, while training schools promoted design reforms that continued to develop between 1870 and the start of the First World War. By the late 1920s, corporations spread their influence throughout the country with their own uniform marketing efforts. The film giant UFA began to ship its film posters from Berlin into less populated areas through promotional catalogues, increasing homogeneity in advertising practices.

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28 Germany experienced two waves of industrialization between its unification in 1871 and the outset of the first World War. In the second wave, its rapid growth was unprecedented among other industrialized nations, at which time the population of Berlin, in particular, increased dramatically. See Guerin, *A Culture of Light*, xxii.

throughout Europe. With their proliferation of color and commerce, these posters carried with them an ambience of the condensed city-scape and its hyperactive modernism.\(^{30}\)

Beginning around 1890 and lasting until the First World War, Germany experienced a surge of public interest in the poster during a so-called *Plakatbewegung*, or poster-movement.\(^{31}\) Large-scale lithograph posters that integrated illustrations and text in the manner of French preliminary examples by Jules Chéret and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec began to be recognized as aesthetic objects worthy of critical commentary and collection. Simultaneously, the Arts and Crafts Movements advanced the poster’s development by increasing the cultural cache of applied art in general.\(^{32}\) In connection with these movements, well-crafted posters like those that advertised for the ground-breaking Sezession exhibits in Germany and Austria were integrated conscientiously into the public sphere with the ambition of elevating the tastes of the masses (Fig. 0.4).\(^{33}\)

![FIGURE 0.4 Gustav Klimt, *I Kunstaustellung der Vereinigung Bildender Künstler Österreichs (Secession) (1898).* Lithograph, 63.5 x 46.9 cm. www.moma.org](image)

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30  Aynsely, *Graphic Design in Germany*, 30-8; Aynsely, *Designing Modern Germany*, 20.

31  In comparison to France and Great Britain, Germany was late in developing an interest in poster art. The delay can be attributed both to a conservative public and a factory-like division of labor among printers whereby visual artists were often uninvolved in the execution of their designs. Henatsch, *Die Entstehung des Plakates*, 63. Nineteenth-century international exhibitions introduced the German-speaking world to the artistic, social, and national potential of developing quality graphic arts, after which Germany and Austria responded by founding the *Deutsches Gewerbe-Museum zu Berlin* (later renamed *Königliches Kunstgewerbemuseum* when it gained state-sponsorship) and the *Kaiserliches-Königliches Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie*. These institutions quickly found equivalents in Hamburg, Dresden, Düsseldorf, Nuremberg and Munich, and adopted their mission to educate designers and to promote “good taste” among industry officials and the general public. Aynsely, *Graphic Design in Germany*, 28.

32  Germany began to invest in developing this modern poster aesthetic when a number of competitions and exhibits focusing solely on the poster began to be advertised in 1896. At Dresden’s International Poster Exhibition, for instance, German posters compared unfavorably to their French and English counterparts, inciting a call for reform in German design. Also in 1896, the *Berlinergerwerbe Ausstellung* provided an international context in which Germany sought to position itself as a *Weltstadt* among other city-centers of the period, like Paris and London. Henatsch, *Die Entstehung des Plakates*, 63.

33  Early design critic Paul Mahlberg argued that in order to participate in modern life, many required an educational “Bilderbuch” of contemporary images, which only timely, artistic posters could provide. He writes: “Nun haben wir aber ein lebendiges Bilderbuch, mit Beispielen, die keines historischen Hinweises bedürfen, denn sie sind aus dem Geist unserer Zeit entstanden, ein Bilderbuch, durch dessen Welt wir tagtäglich schreiten: die Straße und ihre künstlerische Plakate.” (“Now we have a vivid picture book with examples that require no historical consideration, because they have originated from the spirit of our time. A picture book whose world we read through daily: the Street and its artistic posters.”) Translation mine. Mahlberg, *Vom Plakat als Erzieher des Kunstsins*, 196.
poster movement sought to bring the spiritual in art into everyday settings. Through the organic forms of Jugendstil, Germany’s version of Art Nouveau, ornamentation and symbolism imbued the posters with the aura of works of fine art. Ultimately, however, it appeared that the Arts and Crafts movements were merely beating back the irreversible tide of industrialization with these vegetal forms. In response, the internationally renowned Deutsche Werkbund, founded in 1907, took a contrary approach by embracing standardization and stripping away unnecessary ornamentation in its designs. By proposing the collapse of an already destabilized division between art and industry, their work began to pave the way for the country’s nascent advertising industry.

Due to the efforts of the Werkbund, the field of graphic design could boast a distinguished history in Germany when the first independent advertising agency opened in 1897. But by the 1920s bold experiments with animated electronic displays, large-scale posters, and visual ads in newspapers began to ignite skepticism and concern among critics even as they became evidence of the innovative energy of the era. One 1928 manual for students of advertising complains that the majority of Germans saw advertisers’ loud trumpeting as a sign of poor craftsmanship. To many, advertising bespoke an American brand of capitalism, which, like all industries associated with that country, was both attractive and repellent to Germany at the turn of the century. Thus, the burgeoning advertising industry in Germany

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34 Walter Benjamin called this strategy, “the last attempted sortie of an art besieged in its ivory tower by technology,” Selected Writings, 3:38. With this assertion, he indicates the difficulty with which technologically reproduced artworks, like posters, were incorporated into the aesthetic schemas of the nineteenth century. In a reaction against the “cold forms” of technology, poster artists were part of an unarticulated initiative to aestheticize the modern environment.

35 On the history of the Werkbund and its influence nationally and abroad in regard to design, advertising, and aesthetics, see Ward, Weimar Surfaces, 93; and Aysnely, Designing Modern Germany, 50.


37 As Swett rightly notes, the anxiety surrounding the prevalence of advertising in the city gave expression to larger issues of cultural change: “the implications of social equality, the erosion of high culture, and the ability of more and more people to access goods and services that were once the sole property of social and economic elites,” “Introduction,” 6.

38 Dannenberg, Reklame die Gewinn Bringt, 9.

39 Corey Ross writes that America, “though widely celebrated for its promise of material abundance and ‘democratization of consumption,’ was ‘simultaneously derided for what critics saw as its brutally rational erosion of cultural traditions, quashing of individualism, and threat to social stability.’” Ross, Visions of Prosperity, 50. See also Repp, “Marketing, Modernity and the German People’s Soul,” 27.
found itself caught in the midst of a debate over the threat of culturally deteriorating "Amerikanismus." As Pamela Swett argues in her recent book on advertising in Germany, the nation’s advertisers consequently faced a unique challenge in that “[c]orporate imagery had to sell, yet in a way that did not weaken this sophisticated, culture-rich society.” Early advertising journals provided a prime platform for encouraging a specifically German approach to poster advertising that allowed the industry to overcome negative stereotypes and make advertising more acceptable at all levels of society. Such journals continually asserted the cultural relevance of advertising as a sound commercial and artistic practice, and posters, in particular, were held up as opportunities for encouraging good taste in the masses. One of the most influential examples of these journals is *Das Plakat*.

International in scope, *Das Plakat* was founded in 1910 by dentist and poster collector Hans Sachs as the official publication of the *Verein des Plakat Freundes* (Association of Friends of the Poster), which included many of the top designers in the industry such as Lucian Bernhard, Julius Klinger, and Ludwig Hohlwein. The journal arranged articles on the poster as well as other types of design material (book plates, letterheads, illustrated texts) around such contemporary topics as dance, war, religion, and entertainment, underscoring the social importance of poster art. Contributors dealt with instances of plagiarism and censorship, as well as aesthetic and cultural issues. At its peak, the poster journal reached a circulation of 5000 members and, as it included articles by industry professionals as well as critics and poster enthusiasts, became an extremely influential publication in the development of Weimar graphic design.

Along with H. K. Frenzel's *Gebrauchsgraphik* and Robert Hösel's *Seidels Reklame* the journal provides an invaluable resource for understanding the aspirations and challenges of early design.

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40 See the 1926 edition of the *Mitteilung des Bundesdeutscher Gebrauchsgraphiker* with several articles disparaging American advertising practices. They suggest that Americans engage in rampant plagiarism in addition to promoting poor quality design. Bund Deutscher Gebrauchsgraphiker, *BDG-Blätter*.

41 Swett, “Introduction,” 5.

42 The association grew from 84 members in 1906 to near 1,300 recorded members by 1914. Aynsley, *Graphic Design in Germany*, 36.

43 Design historian Steven Heller describes the unparalleled impact of *Das Plakat* in an article for Typotheque.com calling the journal an important “history of the early period of European commercialization and industrialization through the lens of graphic art.” Heller, “Graphic Design Magazines: Das Plakat,” typotheque.com. Dr. Sachs’s own history of the poster and the publication of *Das Plakat* can be found in Guernsey’s auction catalogue. Sachs, “The World’s Largest Poster Collection,” 7-29.
professionals. Their essays provide the best gauge with which to evaluate Weimar film posters as their contemporaries would have. They show us that the poster existed somewhere between the categories of high and low art, groupings that were proving increasingly flexible in light of ever more prominent mass media: photography, film, and the illustrated press.

A remarkable number of articles in Das Plakat revolve around defining the poster in relation to what at the time qualified as “high art” and differentiating this from tasteless Kitsch. If contributors do not treat these issues directly with headings such as “Malerei und Plakatkunst in Ihrer Wechselwirkung,” “Kitsch oder Kunst?” and “Kitsch und Plakat” they often allude to them by elevating the poster through artist biographies and articles devoted to the analysis of personal style and aesthetic developments.

Das Plakat evinces the defensive posturing of industry professionals by engaging with traditional definitions of art work as spiritual, expressive, and, notably, transcending any practical application. Immanuel Kant’s still-reigning assertion that true aesthetic experiences could only be incited by objects without any foreseeable purpose (Zweck) was difficult to square away with the obvious pursuit of profit inherent in the poster. His principle of disinterested pleasure ruled out the possibility of ascribing aesthetic worth to objects conceived with the aim of enticing viewers to buy superfluous luxury items.

The discourse around the poster demonstrates the resiliency of notions that only “low” art aims for a profit.

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44 Published between 1924 and 1944, the bilingual (English and German) Gebrauchsgraphik, or Applied Graphics, gave tactical advise to advertisers and influenced layout and content conventions for design journals for years to come. Aynsley, “Gebrauchsgraphik,” 54. As Aysnley remarks, later journals established by László Moholy-Nagy, Jan Tschichold, and John Heartfield were more aesthetic and social in scope, and Gebrauchsgraphik more practical. Das Plakat straddled the two poles by striving to establish “good” design practices that were at once aesthetically pleasing and economically successful.

45 Though these media forms had been around since the preceding century, they experienced an unprecedented boom during the Weimar Republic as technological innovation and a burgeoning consumer culture made them more accessible to larger portions of the population. See Weitz, Weimar Germany, 208.

46 Behne, “Malerei und Plakatkunst in Ihrer Wechselwirkung,” (Painting and Poster Art in their Mutual-Dependency), 28-35; Reckendorf, “Kitsch oder Kunst?,” (Kitsch or Art?), 152-7; Kutzke, “Kitsch und Plakat,” (Kitsch and Poster), 380-385.

47 “Schönheit ist Form der Zweckmäßigkeit eines Gegenstandes, sofern sie ohne Vorstellung eines Zwecks an ihm wahrgenommen wird.” Kant, Kritik der Urteilskraft, 77. “Beauty is the form of purposiveness [Zweckmäßigkeit] in an object, so far as this is perceived in it apart from the representation of an end [Zweck].” Translated by James Creed Meredith. Kant, Critique of Aesthetic Judgement, 66.

For some, an artistic poster was a culturally transgressive sign of modern times. Ernst Growald, artistic director of the most prolific art press in Berlin, Hollerbaum and Schmidt, for instance, uses Kant’s language to define the poster as a kind of anti-art: „Das Plakat ist keine Sache an sich, sondern nur ein Mittel zum Zweck. Jedes Plakat muss einen Zweck haben. Das Plakat hat den Zweck, das Publikum auf eine Sache aufmerksam zu machen, einen Namen oder eine Mark dem Gedächtnis einzuprägen.” For Growald, the communicative aim of the poster supersedes its artistic value. Das Plakat dealt with the tension between Growald’s position and a more traditional understanding of artwork by arguing that only artistically viable art could fulfill the important social and economic role of the poster. As an opening manifesto in the 1915 publication reads:

Wir wollen eine künstlerische Reklame! Zweierlei soll damit erreicht werden: Der Kaufmann soll seine Plakatspesen nicht umsonst aufgewendet haben, denn unkünstlerische Reklame hat niemals Erfolg! Und der Käufer soll nicht mit roher Gewalt, mit der Macht des Kapitals überrumpelt werden, das sich erlauben kann, uns an allen erdenklichen Stellen mit aufdringlichem und geschmacklosem Kitsch zu verfolgen! Support of aesthetically interesting poster art could operate as a safeguard against consumerist kitsch at the same time that it provided unparalleled support for the aims of good business.

The implication that inartistic posters would not be successful on the market, though frequently repeated by poster enthusiasts, was not without reasonable contention. Poster artist Jo Steiner wrote for Gebrauchsgraphik that often the most “kitschy” and “dilettantish” posters became the most famous and effective: “Irgendetwas aus dem Rahmen Fallendes, den Zeitpunkt Treffendes, Freude-, Schmerz-, Ekelerregendes war, oft ungewollt und unberechnet, die Ursache dieser großen Wirkung,” he writes. Then, as today, artistic quality was not always requisite to an advertisement’s ability to make a lasting impression in the minds of viewers. Novelty, repetition, and effect at a distance were the most commonly

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49 “The poster is not a thing in and of itself, but only a means to an end. Every poster must have a purpose (Zweck). The purpose of the poster is to make the public aware of a thing, to imprint a name or a brand in someone’s mind.” Growald, qtd. in Henatsch, Die Entstehung des Plakates, 72.

50 “We want artistic advertising! Therewith two things will be accomplished: The business man will not have spent his poster expenses in vain, for inartistic advertising is never successful! And the buyer will not be blindsided by raw force, by the power of capitalism, which manages to pursue us in every conceivable arena with obtrusive and tasteless kitsch!” Translation mine. Sachs, “Zum Geleit,” n.p.

51 “Something out of the ordinary, something especially timely, something inducing joy, pain, or disgust often undesired and unaccounted for, that was the basis of [the poster’s] great influence.” Translation mine. Steiner, “Das Plakat als Kunsterzeugnis?” 76.
recognized attributes of effective posters. Often we think of novelty somewhat disparagingly as a manifestation of the consumerist impulse, but in 1920 poster critic Kutzke pointed out that current definitions of high art also demanded novelty (or more gently termed, innovation). At all registers, it seems, the “cult of novelty” exerted its influence. Steiner characteristically calls this quality the “Ohrfeige,” or boxing of the ears. Others described it as a “Schlag” or “Schrei,” strike or scream. As these terms imply, successful poster assaulted the eye and produced a physical imprint on the minds of viewers. Art aided in the production of this assault, but a number of critics warned that posters should not be too artistic in nature. Such artistic posters required too much interpretation, contemplation, and — most importantly — time. The rushing masses had no patience for posters that revealed their secrets only through calm, focused consideration.

Thus, poster artists faced a two-fold challenge. On the one-hand their designs had to include elements of surprise, but they also had to work with conventional means of visual communication (often through symbols and cliche) so that their messages remained easily comprehensible. Repetition and sometimes overwrought sentimentalism, which research had identified as powerful advertising tools, often eclipsed imperatives for artistic design. In either case, it was deemed absolutely critical that posters be legible not only in very short time periods but from considerably far away. The modern poster had to possess what was commonly called “Fernwirkung” — or

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52 Kutzke, “Kitsch und Plakat,” 380.

53 Paul Valery, quoted by Walter Benjamin in the Arcades Project, uses the phrase “cult of novelty” to describe the wide-spread addiction to the new that he observed in the early twentieth century. Benjamin, Arcades Project, 560.

54 For instance, Dresden Museum curator Jean Sponsel, who published the first German book on poster design in 1897, criticized Fred Walker’s Woman in White, identified as a precursor to the modern poster, for having privileged aesthetics over communication. Walker’s poster produced a significant impact on the art community: “Das war noch nichts für die Masse des Volkes, aber für Künstler und Kunstfreunde war das Werk ein Ereignis.” (“It was still nothing for the masses, but for the artists and art enthusiasts the work was an event.”) Translation mine. Sponsel, Das Moderne Plakat, 145. Benjamin marked the significance of the Woman in White when he described the evocative posture of the woman paused on the stairs. Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 172.

55 For accounts of these early experiments in advertising see Münsterberg, Psychology and Industrial Efficiency, 261-3; and Dannenberg, Reklame die Gewinn Bringt, 13.
effect at a distance. An aesthetic requirement unique to the medium, the necessity of *Fernwirkung* gave birth to the first visual style originating in the poster: the *Sachplakat*.

Popularized by Julius Klinger and Lucian Bernhard, the *Sachplakat* reduced a product illustration to its most simplified lines and united the object with a hand-lettered brand name on a plane divided by contrasting colors (Fig. 0.5). The style managed to produce both surprise and meaning in clipped form and to be discernible across busy intersecting street corners. As art critic Adolf Behne declared in 1919, this type of poster provided the most logical manifestation of product advertising in that it forged a basic one-to-one correlation between the object to be sold and the brand of that object in the minds of consumers.

Fritz Hellwag correspondingly wrote of the development of Bernhard’s poster style:

> Das Plakat sollte seinen geschäftlichen Zweck, ohne zu beleidigen, sofort offen bekennen. Impression und Zweck sollten möglichst zusammenfallen; mindestens musste durch die künstlerische Mitwirkung der Weg zwischen ihnen sehr abgekürzt werden. Dieser intuitive Grundsatz schaffte eine ganz neue Plakat-Aesthetik und aus zweideutigen Impressionen wurden Schlager. Das Sachplakat wurde geboren als die natürlichste Sache von der Welt.

Its formulaic correlation between object and brand could claim instantaneous legibility even amid a barrage of city distractions. Thus, the distilled object image had a distinct advantage over the flowery forms of *Jugendstil*. The straight-forward message of the *Sachplakat* integrated itself into the viewer’s consciousness like a popular melody that one could not help but hum throughout the day. Yet it did so by exploiting the unique properties of its own medium. Relying on flat planes of color to create eye-catching visual contrast, the minimal palettes of the *Sachplakat* suggested the flat space of the lithographic stone. Accordingly, the style was often referred to simply as *"Plakatstil,"* or poster style. Both

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58 “The poster should immediately, and openly profess its commercial aim. Impression and aim should preferably coincide; at the very least the path between them should be shortened as much as possible with the assistance of the poster’s artistry. This intuitive principle crafts a totally new poster aesthetic and a ‘hit song’ is created out of ambiguous impressions. The object poster was born out of the most natural, worldly stuff.” Translation mine. Hellwag, “Bernhard,” 4.

59 This comparison of poster art to oral stimulation, particularly songs that cannot be cast out of one’s head (*Ohrwürme*) was commonly repeated throughout these design journals. See Dannenberg, *Reklame die Gewinn Bringt*, 204. The intermediary comparison connects with simultaneous developments in painting as artists like Kandinsky deliberately modeled their works after musical compositions. While traditionally aesthetic theory had conceived of visual artwork as more intellectual than music, in that it remained somewhat at a distance from the viewer, in the Weimar Republic visual stimuli began to be recognized as being just as visceral and obtrusive as sound. Note also the difference between high and low culture in the comparison of the poster to a *Schlager* (or hit song) and Kandinsky’s painting to a symphony.
easy to reproduce and highly effective in garnering attention, the *Sachplakat* was soon internationally duplicated and became the stylistic standard of German design.

However, as with all advertising tactics, its effectiveness eventually dulled with repeated use. By 1917 Sachs charged that the popular style had become too prescriptive, writing, “Aber das Sachplakat bildet doch innerhalb der Plakatkunst eine Klasse für sich, und wohlgemerkt nur eine Klasse, und die deutsche Plakatkunst würde rasch verarmen, wollte sie sich auf diese Plakatart beschränken oder sie vorwiegend pflegen.”

The innovation that Sachs recommended eventually came as a result of propaganda efforts during the Great War. However, many critics were not satisfied with the results. The economic distress of the war led to fewer marks invested in hiring quality poster artists, and political propaganda ushered in an increase in poster displays of sentimentality and brutality, the hallmarks of kitsch according to many commentators.

Thus, the “Golden Age” of poster art in Germany seemed to be at a close. The utopian idealism of the Arts and Crafts movements eroded against waves of violence produced by technological warfare. Posters, though they once suggested the hope of elevating the masses, seemed only to mislead and embroil them.

### 0.2 RAISING THE FILM POSTER

> “Film . . . is perhaps the only art to emerge as a child of capitalist industry and it embodies its spirit. However, it need not remain within the confines of capitalism.”
> — Béla Balázs

As poster artistry declined in the eyes of even its most staunch supporters, film experienced a meteoric rise in popularity. In 1913, only nine years after the first permanent exhibition spaces were opened in Germany, there were 2,900 German theaters receiving a total average of 1.5 million visitors.

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60 “The *Sachplakat* forms a class of its own within the realm of poster art, and yet it is only one class. German poster art would quickly deteriorate if it would confine itself to this type of poster style or predominately cultivate only it.” Translation mine. Sachs, “Otto Baumberger,” 186.

61 See Sachs “Vom Hurrakitsch,” 3. Conversely, at the same time that political propaganda increased the use of kitsch elements in poster art, Expressionist and Dada art forms emulated the “shock” that these posters regularly employed. Ward, *Weimar Surfaces*, 93.

62 Balasz, *Early Film Theory*, 81.
every day.\textsuperscript{63} These theaters were each responsible for their own advertisements and film posters began to proliferate as never before. To some, they proved an especially obnoxious addition to the urban landscape. According to a 1916 edition of \textit{Das Plakat}, Berlin police headquarters issued a statement declaring that “[d]ie stetig zunehmende und auf den öffentlichen Strassen mehr und mehr störend hervortretende Plakatreklame für Kino- und Varietedarbietungen” prompted new government regulations on film poster art.\textsuperscript{64} Officials argued that the unchecked propagation of the film poster put both bodily safety and social respectability at risk. Eye-catching posters were accused of causing traffic hazards, while “Abbildungen von Verbrechen, Gewalttätigkeiten und sonstigen schreckenerregenden Dingen sowie sittlich anstößige Bilder” were thought to corrupt sensitive members of society.\textsuperscript{65} As a result, officials ruled that film posters would be restricted to posting in designated areas in addition to passing special censor inspections more vigorous than those generally applied to commercial posters. These special limitations, deemed irrational and unfair by many poster artists and film exhibitioners, can be attributed to the poor reputation of the film industry as a whole in early twentieth-century Germany.\textsuperscript{66}

Since its inception in the late nineteenth century, film exhibition had been associated with lower-class entertainment, fairground attractions, and traveling entertainment, and had retained a tinge of the morally suspect. The reputation of the cinema only gradually improved via a defense of cinema in public discourse and the government’s investment in developing a national cinema through the founding of the \textit{Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft} (UFA).\textsuperscript{67} Anton Kaes’s influential work on the \textit{Kinodebatte} and Sabine Hake’s history on the discourse surrounding cinema in \textit{The Cinema’s Third Machine} are the most

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{63} Kreimeier, \textit{UFA Story}, 15; and Hake, \textit{The Cinema’s Third Machine}, 5.
\item \textsuperscript{64} “the consistently swelling and increasingly disturbing and obtrusive poster advertisements for cinema and variety shows on public streets,” Translation mine. Collin, “Filmreklame und Reklamefilms,” 236.
\item \textsuperscript{65} “depictions of crime, violence or other terrifying things such as morally objectionable images as attractions,” Translation mine. Ibid., 236.
\item \textsuperscript{66} See Sachs, “Filmprüfungsstelle / Plakatverbote / Nacktheiten,” 479-81; and Eckstein, “Das Reklamepolizeirecht,” 16. Sachs’s article is of special interest as it includes writing by prominent poster artists Robert L. Leonard and Theo Matejko, featured in Chapter 4, on the censorship of their work. Eckstein writes a review of a contemporary publication on Film- und Kinorecht discussing the new rules as an attack on public freedom and against the cinema “as such.”
\item \textsuperscript{67} The \textit{Film-Kurier} defines the importance of the relationship between the government and the film industry thus: “Seit Jahren steht die Regierung auf dem Standpunkte, daß der Film das beste Mittel zur Beeinflussung der breiten Massen ist, und jeder Film, wenn es auch eine Natur- oder Industrieaufnahme ist, eine \textit{Propaganda für das Land} bedeutet, das den Film hergestellt hat.” “For years the government has taken the position that film is the best means of influencing the masses and that every film, whether a nature or industry film, creates \textit{propaganda for the country}.” Translation mine. “Der Abwehrkampf der Filmindustrie,” 1.
\end{itemize}
comprehensive examples of the scholarship in this arena. Their work reveals the anxiety aroused by the popular media and point out the then-held suspicion that film, with its constant flow of images, could prove profoundly influential on the tender psyches of the young and the uneducated masses. Often critics voiced the fear that the cinema could drive viewers to duplicate the misdeeds that often formed the plot lines in early feature films, yet others were intrigued by the potential of harnessing its suggestive powers for political and social edification.68 A subsequent push for Kinoreform attempted to control the development of the medium and worked in tandem with efforts to channel the cinema’s increasingly palpable influence toward the improvement of the masses. At the same time, however, other equally vibrant voices attempted to win over the new medium for art and to reinforce its development as a medium unfettered by aims of public education.

Safeguarding designers’ artistic freedom, the Verein der Plakatfreunde most often spoke out against conservative censorship efforts.69 However, early on they too made a notable exception in regard to film poster censorship. Sachs cuts off hyperbolic complaints such as those voiced in Der Kinematograph that the “sogenannte Schönheitspolizei” had laid down limitations in poster size and content so strict that exhibitors would be forced to give up poster advertisement all together.70 Instead, the voice of the poster friends defends the ordinance, which in his view did not suppress poster advertising “wie mancher Kinobesitzer und manche ‘Kunstanstalt’ wohl fürchten wird.”71 Rather, he explained, that “[a]lle Freunde wahrer Plakatkunst werden diese Verordnungen des Berliner Polizei-Präsidenten nur mit Freude und Genugtuung begrüssen.”72 According to the editor, the poor aesthetic of early film posters made them a real liability to the development and reputation of poster art. Indeed, as Ernst Collin argues

68 See Petersen, Zensur in Der Weimar Republik; and Stieg, “The 1926 German Law to Protect Youth against Trash and Dirt: Moral Protectionism in a Democracy,” 22-56. Laurie Marnhoefer’s dissertation on shifting norms of sexuality in Weimar Germany also gives a particularly well-researched account of how film and other prolific forms of new media were expected to have had a corrupting influence on the masses. Marnhoefer, Among Abnormals.

69 Writing in 1914, Hans Bürgner provides a description of common censorship conflicts faced by poster artists. Ultimately Bürgner maintains that censorship is necessary — but to protect poster artwork from misappropriation by unsavory characters who may over-eroticize or otherwise misuse its imagery. Bürgner, “Verbotene Plakate,” 23.

70 The ‘so-called beauty-police’ enforced size restrictions for Berlin posters at 71 x 95. Jacobsohn, “Amerikanische Filmreklame in Deutschland,” 4.

71 “as some theater owners and some ‘art institutions’ will undoubtedly fear,” Translation mine. Sachs, in Collin, “Filmreklame und Reklamefilmen,” 236.

72 “All friends of true poster art will welcome these changes with pleasure and satisfaction.” Translation mine. Ibid., 236.
in his 1916 denouncement of film poster ads, wartime film posters were not bastions of artistic innovation. Hand-drawn versions of film stills made in exchange for measly design commissions, these posters were naturalistic, emulating illustrations found in novels, and impervious to the innovations inspired by Bernhardian Sachlichkeit. Vying for attention with vehement postings for war bonds, film posters either hinted at violence and brutality or were simply uninspired, conventional portraits of well-known stars. These posters reflected the quick turn-over of wartime film productions, which Germany churned out to meet increasing viewer demands while import embargoes gave producers free-reign of the local market. Poster artists complained of having to execute their designs within an extremely restricted time frame, most often without ever having seen the films for which they made their poster designs. The negative responses to early film posters expressed in Das Plakat were thus quite reasonable; and yet they also served an important rhetorical strategy. Given the contentious reputation of the cinema, the film industry provided a convenient target for poster enthusiasts struggling to legitimize the poster in the eyes of an advertising-wary public.

Especially in its early years, the cinema’s focus on profit, mass appeal, and entertainment over aesthetic value seemed to thwart its artistic promise at every turn, epitomizing every potentially negative argument against technologically reproduced art in general. As one commentator remarked in 1920, in art “[d]ie Rücksicht auf den Geldbeutel ist den Bedürfnissen der Kulturaufgaben unbedingt unterzuordnen. Beim Film herrscht der umgekehrte Grundsatz.” As the industry steadily gained influence in the ever-expanding markets, it threatened to hijack the aesthetic trajectory of the advertising poster, particularly as spectacular advertising campaigns waged in honor of film premiers aligned the poster with a very American notion of commercial art. Indeed, German trade magazines routinely looked to the United

73 “Schlechte, miserable schlechte Plakate, bessere und gute Plakate—so ungefähr liesse sich in knapper Form der Werdegang des Kinoplakats ausdrücken.” (“Bad, miserable and terrible posters, better and good posters, bad posters again — this is how, in short form, we can articulate the development of the film poster.”) Translation mine. Collin, “Filmreklame und Reklamefilme,” 236.


76 “consideration of one’s pocketbook must be absolutely subordinate to the necessities of the cultural imperative. In film, the opposite rule reigns.” Translation mine. Brunner, “Der Film als Kulturträger,” 471.
States for models of advertising practice, often marveling at the scale and expense of American campaigns. Accordingly, in an edition of Das Plakat devoted to the film poster, Walter Schubert describes the history of German film advertising as one of importation. The U.S. was the birthplace of the cinema as well as its unique brand of sensational advertising, he argues. On the positive side, American film brought with it an unbridled energy, which the author maintains could be improved by the acculturating effect of German artisans. Yet, in his view, heavy-handed industry officials stymied what could have been an artistic flourishing of the medium in Germany. He summarizes,

Die Schwierigkeiten für den Künstler haben sich unzweifelhaft sogar noch erhöht durch die Verwildung der Kinokultur, die nach verheißungsvollen Ansätzen in platte Alltäglichkeit auszuufern und die Aufstöbernung und Nährung niederer Instinkte nachgerade planmäßig zu betreiben drohte, bis die Hüter des neuen deutschen Volksstaates sich zum Einschreiten genötigt sahen. Wie sollte dieser nach unten drängenden Schmutzbahn der Plakatkünstler einen Weg zum Licht, zur Höhe weisen? Nicht minder verhängnisvoll war für sein Schaffen die geradezu kunstfeindliche Gesinnung der verantwortlichen Stellen mancher Filmgesellschaften, die mit fanatischer Besessenheit einfach alles kühne künstlerische Wollen unterbanden und diktatorisch erklärtten, das Publikum verlage das und jenes nicht.

Schubert’s criticism of the film industry and its lack of investment in quality poster artists is reflective of over-arching complaints leveled at businesses that summarily considered profit over artistry when commissioning poster ads. Thus, the film poster served as a touchstone for the ambitions of the German advertising industry as a whole.

Many of the advertising industry’s first professionals saw — or perhaps made an attempt to depict — their task as an important cultural one that supported good business practice but did not remain enslaved to economics. As Wolf Zucker wrote on the occasion of the World Advertising Congress held in Berlin in 1929,

participants discuss issues of professional training and the protection of their interests and copyrights; they listen to addresses on the psychology, sociology, and the metaphysics of advertising, and meanwhile one completely forgets that all this is really only concerned with the

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79 “The difficulties for artists have undoubtedly increased with the proliferation [Verwildern] of cinema culture, which threatened to overflow its banks into plain everyday-ness after promising beginnings and to drive the pursuit and provocation of baser instincts more or less systematically until the guardians of the new German people’s state felt compelled to intervene. How should a poster artist redirect this downward racing track toward the light, toward the high ground? The positively degrading [kunstfeindlich] attitude of the officials of many film corporations, who prohibited every bold, artistic impulse and dictatorially declared that the public demanded this and not that, was not least disastrous for the artist’s creation.” Translation mine. Schubert, “Das deutsche Filmplakat,” 444.
best means for earning the most money. Instead it begins to seem to be a congress devoted to questions of philosophy or aesthetics.80

Advertising professionals were well aware of the wider-reaching implications of their business, and, as the industry employed many fine artists and psychologists as well as business professionals, their work often dovetailed with developments in areas of aesthetic and cultural interest. The film industry and its apparent lack of artistic self-reflection countered the impression of social responsibility aimed for by Germany’s new advertising theorists and professionals. Yet, these professionals recognized that to win the film industry to the side of aesthetic innovation would prove an unparalleled achievement for poster art. Thus, poster advocate Karl Brunner among others emphasized the poster as an opportunity for the film industry to promote its own interests, to shake off its negative reputation, and transcend the barriers of low and high art. He published this impassioned plea to that end:


Brunner asks poster artists to serve as a model for the film industry by turning away from the crude imagery that had begun to characterize both film and its advertisements. Though he clearly asserts the superiority of poster art over the low art of film, he insinuates the existence of a symbiotic relationship developing between the two industries and their visual media. As posters continued to serve as the primary means of film advertisement, it became increasingly apparent that the success of one would be contingent on the triumph of the other. In fact, this mutual dependency expressed itself not only in the practical sense of a shared interest in gaining attention and profit, but also in an aesthetic sense. As the era’s two most pervasive and public visual media, film and poster art borrowed, rejected, and assimilated


81 “One of our hopes for the future, that there may one day again be light in the darkened cinema, not in the sense of the light of surface structure but in true cultural development, depends upon poster art, which stands in the service of film. From this art, as far as it is discussed in serious artistic circles, the poster advantageously sets itself apart at all costs. Separated from the trash and kitsch, from the inner falsehoods and sensationalism embodied in film, posters could provide a salubrious, instructive influence on the entire film industry. I would like poster art to remain cognizant of this mission: to assist film in rising up into the heights of culture, never to descend to its level!” Translation mine. Brunner, “Der Film als Kulturträger,” 473.
advances in the each others’ methods throughout the period of the Weimar Republic, incontrovertibly shaping the history and development of visual communication.

Herbert Tannenbaum, one of Germany’s earliest film theorists, correspondingly identified close ties between film and poster art in a series of articles written for Das Plakat. Writing for the journal in 1914, Tannenbaum emphasized visual story-telling as that which separates the cinema from other arts. From his perspective, the theater served as a precursor for modern (feature) film. Yet, because of its silence, film produced a new type of purely visual communication:

So erscheint ein Filmgeschehnis in seiner Konzentriertheit wie der Extrakt einer dramatischen Handlung, die im Film auf die letzte knapp zusammenfassende Formel gebracht ist. Diese Zusammenfassung ergibt eine gewisse groteske Steigerung und Uebertreibung des Vorgangs im Ganzen, wie der schauspielerischen Darstellung der einzelnen Menschen. Daher trägt das Filmtstück einen primitiven, grotesken, grellen, aber in einem bestimmten Sinne monumentalen Charakter an sich.

Film expressed a wealth of information in a matter of seconds, compressing an entire story into images that were necessarily overwrought. This intense condensation, for Tannenbaum, also separated film from painting, which did not necessarily share the narrative function tying together drama and film. In this distinction, Tannenbaum sees inherent similarities between film and poster art that make both of them especially relevant to modern viewers. He explains,

Man kann nach all dem behaupten, dass der [sic] Kino seinem Wesen nach eine innere Verwandtschaft mit dem Plakat besitzt, dessen Aufgabe es auch ist, in aller Konzentriertheit mit Hilfe einer grotesken Steigerung der dargestellten Objekte ein primitives, formelhaftes, buntes Bild von der Art und der Beschaffenheit irgend eines Dinges zu geben. Kino und Plakat sind aus dem Geist unserer Zeit heraus geworden, die in ihrer Hast und Arbeitsamkeit mit kräftigen Mitteln angepackt sein will, deren Menschen am meisten und am raschesten durch den Sehsinn erfassen, und die mit Vorliebe all das annehmen, was sich knapp, formelhaft und bunt darbietet.

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82 Tannebaum was the first German academic to complete his Ph.D. with a dissertation on the cinema. Most active in the prewar period, Tannenbaum published a 36-page book on “Kino und Theater” in 1912. See Diederichs, “Der Filmtheoretiker Herbert Tannebaum,” [http://www.sozpaed.fh-dortmund.de/diederichs/texte/vorttann.htm](http://www.sozpaed.fh-dortmund.de/diederichs/texte/vorttann.htm).

83 “Thus the film-event appears in its concentrated form as the essence of the dramatic storyline that is developed into a final, succinctly summarizing formula of the film. This [visual] summation produces a certain grotesque progression and exaggeration of the whole sequence, as in the dramatic representation of individual people. Therefore, the film has something primitive, grotesque, crude, yet in a certain sense monumental about it.” Translation mine. Tannenbaum, “Kino, Plakat und Kinoplakat,” 237.

84 “After all this, one can recognize that the cinema is essentially related to the poster, which also has the task of giving, in greatest concentration and with help from a grotesque progression of a depicted object, a primitive, formulaic, colorful image of the sort and character of a thing. The cinema and the poster emerged out of the spirit of our time, which desires to be struck in her haste and business with powerful media that people comprehend most often and most quickly through sight, and which takes with a predilection everything that is succinct, formulaic, and colorful.” Translation mine. Ibid., 237.
Both the film and its posters must compress a lengthy narrative into a limited number of images and in the case of the poster into a single image, wherein the use of color helps to make a significant impact on the viewer. Tannenbaum, in Expressionist fashion, finds “primitive” and “grotesque” images to be the most compact and evocative. These images depict the essence of an object in a vibrant composition that reaches the viewer at a subconscious level quickly, intensely, like a flash of lightning.

Unlike other film theorists of his era, Tannenbaum celebrated, rather than down-played, the baser elements aroused by the new medium and encouraged poster artists to embrace this new visual dynamic. To his thinking, even the Sachplakat was too “pretentious” and “ambitious” for the general public. Poster artists would do well to try and capture film’s immediacy of conveyance and relevancy to a broad range of audience members. Accordingly, Tannenbaum railed against reformers who would mollify the jarring impact of the cinema and its poster ads, asserting,


Modern posters, Tannenbaum argued, could be improved if they would take advantage of their obvious similarity to the cinema. They should lean toward the popular and recognizable and away from the esoteric and artistic. Thus, Tannenbaum is not interested in elevating either the cinema or its posters as fine artworks or moral educators. In apparent exasperation, he exclaimed, “Als ob wir immer noch gebildeter werden wollten und als ob es einen Sinn hätte, allzugklug zu sein!” And yet, Tannenbaum did attribute a pedagogic function to the cinema. He argued that film made an exceptional teacher of the art of visual comprehension, a necessary skill that all citizens of the modern world would increasingly require. He writes of the cinema:

85 Tannenbaum’s work has been largely forgotten, perhaps because of his complete rejection of the more traditionally artistic properties of film. More work could be done to illuminate this thinker’s contribution to the discourse on early film. His articles written for Das Plakat provide a valuable, unaccounted-for resource.

86 “By no means do we want to ‚reform‘ the film poster in a bleak sense, but as we value in the cinema — despite all of its failures — its constantly innovative, adventurous, unmediated, instinctual, unconsciously growing essential element and wish to know it more purely, more assuredly emphasized, we wish the same for the poster in general. But primarily we wish it for the film poster, this instinctiveness of being and growth.” Translation mine. Ibid., 452.

87 “As if we always wanted to be more educated and as if it made sense being ‘all-to-clever,”’ Translation mine. Tannenbaum, “Kino, Plakat, und Kinoplakat,” 451.
Seine Ausdrucksmittel sind lediglich für die Augen der Zuschauer berechnet; was der Film nicht sichtbar machen kann, ist ihm verschlossen. So trägt er sein großes Teil mit dazu bei, die Menschen sehen zu lernen, eine Fähigkeit, die bekanntermaßen nicht so allgemein verbreitet ist, wie man oft annehmen möchte. Die Notwendigkeit, bildlich-optische Vorgänge sehr rasch erfassen zu müssen, verschafft im Laufe der Jahre dem Sehsinn der Menschen eine Ausbildung, die sie sonst nie erhalten hätten, und die zweifellos jeder anderen Wirkungsmöglichkeit, die sich an die Augen wendet, den Boden ebnet. Das Betrachten des lebenden Bildes auf der Leinwand ist nämlich ein wesentlich anderer Vorgang, als die visuelle Erfassung der wirklichen Welt.  

Though they communicated at a deeply intuitive level, to read the images of film and poster was a skill that had to be learned through habit and exposure. Here Tannenbaum’s writing resonates with other more-recognized early film theorists’ who saw in film the possibility of developing a kind of visual lingua franca with the potential to transform the very structure of society.

American poet Vachel Lindsay’s *The Art of the Moving Picture*, first published in 1915, promoted the idea that the “photoplay” would help to advance a system of universally legible hieroglyphic that might one day be used to facilitate understanding among people at all levels of society and in all parts of the world. With a corresponding utopian vision, Béla Balázs argued that visual language as ushered in by the cinema would do away with linguistic concepts: “Der Mensch der visuellen Kultur ersetzt mit seinen Gebärdén nicht Worte wie etwa die Taubstummen mit ihrer Zeichensprache. Er denkt keine Worte, deren Silben er mit Morsezeichen in die Luft schreibt,” he writes. Instead, visual culture would allow humanity to express, unmediated, its spirit, *geist*, “von einer Schicht der Seele.”

Modern poster critics often spoke about advertising media in similar terms as a mode of communication that subsisted in forming connections at an underlying, universal level. Behne

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88 “Above all else — and far above its literary and dramatic elements — the cinema is an optical instrument. Its expressive means are solely calculated for the eye; what the film cannot make visible is unattainable. Thus film carries it in large part the ability to teach its audiences to see, an ability that is not as widespread as one would like to think. The necessity of comprehending image-optical events very quickly has supplied people with an education in visual sense [Sehsinn] in the course of years, that they would never have been able to achieve alone, and that undoubtedly levels the ground for every other medium that engages the eye. The observation of the living image on the screen is a fundamentally different process from the visual comprehension the real world.” Translation mine. Ibid., 453-4.

89 Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, 22.

90 Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch*, 16. “For the man of visual culture is not like a deaf mute who replaces words with sign language. He does not think in words whose syllables he inscribes in the air with the dots and dashes of the Morse code.” Translation by Livingstone, Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, 9.


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characteristically argued that the appropriateness of the Expressionist style for poster art hinged on its arousal of the “seelische Ursprünglichkeit” of humanity. Even Jan Tschichold, who opposed the idea that typographic styles held their value through time, theorized a type of design that implied its own version of universality. Tschichold maintained that purely technologized design would appeal to modern human logic shared by all citizens of the early twentieth century. On the other hand, Tschichold resolutely spurned any touch of the artistic expression of the individual. His writing is evidence of diverging consensus as to whether or not a “good” poster was meant to strive for artistic merit in the traditional sense. Only the importance of condensed, efficient design concepts remained paramount in theories of design efficacy as critics became more interested in the anti-ornamental forms of Constructivism and Neue Sachlichkeit. As one professional writes for Gebrauchsgraphik, a poster must be a “snap shot,” striking and dramatic — it could not assume a willing and captive readership as could a newspaper advertisement operating through a “time exposure.” As a result, poster artists continually sought out the most direct means of conveyance, and yet posters, like film images, are often fraught with layer upon layer of intrinsic associations that their impression of immediacy only served to conceal. Our task is to unpack these images for the cultural narratives that they intentionally or inadvertently imply.

0.3 KARL MICHEL'S APOKALYPTISCHE REITER UND PEST-HEILUNG


— Jean-Louis Sponsel, Das Moderne Plakat

95 “In its new form, the poster is perhaps the most powerful agent for instilling in the people the sensitivity to and need for art. In any case, the modern artistic poster has made artistic matters a topic of discussion among all classes.” Translation by Chapman, Expressionism Multiplied, 43.
Around 1920, the once-antagonistic relationship between poster enthusiasts and film industry professionals began to shift as the film industry gained momentum. Posters proliferated as the primary vehicle through which Germany’s new movie palaces could combat the dubious reputation of the cinema and catch the interest of an expanding middle- and upper-class audience. In tag-lines, posters espoused the relationship between new longer-length feature films and the classics of literature, dance, and the theater from which they drew inspiration. Alongside the portraits of well-known stars, posters began to give prominent billing to film directors, helping to establish the new genre of Autorenfilme. These changes in the content of film posters were accompanied by quality designs, which became critical to the production of artistic legitimacy. Exhibitors hired artists whose work evoked established visual arts with new cinema palaces like the Marmorhaus in Berlin, going to great lengths to develop a visual identity via poster advertisements and complementary interior design. Increasingly, successful film production companies, most notably UFA, promoted advertising posters alongside film premiers. In recognition of shared aesthetic and commercial interests, the film industry encouraged audiences to view posters as visual art works in their own right.

Karl Michel’s poster for the 1926 premier of F. W. Murnau’s Faust: Eine deutsche Volkssage provides a case in point (Fig. 0.6). The poster, titled Apokalyptische Reiter und Pest-Heilung, (Apocalyptic Riders and Healing from the Plague) was the winner of a competition promoted through the Bund deutscher Gebrauchsgraphiker and the Reichs-Wirtschaftsverbandes bildender Künstler, two of the most influential graphic design organizations in Germany. A jury selected Michel’s poster from a group of 359 entries and awarded the design a prize of 2000 Reichsmark. Such competitions served an important function among poster artists. They operated as a way of singling out and encouraging principles of good design as determined by a select group of artists and critics, a unique opportunity in an industry in which the work was routinely vetted solely by business people with varying degrees of aesthetic competence. The results of such contests were routinely the subject of design trade periodicals and whole articles were

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96 See Tannenbaum’s 1914 article, “Kino, Plakat und Kinoplakat,” Das Plakat for an explanation of how film exhibition spaces impacted the poster advertisements and vice versa.
often devoted to winners. Michel had, for instance, already been featured in *Das Plakat* for executing the winning design for a new postage stamp in 1920. UFA took advantage of this interest in design by incorporating the *Faust* poster competition into its marketing campaign. The results of the competition were reported in the *Lichtbild-Bühne* and the contest finalists were exhibited in the lobby of the grand UFA Palast am Zoo in the days leading up to the film premier at the same venue. UFA had already experimented with hosting events alongside the exhibit of its films — incorporating a fashion show, for instance, into the screening of a film on the garment industry.

Turning the lobby into an art gallery with posters on exhibition implied the aesthetic ambitions of the film, the elevation of reproducible artworks into legitimate objects of reverence, and recognition of both film and poster art as cultural objects worthy of sustained attention.

Michel’s poster accordingly communicates the high-culture aspirations of both film and poster art. In Michel’s characteristic “holzschnittartig” (woodcut-like) style, the poster recalls Germany’s long tradition of masterful print-making. Bold outlines reminiscent of Early Modern book illustrations bring Michel’s compressed depiction of the opening sequences of the film into sharp relief. Therein three apocalyptic riders, War, Pestilence, and Hunger, cascade above a crowd of medieval figures pressing toward the bearded Dr. Faustus as he attempts to heal a skeletal patient. The horsemen evoke Albrecht Dürer’s famous fifteenth-century woodcut depicting Revelation 6:1-8, an internationally recognized emblem of German artistry. Like Dürer, Michel introduces movement into the two-dimensional plane by positioning his riders at a strong diagonal.

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100 “Amerikanische Reklamemethoden in Berlin,” 20.

101 Osborn, “Karl Michel,” 299.
However, his simplification of the scene within a frame of bold lines more closely resembles the less-sophisticated drawings that proliferated in early popular print forms, like the chapbooks through which the Faust legend first circulated, than they do Dürer’s masterpiece. With some derision, Helmut Schanze recently called Michel’s style a form of “artificial archaism,” but the distilled forms of Michel’s poster align him with modern, Expressionist artists who had revived woodblock printing in the early decades of the twentieth century. As in the Expressionists’ experiments, Michel’s flat, jagged illustration deemphasizes painterly subtleties, highlighting instead the flatness of the woodblock, or in Michel’s case, the lithographic stone. In addition to celebrating the properties of the medium, the Expressionists had also underscored what they perceived to be its raw, spiritually relevatory quality. This otherworldliness proved a good fit for the demonic elements of Michel’s design.

The poster strives toward a mystical, pseudo-religious dynamism, imbuing the film with a metaphysical energy that precedes the grandiose setting of the theater and the flickering streams of light that set off the opening credits. The poster owes this supernatural effect in part to Michel’s unconventional use of color. The flat primaries are neither merely illustrative like many lesser-quality posters of its time period, nor simplified like those of the Sachplakat color-blocks. Partitioned blue, red, yellow, and black emphasize the two-dimensionality of the poster space, but are dispersed so that they give the impression of greater color variation and the impression of intricacy. This vibrancy set the poster apart from the black and white imagery of film and likewise from its art historical precursors. Yet, the design seems to have had a traditional referent: Michel’s vivid hues glow as would a stained glass window illuminated with an otherworldly light. As if emphasizing this association, one newspaper framed Michel’s design between two candles with the cast and crew appearing beneath it on what hangs like a sacred tapestry (Fig. 0.7). These extra elements compensate

FIGURE 0.7 Advertisement for Faust. Film-Echo (October 18, 1926).

for what is lost in the black and white rendering of the image. The spiritual tenor of the design in both versions reinforces the mystical qualities of the Expressionist stylizations, elevating the poster from a profit-driven kitsch painting to a conveyor of religious truth.

In its decorative details, the poster also hints at the importance of the literary tradition from which the film drew its content. The ornate lettering of the title evokes the ancient illuminated manuscripts in which the earliest medieval literary and religious texts were preserved. The allusion reinforces the notion of *Faust* as a cultural treasure and artistic masterpiece. Amid the maelstrom of color and movement, the eye is pulled to the crisp contrast between black and white at the center of the poster, providing the necessary resting point for the gaze. Though the surfeit of ornamentation may interfere with the title’s legibility, breaking a tenet of good poster design, Michel could rely on the audience’s familiarity with the basic blackletter typeface undergirding the style of the lettering, as well as the popularity of the Faust legend to help his viewers decipher the title. Not only had Goethe’s masterful drama secured the legend a place within the national literary treasury, it had been reinterpreted in numerous plays, artworks, and even many early silent films. Here, by asking a bit more of its viewer upfront, the poster suggests its own significance within this tradition and by association that of Murnau’s film. At the same time, the title amounts to a visual game, engaging the mind in a play of discernment that produces a pleasurable moment of recognition. Thus a kind of levity emanates from the poster, evincing the satirical edge that, according to one commentator, modernized Michel’s historicist style.  

Already, these elements give us a sense of the way in which Michel’s design elicits a play between popular and fine art conventions. Michel presses viewers to increase the *duration* of their gaze by including more information and allusion than can be quickly apprehended by the moving targets that make up his audience. By reprinting the poster in newspapers and featuring it in the opening gallery exhibition, marketers accordingly encouraged audiences to give the poster a lengthy look. Before they sat down to view the film, viewers were already thus cued by the poster to adopt a more traditional method of visual art reception. Correspondingly, what the poster lacks in immediate clarity, it aims to make up for in overall impression and in subtle association. In spending a few extra moments to decipher the ornamental

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script, viewers gained access to other, less-palpable assertions. The double F alludes to the doubling of the Faust character as both an aging alchemist and a young lover in the first and second half of the film, while the cross at the end of the final T reiterates the religious elements and mythological symbolism of the image. In this visual context the Ufa and Parufamet logos from the right and left of the title become magical icons as well, not dissimilar to the occult hieroglyphs with which Faust conjures Mephisto and proceeds to make his famous pact: to trade his soul for super-human power and knowledge. The magic of the cinema, the poster seems to suggest, will likewise bring to life the great legend of the past.

Critics, however, found Murnau’s compilation of various versions of the legend and use of horror and melodramatic conventions unsophisticated and haphazard. The discrepancy between early reviews of the film and the eventual praise that Murnau achieved for it has been attributed to an initial preoccupation with the story and its source materials. As one reviewer remarked in Film-Echo “wenn auch die Zahl derer, die den filmischen Faust sehen, größer sein wird wie das Häuflein derjenigen, die die Werke der klassischen Schriftsteller lesen, so bleibt doch für den, der sich kritisch mit dem Film beschäftigt, immer das große Vorbild, die starke Erinnerung an unauslöschliche Eindrücke aus Büchern und vom Theater.” Goethe’s Faust remained so strongly engraved on the minds of informed viewers, that no amount of reinvention could compete with its impact, according to this commentator. Inadvertently, in addressing critics’ reactions to the film, he also points toward a probable marketing problem. In its promotional materials, UFA perhaps too vividly emphasized the literary tradition of the legend to advertise for Murnau’s distinctly visual reinterpretation. Lotte Eisner would identify Faust as “the large-scale deployment of all the artifice of the cinema, by a man who knows every detail of his craft,” but upon its release viewers were swayed to compare the film with the literary work. The filmmakers muddied viewer expectations for the film when they commissioned Gerhardt Hauptmann to compose the intertitles, for instance. Later it was agreed that the dramatist’s rhyming couplets took too long to read and disrupted

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105 Jones, “Devils in the Detail,” 220.
106 “Although the number of those that see the Faust film will be greater than the small assemblage of those that read the work of the classical writers, the strong remembrance of the ineradicable impression from books and the theater remains the great standard for those who concern themselves critically with the film.” Translation mine. “Der Film von Doktor Faust,” 1.
107 Eisner, The Haunted Screen, 100.
the flow of images, and they were ultimately replaced by Hans Kyser’s shortened intertitles before the premier. Yet, Hauptmann’s verse survived in a publication made to commemorate the film’s release. In turn, viewers, not unexpectedly, overlooked Murnau’s stunning imagery in their assessment of the plot.

Michel’s poster, by subordinating text to ornamentation, provided a better representation of the media hierarchy at work in the film. His invocation of the history of graphic arts in Germany suggests the importance of visual story-telling for this version of the legend. The script that forms the center field of the poster gives way to the powerful imagery vibrating along the top and bottom of the frame. The poster thereby exemplifies what one commentator called Michel’s “angeborene Fähigkeit, Flächen zu beherrschen, durch liebenswürdiges ornamentales Spiel zu beleben, sie in bildmäßige Gestaltung aufzulösen und doch in ihrem flächigen Charakter zu erhalten, in strenger Fassung eine Zeichnung von linien-haftiger Bestimmtheit anzuordnen.”

In the Faust poster, strong lines provide a rhythmic thrust that guide the eye in a circular journey around the composition. In this respect the design endeavors to catch viewer interest like a suspenseful narrative asking to be read through to its summation. The accent mark above the u and the ligature above the s work in tandem with the upward curve of the text to impel the eye toward the four horsemen above it. The gaze is further guided from the ascension of the lettered scroll into the upper-right hand corner of the poster and along the arrow-like outstretched bodies of the demonic horsemen flying across its top. Guided by the propulsion of the horses’ breath, the eye travels down to the bottom portion of the composition where a crowded corner tapers into the rising fog around Faust’s head and hands before lifting off above his skeletal patient. Thus, the illustration swirls around the text like a maelstrom of color and movement issued from the script, ultimately subsuming the text within its vibrancy and movement.

108 "Innate ability to control flat surfaces, to animate them through genial ornamental play, to dissolve them in picturesque composition and yet to preserve their flat character, to organize a drawing of linear certainty in a strict form." Translation mine. Osborn, “Karl Michel,” 300.

109 This strategy was well-known to UFA marketing director Rudi Feld who organized immense, narrative light shows on the front of theaters to advertise for premieres. His belief was that viewers, once their curiosity was peaked by a narrative display, would dedicate to watching the spectacle through to its completion. Ward, Weimar Surfaces, 169.

110 The narrative progression of the eye through the design was a common attribute of poster layout. Known as the Blickbewegungslinien, these lines guided the wandering gaze toward pertinent information. Cowan, “Taking it to the Street,” 474.
By thus featuring a lively progression from text to image, Michel's poster prefigures what Matt Erlin has identified as the opposition between — and eventual unification of — literary tradition and mass visual entertainment encoded in Murnau’s treatment of the story. Erlin tracks competing allusions to *Faust*'s textual tradition against self-reflexive cinematic illusions in the film to argue that Murnau’s *Faust* ultimately exemplifies the “search for a synthesis between mass appeal and artistic self-realization, between aesthetics, technology, and the market.” In this respect Schanze corroborates Erlin’s assertion that Murnau’s film reveals “cinematic magic [that] surpasses the magic images of the Gutenberg age, the images of the printed book.” Murnau’s art historical background, the literary tradition, and the technological possibilities of the cinema combine to produce the ultimate expression of the magical elements of the Faust myth. Accordingly, Michel’s award-winning poster hints at the pleasure to be had from watching this transition toward the consummation of multiple media.

Like the film, the poster presents what Hauptmann called in his preface to the film text: “Ein Bildersturm, ein Wirbelwind, / Drin Dämonen und Geister zu Hause sind” Even the reference to a “whirlwind,” which Schanze notes was frequently employed as a metaphor for the cinema, seems to reverberate in the circular motion of Michel’s design. The poster, like the cinema itself, is nearly overwhelming in its visual intensity — a storm of images in which the viewer is caught. In Michel’s poster the vibrancy of the crowd in the bottom left portion of the plane approximates the cinematic vigor of the masses as depicted by Murnau within the film. In this congested corner, we see the reflection of the wave-like surge of extras who served as referents to the audiences filling theater seats. The two hooded figures in Michel’s poster further identify this crowd as one of both spectatorship and participation.

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113 Ibid., 227.

114 Ibid., 227.

115 This common conceit of the crowd as self-reflexive element surfaces in many examples of silent cinema; for example, King Vidor’s famous film *The Crowd,* released two years after *Faust.* Erlin points out that in Murnau’s film the masses are fittingly enthralled with the visual, alluding to the real-world fascination with the cinema among the public, “Tradition as Intellectual Montage,” 162.
Their prominent eyes stand out against the empty white space of their cloaks and point along the line of twisting smoke that floats above the heads of Faust and his patient. This rising vapor, so often synonymous with magic and religious rites, gives a visual expression to the wonders that the cinema manages to invoke.\(^{116}\) Murnau’s film is filled with smoke and diffuse mists that accompany major shifts in reality—transitions from past to present, between heaven and earth—they saturate the initial sequences of *Faust* and remain guiding signifiers throughout. The smoke as depicted in Michel’s poster also has a more general historical referent in the incense burners that were thought to help eradicate the plague and were often used in funeral rites. Thus, spectacular, religious, and scientific themes are all evoked via the pointed gaze of these anonymous hooded spectators. Their gaze guides the viewer’s eye along the ribbons of smoke as they curl over Faust’s head and upturned palms. These hands, as well as the others that appear as a repeated motif among the members of the crowd, (the woman in blue and the young child below her as well as Faust’s patient) recall the distorted appendages in Expressionist paintings, evoking the helplessness of inner torment and physical breakdown that had become far-reaching in the postwar period.\(^{117}\) Similarly, Murnau has his protagonist envision a sea of arms reaching upward in supplication while considering the impending pact with Mephisto. This scene in the poster (as well as in the film) underscored the fragility of life for audiences who mourned casualties of both war and disease.\(^ {118}\)

As the commentator for the *Lichtbild-Bühne* remarked, a viewer passing by quickly on the street would most likely fail to capture all of these inferences, and yet the poster managed nonetheless to provide a fitting representation of the experience of viewing the film.\(^ {119}\) Michel’s careful control of circular and diagonal patterning makes its own significant impression of supernatural, Expressionistic play with

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\(^{116}\) Schanze draws a connection between Goethe’s descriptions of smoke and fire in *Faust* as a precursor to Murnau’s animation of the same effect; “On Murnau’s *Faust,*” 231. Borrowing from the pyrotechnics of the theater, the early cinema of attractions made frequent use of smoke and fire in both its exhibition and visual devices. Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment,” 114-33. Take for instance the orbs of vapor that so often accompany Molières cinematic tricks.

\(^{117}\) Stahl-Arpke’s poster also uses this motif. A vivid example from the work of E. L. Kirchner is his *Self Portrait as a Soldier* (1915). Painted after being dismissed from active duty due to mental breakdown, the work depicts Kirchner with one hand cut off at the wrist, the other crumpled and twisted below an unfinished painting.

\(^{118}\) Erlin, “Tradition as Intellectual Montage,” 160.

historically grounded styles and figures. Even when treated with only a glance, Michel’s poster tugs at a viewer’s preconceived associations with its imagery. Thus, Michel’s poster aims to satisfy two types of spectators: those that would see the poster in a flash on the public street, who may comprehend only the revised historicist style, cleverly ornamented title, and recognizable horsemen in an exciting and dynamic setting, and those that would invest in a more sustained look at the poster’s elements, forming questions and drawing out the many allusions that Michel’s composition offers. In this sense, Michel’s poster attempts to “have it both ways” satisfying the requirements of both art and advertisement.

0.4 INTERMEDIATE REPETITION AND VISUAL PLEASURE

“Our advertising must make a deep imprint on the wax surface [of the mind . . . ] The public rushing by can only be chained to us if we succeed in projecting the . . . material [of the film] onto the outside world.”

— Rudi Feld, marketing director for UFA

The allusions in Michel’s design become even more potent with a viewing of Murnau’s film. Like many posters from this period, by reinterpreting a scene that can easily be identified during the movie Michel’s poster impresses a pattern of repetition and recognition on the minds of audiences. Imagine it: we would take our seats in the darkened film palace having paraded past Michel’s design in the foyer, and in the opening moments of the film we would watch transfixed as the grey ghosts of hunger, pestilence, and death flashed from the pale screen in front of us. Suddenly, before our mind’s eye Michel’s vivid illustration would splice itself between the flicker of photographs, seeming to signal that we had arrived in the appropriate place at the perfect time. We would recognize our own effortless accumulation of insight, feeling that we had been given a key to unlock the secrets of the moving image, a close-up of a smoking gun that allows us to solve the case moments before the detective pieces together the criminal’s trail. Upon exiting the theater, we would turn at the threshold to the street and see the posters once more. The enigmatic figures at the bottom of the frame now recognizable as they had not been previously — we are invited to reconsider the poster, to reinvest Michel’s design with our impressions of the film. In this

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manner, Michel's poster could mitigate impressions made by the film, reasserting its own messages, and asking us to reevaluate what we have seen. Quickly and almost unconsciously, the poster produces a play between media that blossoms into contemplation otherwise denied by the fleeting experience of film exhibition.

Advertisers were well aware of the power that such patterns of recognition held for their audiences.\(^{121}\) Silent film and advertising theorist Hugo Münsterberg, for instance, insisted that:

> the pleasure in mere recognition readily attaches itself to the recognized object. The customer who has the choice among various makes and brands in the store may not have any idea how far one is superior to another, but the mere fact that one among them bears a name which has repeatedly approached his consciousness before through advertisements is sufficient to arouse a certain warm feeling of acquaintance, and by a transposition of feeling this pleasurable tone accentuates the attractiveness of that make and leads to its selection. This indirect help through the memory-value is economically no less important than the direct service.\(^{122}\)

Münsterberg found that consumers were attracted to that which they recognized and that the mere identification of that thing produced a pleasure that became a nearly indispensable aspect of consumer satisfaction. The visual advertisement engages us in a mental game that asks us to remember, recall, and react based on associations forged within the design.

Recognizing the strength of such mental associations, Benjamin once described the acute personal impact made on him by an advertisement for Bullrich salt. He writes,

> Many years ago, on the streetcar, I saw a poster that, if things had their due in this world, would have found its admirers, historians, exegetes and copyists just as surely as any great poem or painting. And, in fact, it was both at the same time. As is sometimes the case with very deep, unexpected impressions, however, the shock was too violent: the impression, if I may say so, struck with such force that it broke through the bottom of my consciousness and for years lay unrecoverable somewhere in the darkness . . . [Later] I stood with my two beautiful companions in front of a miserable cafe, whose window display was enlivened by an arrangement of signboards. On one of these was the legend ‘Bullrich Salt,’ It contained nothing else besides the words; but around these written characters there was suddenly and effortlessly configured that desert landscape of the poster. I had it once more . . . Was not the preestablished harmony of Leibniz mere child’s play compared to this tightly orchestrated predestination in the desert? And didn’t that poster furnish an image for things that no one in this mortal life has yet experienced? An image of the everyday in Utopia? (173-4).

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\(^{121}\) See Hall, "Open your Eyes," 277-96.

\(^{122}\) Münsterberg, *Psychology and Industrial Efficiency*, [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15154/15154-h/15154-h.htm#XX](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15154/15154-h/15154-h.htm#XX).
According to his description, the Bulrich poster made profound assertions about destiny, a prearranged cosmos, the propensity for Utopia not only through its design (that of a cart spilling salt to spell out the name Bulrich), but through its ability to imbed itself within the viewer’s unconscious, resurfacing when bidden.\textsuperscript{123} For Benjamin, this mental process suggests an underlying structure and formula to the universe; hence the “warm feeling,” to use Münsterberg’s words, we receive from experiencing the recollection of the image.

Indeed, early filmmakers have long been aware of this particular kind of satisfaction as it finds its expression in the frequent citation of art historical masterpieces in many examples of early cinema. Take for instance, Murnau’s own visual references to Rembrandt and Botticelli in \textit{Faust}.\textsuperscript{124} The joy that a viewer takes, whether explicit or not, in recognizing this familiar imagery can have a significant effect on how he or she understands a film. In fact, most scholars would agree that cinematic language relies heavily on repetition and citation to construct meaning. For instance, the reoccurrence of visual motifs within a film often help to draw parallels and comparisons on a diegetic level. Murnau gives us an example of this when he produces a superimposition of Gretchen’s happy childhood over a later sequence of the heroine as she faces execution. If on a para-textual as well as a diegetic level the repetition of certain images serves an important function of meaning-making and cognitive pleasure in film, certainly this pleasure of recognition can be structured around the interplay between poster and film as well. The poster that makes a strong impression on the viewer countless times before he or she sets foot in the theater re-evokes the film for the

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\textsuperscript{123} See Buse, et. al, \textit{Benjamin’s Arcades}, 115. The authors note Benjamin’s interest in overcoming the distance between referent and thing, which often came to play in advertisements like this one where text and object were essentially depicted as being one and the same.

\textsuperscript{124} Eisner, \textit{Haunted Screen}, 286-9.
spectator who has exited back onto the street. Thus, the poster image becomes a visual repository in which a variety of impressions made by the film can be housed.\textsuperscript{125}

At first glance the reigning assertion of Michel’s \textit{Faust} poster matches the apocalyptic tone of the film’s first hour. The melee of pigment and circular motion gives visual representation to a sense of metaphysical destruction. Yet, it also evokes the final sequence of the film in which Faust is saved through the power of “Liebe,” which appears as light-infused text surrounded by plumes of smoke and rays of light in the heavens (Fig. 0.8). This one word immediately overpowers Mephisto and erases the Faustian pact. As Erlin has argued, this cumulative shot near the close of the film “features the word as dynamic image, a glowing icon expanding against a black backdrop, clearly intended to transcend its merely referential function.”\textsuperscript{126} The animated text represents the triumph of the cinema as combinator of text and image as much as it does the power of heaven over the devil. With its swirl of detail around the bold “Faust,” the poster offers a kind of graphic match to Murnau’s powerful symbol. In this respect, the poster manages to evoke both the turbulence of the end of days and the possibility of salvation.

In both the poster and film, the combination of media, word and image, movement and stillness, amounts to a moment of spiritual transformation. Yet, the question remains as to whether the magic that overrides the impression is dark, demonic magic as pictured in the poster or light, like the heavenly magic of love as presented in the film. The censure of the ending from critics, who saw it as pandering to the masses and following hollow conventions of the “happy ending” in Hollywood films, seems to suggest that the dark material of the poster weighed out more heavily for these more erudite viewers.\textsuperscript{127} However, as with all poster studies, we can only guess at the interpretations and impressions that posters achieved in their audiences. Already in his early scientific examinations of the effects of advertising, Münsterberg declared that viewer interest and retention of advertisements diverged wildly to account for individuals’ own backgrounds and preferences.\textsuperscript{128} However, we can see that the \textit{Faust} poster at the very least had

\textsuperscript{125}Mahlberg writes for \textit{Das Plakat} that the film poster must provide a ‘key’ to the film — an image that contains the whole film within itself and that can express it clearly, “Zur Film-Reklame: Buntplakate und Klischeeplakate,” 172.

\textsuperscript{126}Erlin, “Tradition as Intellectual Montage,” 169.

\textsuperscript{127}Erlin, “Tradition as Intellectual Montage,” 169.

\textsuperscript{128}Munsterberg, \textit{Psychology and Industrial Efficiency}, \url{http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15154/15154-h/15154-h.htm#XX}. 
the potential to influence viewer relationships with the content of the film and perhaps prompted them to consider more carefully its use of media. The poster provides an intriguing reassertion of the central conflicts of the film — a teetering between opposing forces of salvation and destruction as well as between image and text. In this respect the poster is representative of Weimar film posters that advance certain plot themes by exploiting the dissonance between the poster’s inherent stillness and the cinema’s vibrant dynamism.

Michel’s brilliant colors and rhythmic lines conjure up the breath-taking speed and unparalleled visual story-telling of cinematic technology, standing as a reminder of the influence of moving-image technology on other visual arts. Its content, on the other hand, points toward the cinema’s incorporation of existing media at a time when critics were conversely invested in reestablishing media boundaries. Rudolf Arnheim, for instance, defended the artistic merit of film by outlining the expressive potential of its images in regard to composition, lighting, and editing.\textsuperscript{129} His staunch rejection of additions of color, sound, or music to the pure images of the silent film bespoke a broader tendency to distill from the medium its most autonomous properties, as did Balázs’s conviction that film was a “fundamentally new revelation of humanity.”\textsuperscript{130} Balázs outlined those elements that distinguished film from the arts that preceded it, which, he argued, endowed the medium with Utopian potential. Through the cinema, he hypothesized, humanity could formulate an immediately comprehensible, inherently democratic form of communication. These theorists helped to advance the recognition of film as an art form, but by defining the aesthetic value of film through its medium-specific elements, they upheld the notion that hybridity was synonymous with low art, a concept that has continued to shape academic study of art history, film, and literature, into the present day.\textsuperscript{131}

\textsuperscript{129} Arnheim, \textit{Film als Kunst}.

\textsuperscript{130} Balázs, \textit{Early Film Theory}, 5.

\textsuperscript{131} The enduring ideal of \textit{Gesamtkunstwerk} offers an obvious counter-point to the denigration of media hybridity. Expressionism may have been the last movement to embrace this notion as a distinct possibility. As photography “freed” painting from its need to represent reality, in Bazin’s terms, specific media attributes became more intriguing to artists and art critics alike, bringing about a loss of interest in creating a total artwork. At the same time, the notion resurfaces again in Bazin’s “Myth of Total Cinema.”
Since the 1990s, scholarly inquiry in inter-media analysis has worked to challenge the segregation of academic discourses along the lines of media specificity.\textsuperscript{132} This direction was first forged when W. J. T. Mitchell announced the “Pictorial Turn” and argued that images communicate in ways that often resist easy categorization within a script/semblance binary.\textsuperscript{133} Yet, no matter how often scholars attempt to delve into the diverse, inter-medial aspects of modern communication, the traditional divisions of academic study remain a barrier, particularly since the arrival of the digital age has reconfigured how we think about media communication once more, giving birth to new anxieties and requiring new categories. In this setting it is as necessary to reexamine the history of contemporary media and their specific properties as it is to mine the space of media overlap that exists (and historically has existed) in all forms of visual communication. In fact, the communicative means of various media are often so deeply engrained in our viewing habits that they are revealed only in moments of inter-medial interaction. In their collection of essays on film and photography, for instance, Karen Beckman and Jean Ma point out that the provocative friction between media yields a critical component of image meaning. They write that “the hesitation between stasis and motion actually produces an interval in which rigorous thinking can emerge.”\textsuperscript{134} These creative “intervals” open up images that might otherwise appear self-contained and straightforward. They break through the apparent “effortlessness” of the most effective designs.\textsuperscript{135} By turning our attention to the productive correlations between poster stasis and film movement, we can begin to identify hidden seams in the cultural assumptions that bind the two together.

An astute observer of the habits of perception and visual communication, Arnheim had already intuited the revelatory prospects for juxtapositions of still and moving imagery in 1932 when he wrote:

\textsuperscript{132} There really are a vast number of volumes which fall into this category; a few examples that illustrate the scope of this field are: Jonathon Smith’s \textit{Charles Darwin and Victorian Visual Culture} (2006), Allison Mary Levy’s \textit{Widowhood and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe} (2003), Jo Ann Morgan’s \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin as Visual Culture} (2007), Barbie Zelizer’s \textit{Visual Culture and the Holocaust} (2001), and Claudia Lazzaro and Roger J. Crum’s \textit{Donatello Among the Blackshirts: History and Modernity in the Visual Culture of Fascist Italy} (2005).

\textsuperscript{133} Mitchell, \textit{Picture Theory}.

\textsuperscript{134} Beckman and Ma, “Introduction,” 5.

\textsuperscript{135} As Johanna Drucker and Emily McVarish state in their history of graphic design, the appearance of “effortlessness” in design is often the sign of the highest degree of complexity, in that it incorporates a plethora of conventions so deeply held that they are beyond recognition. Drucker and McVarish, \textit{Graphic Design History}, xxix.
Das stillstehende Bild mitten im laufenden Film ergibt eine sehr merkwürdige Wirkung und zwar weil der Zeitablauf, der in den bewegten Filmszenen vorhanden ist, nun auch auf die dazwischenmontierte Standbildszene übertragen wird, so daß diese als ein unheimliches, anhaltendes Erstarren wirkt. Und so wie die Zeit übertragen wird, so wird auch die Starre sozusagen als Bewegung gewertet, nämlich als Bewegungsstillstand. Während eine einzelne Photographie fast niemals den Eindruck der Starrheit macht, weil man sie nämlich nicht bewegungsmäßig und die Zeit, in der man sie betrachtet, nicht als Zeitablauf im Sinne des auf dem Bilde gezeigten Vorgangs ansieht, wirkt eine in einen Film eingeschaltete Standphotographie wie Gottes Spruch über Lots Weib.\footnote{Arnheim, \textit{Film als Kunst}, 139-40. “A still photograph inserted in the middle of a moving film gives a very curious sensation; chiefly because the time character of the moving shots is carried over to the still picture, which therefore looks uncannily petrified. An ordinary photograph hardly ever gives an impression of rigid standstill because the dimension of motion is not applied to it, and the time spent looking at it is not considered as being the time that passes while the event shown in the picture takes place. But a still photograph cut into a film acts like the curse on Lot’s wife.” Arnheim, “Film as Art,” 118.}

For Arnheim, the unsettling quality of the photographic still image is not fully comprehensible unless viewed in the context of the cinema’s moving image technology. Ubiquity mutes the uncanny elements of photography, until the still photograph interrupts the flow of time in the cinema and modifies our perceptions of both media, casting a cold light on the properties of both. Similarly, much more recent developments in film and image technology can provide a revelatory lens through which to gain new perspectives on the early years of the cinema.

According to Laura Mulvey, our new-found ability to pause images at will with digital and video technology offers viewers a reminder of the basis of film in the photograph, allowing the parallel reality of photograph to resurface.\footnote{Mulvey, \textit{Death 24 x a Second}, 67.} For Mulvey, the stilled movie image offers spectators opportunities to interact with the film in new ways. Namely, she says, it allows viewers to become “possessive” and/or “pensive” spectators. By stilling the film image, the possessive spectator expresses the desire to hold onto particular moments or elements of a favorite film. As Mulvey rightly notes, this compulsion has been an enduring aspect of film-viewership that found its earlier iterations in the dissemination and collection of film memorabilia.\footnote{Ibid., 161.} In the many examples of star depictions in film posters, for instance, the portrait raised the actor to the level of a visual icon.\footnote{Ibid., 161.} Posters such as Michel’s \textit{Faust} that depicted scenes from the film allowed spectators to extend the duration of the film, to grasp moments from the viewing before
they receded irretrievably into the past. Correspondingly, Michel's design was also circulated in a premier invitation imprinted on thick, soft paper that could be held in the hand or tucked in a drawer.

As the poster freed the cinema from its confines in the exhibition space and put it into the hands and minds of spectators, it also opened the film to ongoing deliberation. In this respect, the film poster also indulged Mulvey's “pensive spectator.” Today, pausing a film provides a way for film viewers to think more concertedly about the composition of certain shots and about the presence of the thousands of still images within the flow of moving image technology. In the early years of film production, posters reinserted the traditional attributes of art viewership, such as contemplation, reflection, and distance, into the ephemeral experience of viewing the film and thereby created a heightened awareness of the unique properties of the cinema — including its basis in photography and its strange relationship to both past and present. Mulvey calls this an “aesthetics of delay,” which “revolve around the process of stilling the film but also of repetition, the return to certain moments or sequences, as well as slowing down the illusion of natural movement. The delayed cinema makes visible its materiality and its aesthetic attributes, but also engages an element of play and of repetition compulsion.”

Posters produce their own aesthetics of delay by breaking into the closed illusion of the film and returning the viewer to certain themes. According to Mulvey, this repetition postpones the “finality of the ending” and thus throws light on the pastness of the cinema even as it overcomes it, forging the possibility of returning to its questions through the childlike compulsion to repeat. “Finding the presence of these [still image] aesthetics in apparently conventional and commercial film has all the childish and playful pleasure of the treasure hunt,” she writes.

This type of pleasure mirrors the enjoyment of repetition and recognition patterns supplied by the film poster. Mulvey, citing Miriam Hansen, understands this repetitive play as both “therapeutic and pedagogic.” The question then begs to be asked: what lessons did film posters put forward, what counsel did they offer?

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140 Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 192.

141 Ibid., 193.

142 Ibid., 193.
Through their potential for repetitive play, posters could heighten the enjoyment afforded to viewers by highlighting the interplay between still and moving images, but also, naturally, that between the graphic and photographic. During the 1920s art critics and cultural theorists alike acknowledged the overlaps and divergences that constituted graphic and photographic imagery and were quick to outline the ways in which photography altered visual perception and communication. Unfortunately, an overwhelming interest in the photograph’s indexicality among film critics led to a denigration of imaginative imagery, cinematic tricks, and animation. More recently, work by Tom Gunning among others has begun to reassert the inter-reliance of photography and hand-produced drawings in the creation and reproduction of images which are made to emulate motion in real time.143 Early filmmakers seem to have been more attuned to the overlap in animated and live-action film, which Karen Beckman rightly notes has now become more significant with the emergence of digital filmmaking.144 Avant-garde filmmakers of the 1920s, those whom we most often associate with the artistic development of the medium during that time, were particularly intrigued by the expressive possibilities of animated film. As Cowan has argued, the advertising *Trickfilme* (animated film) often provided the centrifugal point where advertising and avant-garde aesthetic converged.145 Walther Ruttmann, cinematographer Guido Seeber, and Hans Richter, among others, employed their advertising commissions as important opportunities for experimentation that were in turn recognized for for their artistic ingenuity.146 These films affirm Judith Halberstam’s recent argument for the significance of animated films as unexpected sites of resistance to the status quo. Citing Benjamin and his interest in the cartoons of Granville, she explains that animation offers a unique collective representation of a reality that in its rejection of naturalism actually comes closer to representing society as it is.147 Film posters share that potential by expanding the expressive possibilities of the photographic, cinematic image.

143 Gunning, “Animating the Instant,” 38-9. See also the entire volume in which this essay appears: Beckman, *Animating Film Theory*, as well as Buchan, *Pervasive Animation*.


146 Collin, “Filmreklame und Reklamefilms,” 245.

147 Halberstam, “Animation,” 47.
An obvious advantage of illustration over photography lay in the former’s use of color. Explorations into the most effective uses of color among critics and poster artists indicate the perceived importance of hue and variation to successful poster designs. However, it seems that the simple application of color was not enough to elevate a photograph to the level of an illustrated poster as commentators overwhelmingly denigrated those that merely tinted or produced colored drawings of pre-existing photographic images.\(^{148}\) They seemed to understand that the task of the film poster was not to reproduce reality as only the photograph could do, but to craft an attention-grabbing image that held within it the entire essence of the film. As Mahlberg explained of the film poster,

> es soll der Schlüssel zum Film sein. Daß es nun eine Szene des Films auf sich übertrage, ist nicht nötig, ist sogar schlecht, ist aber beliebt. (Man gibt und nimmt ein Photo und transponiert einfach.) Eine gefilzte Szene oder ein am Film entstandenes Photo hat selten den ganzen Film in sich; es muß ihn aber in sich haben und auch aussprechen können.\(^{149}\)

Mahlberg disapproves of film posters that merely copy a photographed scene on set, because in his view they could not provide comprehensive representations of the nature of the film at hand. As his commentary suggests, the singular frame from a film neither captures the meaning of the film, nor does it replicate the excitement of the moving image. The photograph, in relation to the film, appears \textit{too still}, remarkably frozen, whereas the effective film poster compromises in its representation of stillness. It alludes to the dynamic movement of the cinema through a unique illustrative aesthetic. For Mahlberg, the film poster that merely represents a scene from the film, in fact, destroys the aesthetic experience offered by the cinema. As he explains,

> Ja, eine Szene aus dem Film unmittelbar in Farbe und aufs Plakat und in die Fläche zu setzen, erweist sich meist im entsprechenden Augenblick als unheitvoll, wenn nämlich die Szene im Film drankommt. . . . Der Film überhaupt ist illusionär – nicht visionär wie das Theater, wenn anders es gut ist –, ist Wirklichkeit, wenn auch in Photographie, und aus unserer Lebenskraft versetzen wir das Flächenbild in das Räumliche unserer Vorstellung. Soweit sind wir nun glücklich im Film, . . .da senkt sich plötzlich auf dieses Raum-Lichtgebilde des Films, das unsere Vorstellung künstlich in der Schwebe erhält, die Zentnerlast des genau passend bedruckten Stücks Papier, das so garnichts Raumschwebendes hat – und pappt den Film für den Augenblick und länger


\(^{149}\) “it should be the key to the film. That it conveys a scene out of the film is not necessary, indeed, it’s bad though nonetheless popular. (One gives and takes a photo and simply transposes it). A filmed scene or a photograph from the film seldom encapsulates the whole film; however it must encapsulate the film and be able to express it.” Translation mine. Mahlberg, “Zur Film-Reklame,” 172.
Mahlberg’s suggestion here that the primary function of the cinema was to create the illusion of reality was common, though not uncontested. Arnheim, for instance, stridently argued against the notion of film as an art of pure realistic illusion. Indeed, though Andre Bazin would famously point out that no other artistic medium would match the photograph’s ability to “bear away our faith,” film historians have detailed numerous ways in which the pleasure of early cinematic spectatorship hinged upon the fissures within its supposed realism. Mahlberg nonetheless astutely confirms the importance of the moment of recollection and recognition supplied by the interplay between the poster and the film. The poster has the potential to remind viewers that they are, in fact, viewing an imaginary construction of reality. In this respect, it is possible to imagine posters producing a kind of Verfremdungseffekt with the poster breaking through the cinema’s visual chimera. The poster’s intentions, however, may vary. Their effect could be either to disrupt or soothe, to ameliorate or to impede. Thus, a careful examination of a poster in connection with its film could do much to alter our perceptions of early film.

0.5 RECURRENCE AND VARIATION IN POSTER “QUOTATION”

“[t]he relation posters have to visual fashion is that of ‘quotation.’ Thus, the poster artist is usually a plagiarist (whether of himself or others), and plagiarism is one of the main features of the history of poster aesthetics.”
— Susan Sontag

According to Susan Sontag, poster artists did not develop new methods of graphic mediation, but borrowed them from established aesthetics — both graphic and photographic. Posters had to use

150 “Indeed an unmediated scene taken from the film and placed in color on the flat plane of the poster proves disastrous in that corresponding moment when the scene arrives in the film. . . . As a rule, film is illusionary — not visionary as in the theater where something else would suffice — film is reality, also in photography, and out of our life force we place the two-dimensional image into the space of our imagination. No sooner are we happily immersed in the film, . . . than this spatial-light image that our imagination has artfully held before us suddenly subsides. The heavy burden of the corresponding printed piece of paper that has nothing of the suspended spatiality of the film reappears — and the film melts away for a moment and leaves the flat wall. The material image smothers the imaginary. The illusion is gone and the gray-washed flickering canvas is left in its place.” Translation mine. Mahlberg, “Zur Film-Rekalme (Buntplakate und Klischeeplakate),” 172.


152 Sontag, “Posters,” np.
“quotation” of other art forms in order to communicate in their abbreviated forms. In contrast, paintings and art photographs appeared in arenas where they could be contemplated at leisure; film was able to direct and guide its audiences’ attention through editing and the sequencing between one frame and the next. As Benjamin wrote in the 1930s, “The directives given by captions to those looking at images in illustrated magazines soon become even more precise and commanding in films, where the way each single image is understood appears prescribed by the sequence of all the preceding images.” \(^{153}\) The poster could not control what was hung in its proximity, but it could conjure up its own imaginary surroundings by evoking other images and other discourses through its graphic style and content. Thus, film posters necessarily bound the film into the fabric of a preexisting visual culture.

Posters’ free quotation of other visual works often resulted in a deliberately hybrid evocation of multiple media as well as multiple themes. As a result, when viewed today early film poster artifacts give a particularly vibrant account of the multifarious nature of the cinema itself — emphasizing those elements that were extra-textual in the film. Returning to the intermedial allusion in film posters may help to mitigate anxieties brought about by the recent transition from analog to digital and video recording technology. Concerns, such as those voiced by filmmaker Jean-Pierre Geuens, for instance, that the increased speed of filmmaking through digital technology lowers the quality of the creative process and its products, dissipate when we recognize the hybrid properties of early film. \(^{154}\) Scholars tend to think that the digital age, with its ability to forge, to combine, endlessly to duplicate visual material has fundamentally changed the way that films are made and received by audiences. \(^{155}\) The digital age introduces a rift between the indexical property of the film strip and the imaginative aspect of digitally produced imagery, and, perhaps even more importantly, gives the viewer greater control in shaping their viewing experience.

Film posters remind us that though the digital age has intensified some of the cinema’s abilities to represent the fantastic and to engage viewers in the process of creating a viewing experience, these attributes of movie-going were present as early as the 1920s. Like films today, which defy the “perfected


\(^{154}\) Geuens, “The Digital World Picture,” 19.

quality” of the digital image with self-reflexive nods to the human-makers who conceived them, film posters emphasized the craft behind the illusion. Accordingly, posters suggest an early audience that was more aware of the technological-artistic mechanisms behind cinematic fantasy than our history of film and film theory currently suggests. The poster reveals a concept of film as an expressive, human tool whose strength lies in its ability to infuse one medium with the effects of another. Examining early film posters along side the works that they promote shatters the myth of film as a medium reliant on indexicality for its artistry and instead reveals its inter-reliance on still and moving images, text and image, and graphic and photographic elements in crafting the cinematic experience.

Arguably, film posters’ citation of Expressionism did more than any other style to help redefine the cinematic experience within Germany and to promote German film in international markets. The longevity of the category of “German Expressionist Film” suggests the effectiveness of the campaigns that used posters in this style. Adopting Expressionist stylization allowed film exhibitioners to confront the dubious reputation of the film industry, while also emphasizing the greatest potential of film medium: to traverse the distance between the animate and inanimate, the living and the dead, material and spirit. In the chapter of my dissertation that follows, I examine Expressionist film posters as more than part and parcel of a mere marketing ploy aimed at elevating the status of the cinema. I demonstrate that Expressionism helped to define what constituted cinematic space and modern spectacle within Berlin — crafting a conception of movie-going that would be disseminated throughout the country. I look closely at the posters of renowned films like those for the Caligari campaign but also at lesser-known posters of prolific designer Josef Fenneker. His work for the Marmorhaus indicates that in the early 1920s Expressionism characterized more than a particular genre or nationality of film; it suggested a way of relating to the medium of film that encouraged its audience’s active participation in a tone that was sometimes highly spiritual and sometimes surprisingly ironic.

Another significant aspect of the movie-going experience in Germany hinged on audience participation in star culture, a phenomenon that has received much critical attention in American film

156 Rombes, Cinema in the Digital Age, especially 140-54.
157 Elsaesser, Weimar Cinema, 26; Scheunemann, Expressionist Film, 1-33.
history but not as much in its German counterpart. Weimar film posters reveal a more ambivalent stance toward star and fan culture in Germany than the United States, one that often gendered both stars and fans as female in order to downplay their significance. Accordingly, German promotional materials often emphasized the role of the male director as the film’s authorial guide in order to align the film with traditional models of art-making under the hand of the master-craftsman. In my second chapter I take the posters featuring director Ernst Lubitsch’s strong female leads, Ossi Oswalda, Pola Negri, and Henny Porten, as a case study through which to examine the gendered aspects of poster art, advertising, and film stardom in Germany. As I will show, the female star became an icon of myriad cultural hopes and anxieties that at once resisted commodification and celebrated female agency under a capitalist structure that nonetheless exploited their images for commercial gain.

My examination of Oswalda, Negri, and Porten images in film and poster art already reveals the decisive impact that the political context in Germany had on cultural products in both media. The third chapter of my dissertation looks more closely at the relationship between political propaganda and film poster aesthetic by focusing on Theo Matejko’s poster for Fritz Lang’s famous Die Nibelungen: Siegfried (1924). This dynamic poster revises both art historical tropes and motifs commonly associated with political propaganda to illustrate the convergence between politics and film in Germany. Matejko, who worked as a propaganda and commercial artist throughout his career, uses a documentary style typical of drawings executed for the illustrated press. His Siegfried poster correspondingly epitomizes what I call the artist’s “aesthetics of movement,” a quality of illustration that contributed to impressions of constant chaos and tumult in Weimar Germany. His work borrows from the effect of the snap-shot, the immediately comprehensible, indexical representation of a pivotal moment in time, thus beginning to show a turn toward Neue Sachlichkeit aesthetics.

The final chapter of my dissertation turns to issues of media-specificity by delving more deeply into the relationship between photography and poster art during the period in which Neue Sachlichkeit dominated many of Germany’s film experiments. By that time, photography and film had gained the artistic legitimacy for which they struggled in the early decades of the twentieth century. Both had begun to influence the new, “legitimate” aesthetic theories of the Bauhaus, László Moholy-Nagy’s Typofoto, and
the German and Russian Constructivists. At the same time, however, production agreements between Hollywood and Germany resulted in diminished experimentation in film as well as in the posters that advertised for the art form. A rift formed between the artistic avant-garde film poster and the slick, Hollywood-style feature film poster that would come to dominate international film poster art for decades to come. I examine some of the most ambitious attempts at maintaining an “objective” stance toward advertising and filmmaking during this period: Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*, the New-Typography-inspired posters of Jan Tschichold, and the promotional materials for Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931). These objects strove to adopt the cool, uninflected gaze of the camera lens to identify underlying truths of their contemporary reality, but, as I explain, later incited some criticism for their seemingly nonpartisan approach to their subjects.

In the chapters that follow, I report on a number of key individuals, institutions, and critics supporting the development of poster art during the Weimar Republic and try to make the material conditions of their work known where possible. At the same time, I must acknowledge that a comprehensive study of film poster art from this period is not possible — a great number of artifacts have not survived the wars and wear of the last century, and accounts of individual posters are even more scarce than the objects themselves. But just as our own reactions to the very stuff of our everyday existence often remain unarticulated, we can nonetheless recognize our own susceptibility to implications made in designs as well as our own creative responsibility regarding the images that we produce. Individual and collective responses to particular posters can only be guessed at in hindsight, but by revisiting film posters in the context of other media, we begin to understand the communicative methods of the art form and from there can envision the impact they strove to achieve.

By aiming to reconstruct this vision, I do more than trace the history of the film poster with this project. Instead I take emblematic posters as a starting point from which to examine the nature of mass media communication at that time. Adapting to intense technological and social changes, mass media took on a diverse number of stylistic devices and borrowed rapaciously from a variety of new media and traditional sources for inspiration. I have attempt to recapture the fluid mediation between styles and
themes that characterized early silent film poster art in Germany by structuring each of my chapters around various themes and/or individuals.

Most existing scholarship on film posters has focused on the relationship between posters and art historical movements: Expressionism, Cubism, *Neue Sachlichkeit* and Constructivism. Certainly I too recognize the importance of that overlap, as evidenced in my first and final chapters. However, to use Sontag’s term, film posters were a delightfully “parasitic” medium and found hosts in a variety of cultural realms, not just painting and the fine arts. Thus my second and third chapters emphasize the popular culture influences on poster design as a way to look once more at the position of the film industry vis-a-vis a dynamic and varied visual cultural context. At times I focus on the work of individual artists, Matejko and Fenneker, for instance, at others the use of particular visual styles in a variety of posters. In other moments, I single out advertisements for the work of a particular director (Lang, Lubitsch) to trace the importance of the auteur for market branding. In this way, I hope to have captured some of the malleability of film poster aesthetic in the pages that follow.

In the medium’s constant striving toward novelty, it embraced change, flux, and heterogeneity. This ceaseless orientation toward novelty makes the poster invite new ways of reading and ask for varied interpretations from diverse arenas of society. At the same time, the plethora of styles that were in circulation during the Weimar Republic attest to the collective nature of the visual culture that the nation produced. As commercial imagery, film posters had to appeal to a variety of audiences simultaneously, thus the demands of the populace, or at least their imagined demands, are made visible in the images themselves. Many of these posters ask their audiences to take an active part in the play that movie-going entails, thereby foregrounding the role of the masses in engendering consumer culture. This amounted to a celebration of urban leisure and the autonomous role of the masses in engendering its thrills, but at times and in various instances incited misgivings with regard to the power of the collective. In the visual analysis that follows, cultural beliefs, assumptions, ideologies, and desires begin to emerge from the colorful forms of poster papers that once decorated the cities and the psyches of the Weimar Republic.
CHAPTER ONE

Film Posters at Play: Crafting the Expressionist Cinema-Space

Josef Fenneker’s movie posters from the early 1920s achieved unparalleled renown at the time they were in circulation for their skewed perspective, abstract figures, and inventive color pallets; they continue to garner interest among design critics who emphasize Fenneker’s contribution to Expressionist poster art.\(^1\) With lines reminiscent of the paintings and woodcuts of avant-garde groups \textit{die Brücke} and \textit{der Blaue Reiter}, Fenneker’s posters cued the public to view movie-going as an Expressionist undertaking even before the international success of \textit{Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari} (Wiene 1920), the quintessential Expressionist film.\(^2\) Notably, in comparison to the vast number of film posters that Fenneker executed in an Expressionistic style, only a relative handful of Expressionist films were produced by the German film industry, though these films came to represent Germany’s output among film historians and fans. In fact, Fenneker’s style was more closely associated with Berlin’s modish theaters, the Marmorhaus and Mozartsaal that commissioned the work, than any one genre of film. With a plethora of styles in circulation, why then did an adaptation of Expressionism serve as the optimal representative of high-quality cinema aesthetic? This chapter examines the lofty ambitions attached to Expressionism that made it so well-suited to film poster design in the early 1920s.

The contested and, many have argued, overused term “Expressionism” has been employed to describe exaggerating, emotionally jarring, stylistic devices across nearly every form of early twentieth-century media.\(^3\) In histories of German cinema, Expressionism has also offered an unavoidably centrifugal point. In this chapter, however, I want to table debates about the broad (or narrow) scope of


\(^2\) \textit{Caligari} was released on February 26, 1920 at least several months after Fenneker’s posters for the Marmorhaus began circulating in Berlin. Although historically there has been a tendency to view every Expressionist experiment in film after \textit{Caligari} as a knock-off of its style, the near simultaneous eruption of Fenneker’s work and Wiene’s film on the scene in Berlin suggests that the use of the Expressionist aesthetic to color all-things-cinematic was a much broader phenomenon than a one-way lineage from \textit{Caligari} assumes.

\(^3\) Bell, “The Expressionist Total Artwork,” 26.
what can be called Expressionism in German film and its influence on later cinematic developments.\textsuperscript{4} Instead, I’d like to draw attention to the fact that by the birth of the Weimar Republic and the so-called death of the art movement proper, Expressionism was already a contested critical category. Often the term was used loosely to describe any form of painterly abstraction that had bled into popular culture and applied art. Though this flexible terminology has certainly caused some confusion, the earliest proponents of the movement that came to bear the name Expressionism had always considered it more Weltanschauung than style.\textsuperscript{5} Thus it was fitting that by the time their style had migrated to the applied arts, design and decorating journals, film and advertising magazines discussed Expressionism not so much as a specific set of aesthetic attributes but as a way of visually redefining the human relationship to material objects and physical space. Any abstraction through light, color, and fragmentary composition became the hallmark of an urge to place subjective, human experience before material existence.

Much as it would be today, the application of Expressionism in craft and advertising materials was, for many, a sign of the deterioration of the movement as it had developed in painting. Fenneker and other prominent Weimar poster artists, such as Paul Leni and the artist duo Stahl-Arpke, who employed Expressionism in their designs were simultaneously heralded and accused of mannerism. Although, as scholars continue to emphasize, its posters formed part of an effort to ennoble the cinema and thus make it more consumable for a wider array of patrons, this cinematic Expressionism amounted to more than a mere marketing tactic. Ultimately, Expressionist stylization helped to characterize movie-going not only as a legitimate social purview but, more profoundly, as an opportunity for viewers to reposition themselves in relationship to the physical world. As Kracauer wrote in his 1920 elegy to the movement, in Expressionism the soul itself “strives to conquer anew the path to God. . . it rolls aside the heavy cloddish block of reality in order to finally be allowed to flourish unhindered.”\textsuperscript{6} Though Kracauer argued that the movement failed in its desperate attack on reality, Expressionist film posters encouraged the public to

\textsuperscript{4} Dietrich Scheunemann’s Expressionist Film-New Perspectives provides a detailed overview of the debates regarding the historical and stylistic parameters of Expressionist cinema for those who would like more context.

\textsuperscript{5} See Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s “Programm der Brücke,” executed in a woodcut and calling together “Everyone who reproduces, directly and without illusion, whatever he senses the urge to create,” 80.

\textsuperscript{6} Kracauer, “A Turn in Art’s Destiny,” 437.
map those heady ambitions onto the cinema. The posters asserted the expressive capabilities of film by positioning it among established and even non-visual media. As one commentator stated of Expressionist cinema, “Die formale Ballung und Rhythmisierung unendlichen ornamentalen Form- und Farbenreichtums durch dieses Spiegelspielzeug ist erstes Stammeln optischer Musik.”

With their promise to reveal otherworldly truths, Expressionist film posters crafted multi-media cinematic spaces that encouraged audiences to traverse the distance between mental impression and physical world. As I will show, though Kracauer and others suspected that these visions diverted the masses from recognizing and exercising their autonomy, many of these posters and the films for which they advertised invited the opposite reaction. By highlighting the specific properties of their media, they emphasize the hand of the craftsman and draw attention to the constructed nature of the cinematic display. Audiences, rather than being driven ceaselessly forward by one impression and then another, could circle back through familiar streets to find the still posters reasserting questions and once more troubling the rift between mind and matter.

This chapter brings many of the most renowned film posters of the Weimar Republic back into the spotlight. As I will outline, their particular iteration of Expressionism strives to produce the effects of a variety of materials, combines interior design with painterly abstraction, and joins caustic irony to spiritual evocation. In the first section of this chapter, I examine Fenneker’s work. Through chiaroscuro and scale, the designer brought a moving-image aesthetic out of the theater and in turn helped to refashion city space as a cinematic spectacle. The second section turns more explicitly to the theatrical spaces that these posters helped to craft, as well as to other sites of leisure that adopted the same style, such as Berlin’s Luna park, also designed in part by Fenneker. Kracauer’s writing on Berlin’s movie palaces, the seat of the city’s “Cult of Distraction,” provides a window onto the anxieties that built up around these spaces and the collective intrigue that they elicited. However, while Kracauer saw Berlin’s movie palaces as a retreat from reality that manipulated audiences into surrendering their ability to act in a meaningful way, the posters that adorned their walls encouraged a greater awareness of the suggestive, hypnotic powers of advertising and cinema spectatorship. As we will see, the posters regularly call into question the fantastic nature of the constructed, cinematic world.

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Stahl-Arpke’s famous poster for *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, for instance, explicitly calls upon the film’s extravagant setting to create emotional effects and drive the viewer toward a reconsideration of material reality. This poster forms the subject of the third section of this chapter where I argue that Stahl-Arpke’s posters and Wiene’s film both emphasize moments of stillness and invite contemplation that confounds the traditional characterization of Weimar film as a series of on-going shocks. The Stahl-Arpke poster draws attention to the prominence of suspension and delay in the moving image exhibition. The film’s moments of prolonged duration rupture the illusion of the cinematic image, giving the viewer’s mind the opportunity to contemplate the objects depicted. Thus, they potentially heighten the viewer’s attention to his or her own autonomy. Poster artist and director Paul Leni, the aesthetic predecessor of the Stahl-Arpke duo, further emphasized the active role of both artist and audience in his film *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett* (1924). Identified by many as the final “Expressionist” film, the piece highlights the role of the author/audience in creating the visions they encounter on the screen. In the final section of this chapter, then, I examine Leni’s film and its promotional materials. I will argue that they illustrate the prominence of irony in Expressionist design and demonstrate its invitation to audiences to consider themselves as makers rather than mere consumers of the cinematic illusions that they encountered in Berlin.

1.1 JOSEF FENNEKER AND THE EXTERIOR INTERIOR WORLD

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_The artist roams far beyond any reality toward the land of his dreams, where, unfettered by external constraints, the soul can stretch out beyond measure._

— Siegfried Kracauer

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8 The claim that cinema produces a series of shocks in its viewers was most compellingly argued by Walter Benjamin, who associated film with the artillery-effect of Dada art. He writes, “The painting invites the viewer to contemplation; before it, he can give himself up to his train of associations. Before a film image, he cannot do so. No sooner has he seen it than it has already changed it cannot be fixed on. . . This constitutes the shock effect of film, which, like all shock effects, seeks to induce heightened attention.” Benjamin, “Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility,” 267. See also Benjamin and Osborne, *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy*; and Ward, *Weimar Surfaces*, especially 122-30.

Amid the incessant circulation of poor quality film posters in the late 1910s, avant-garde stylization was generally welcomed by design critics as a sign of improvement. Commentators dubbed Fenneker the “kommenden Mann” for the film poster in 1919; (“Möge er die großen Hoffnungen, die man nach seinen ersten Leistungen auf ihn setzen darf, nicht enttäuschen.”) Examples of Fenneker’s designs were widely reprinted and held up as models of successful poster design in Das Plakat as well as film trade journals. Beyond its stylistic similarities with the work of Expressionist visual artists, however, contemporaries praised Fenneker’s ability to encapsulate the aesthetic of the cinema in poster form. As Walter Schubert remarked: “Immer jedoch haben Fennekers Arbeiten . . . Stil, wirklichen brausenden, brandenden Kinostil. Darin liegt ihr Geheimnis, ihre Zugkraft, ihr Erfolg. Und bisweilen gelingen ihm Schlager von unerhörter Wirkung.” Fenneker himself described his work as drawing directly on the vigorous thrill of the moving image: “Aus dem lebendigen Wesen des Films sind in hohem Maße die Möglichkeiten gegeben, Phantasie und Farben anzuwenden, um Plakate von großem Reiz und frappierender Eigenart zu schaffen, ja solche, die kaum vergessen werden können.” Fenneker’s Expressionist film posters brought visions of Weimar’s flickering celluloid into the streets with a style that not only elevated the medium to the upper echelons of art; it familiarized would-be patrons with the very texture of the moving picture image and in turn helped characterize the city as a cinematic space.

Fenneker’s Das Frauenhaus von Brescia is

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11 “May he not disappoint the great hopes that one has placed upon him after his first achievements.” Ibid., 74.
13 “The living essence of the film provides great opportunities to utilize fantasy and color to craft posters of enormous appeal and uncanny originality such that they can scarcely be forgotten.” Translation mine. Fenneker, “Josef Fenneker,” 38.
indicative of the designer’s Expressionist rendering of cinematic imagery (Fig. 1.1). As in most of his film posters, the design takes a character from the film as its subject. Here Fenneker represents Hedda Vernon in her role as a queen, who, through a twist of fate, is sold into prostitution. With head bent low at an unnatural angle, her gaunt body and shadowed eyes are reminiscent of Oskar Kokoschka’s corpse-like anatomies. Yet, her contorted frame is softened by the pale luminosity of the skin of her shoulder and neck, the delicacy of her profile, and the barely palpable filigree in the background that mimics the line in the soft fall of her hair. This visual symbiosis between the figure and her environment invokes the Expressionists’ painterly subjectivities: think Kirchner’s Striding into the Sea of 1912. The bathers’ bodies echo the graphic forms of the seascape. Also the triangular pattern of intersecting lines that light Vernon’s head reflects the crystalline forms so often found in Expressionist visions of the city to suggest the jagged edges of glass and steel structures. However, as Hanna Gagel notes in her biography of Fenneker, despite the visual references to painterly Expressionism, Fenneker’s work has a tone all its own. His posters are more figurative than those of the avant-garde who, by the 1920s, had begun to experiment with more and more elemental properties of painting. Unlike such artists, Fenneker marries the deep inner psychosis associated with Expressionist abstraction to narrative and melodrama, the more accessible elements of feature film. Thus, we can see the artist reworking the high art style for the tastes of a diverse film audience.

Fenneker’s adaptation of Expressionism allows his work to avoid the critical misstep attributed to many abstract poster designs: obscuring the commercial message of the poster and alienating potential audience members. Ferdy Horrmeyer, for instance, stated definitively that “Expressionismus aber (wenn auch z. Z. stark theorethisierend und experimentierend), ist als reiner abstrakter Begriff eine Geistigkeit, die sich niemals in kaufmännische Formen zwingen lassen wird.” Horrmeyer’s concerns about the style are echoed by prolific film critic Fritz Olimsky: “Filmmusik muß Volkskunst sein und bleiben, unsere Spielfilme müssen schon aus Geschäftsrücksichten auf die breite Masse des Volkes zugeschnitten sein.

16 “Expressionism, however, (when fervently theoretical and experimental), is, as a pure abstract notion, a kind of spirituality that will never let itself be forced into commercial forms.” Translation mine. Horrmeyer, “Expressionismus und Reklame,” 139.
wenn aber das Volk durch einen Kunstfilm dem Kino entfremdet wird, dann ist eben diese Filmkunst auf dem falschen Wege.”

Not only did film and poster critics suspect that Expressionism’s abstruse communicative methods were in danger of alienating the masses but, moreover, they doubted the viability of adapting a high art aesthetic into applied or popular art. For design critics, the “sachliche Qualität” of poster art could only be threatened by the “aufgeblasener Scheinexpressionismus” that suddenly seemed to adorn every street corner. No doubt this suspicion toward the superficial application of style was bolstered by the modernist rejection of ornamentation that had been announced by the virulent Adolf Loos in 1908. However, as design historian Jeremy Aynsley reminds us, despite the prominence of Modernist manifestos in art history, the Weimar Republic supported a pluralism of style. Like many proponents of applied art at this time, Germany’s design critics and educators were not necessarily against the adaptation and application of style, so long as the aesthetic was bound to the function of the object itself.

Still, even under this more permissive approach to style, Expressionism, having developed as a mode of personal expression in the “free arts,” could not be expected to adapt easily to use in the task-oriented poster. Robert Hösel, writing for the practical *Seidels Reklame*, wrote that for an Expressionist poster to be successful it must do away with the spiritual elements that guide an artwork to completion. In his own words, “Der Expressionist muß bei den Werbearbeiten das Geistige, das in erster Linie die Kunst in seinen Werken verkörpert, mehr als bei seinen freien Schöpfungen zurückstellen und dafür die technischen Ausdrucksmittel, die ja eben, wie schon gesagt, von der Plakatmalerei angeregt wurden, stärker in den Vordergrund bringen.”

The technical aspects of Expressionism’s style, according to Hösel, had first developed within poster art; poster artists relied on their tendency toward simplification and

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17 “Film art must be and stay a people’s art, our films must be tailored to the masses in consideration of profit. When the people are alienated by an art film, than this film art is moving in the wrong direction.” Translation mine. Olimsky, “Genuine,” [http://www.filmportal.de/node/27611/material/641925](http://www.filmportal.de/node/27611/material/641925).

18 “objective quality,” “bloated surface expressionism,” Translation mine. Ibid., 141.

19 Aynsley, *Designing Modern Germany*, 102.

20 Ibid., 111. Paul Rennie also affirms the over-emphasis on Bauhaus modernism writing: “International Style Modernism, with its emphasis on form and function, is only one strand in the evolution of modernism and need not be its only logical conclusion,” “Film Advertising and Graphic Design,” 28.

21 “For the advertisement, the Expressionist must waylay the spiritual that is the first objective in his ‘free’ works, and thereby bring forward the technical aspects that, as mentioned, first arose in poster art.” Hösel, “Expressionistische Reklameentwürfe,” 37.
amplification. Yet, it was the association of Expressionism with spirituality that in large part constituted its appeal in advertisements. Time and again, critics suggested that the ability to unite this spiritual tenor with material function was the sign of successful craftsmanship. For instance, on the occasion of the Munich Werkstatt exhibition of 1921, designer, journalist, and art historian Georg Jakob Wolf, wrote,


Bound to the physical world of practical application, lofty Expressionism finally reached its zenith when it migrated into craft, according to Wolf. Poster artists provided the style with an initial, regulatory influence, but, Wolf maintains, in graphic design Expressionism remained especially vulnerable to the “Allzulockeres” and “übergroße Leichtigkeit” that plagued the “free” artists.23 At the same time, Adolf Behne, among others, was adamant that Expressionist posters were uniquely adept at promoting non-material goods.24 The style provided a modern alternative to traditional methods, such as symbolism and allegory, of invoking theoretical, ideological, and metaphysical notions. And — unlike shoes and cigarettes — political parties, art exhibits, and film and theater exhibitions required posters to evoke abstract concepts.

Returning to Fenneker’s example, we can see stylistic abstraction put to use to emphasize the supposedly supernatural qualities of cinema. Developed in part to provide a scientific record of motion, film carried with it the impression that it could reveal hidden truths about the workings of material reality. For many, its “aspiration to preserve the fleeting instability of reality and the passing of time in a fixed

22 “A style that ascended from the spirit of the times, that began as a fashionable current of great madness and in its excesses and outgrowths remained throughly objectionable, took possession of the most substantial of all arts, the applied arts. Through the clarifying pool of the graphic arts, where today it still arises most wildly and often enough boils over, painting and sculpture enter the current — henceforth flowing into craft. But here its gambols are necessarily transformed in principle, genial fuss and chaos are useless here, as they are unusable; here the point is to turn out a positive performance.” Translation mine. Wolf, “Die Deutschen Werkstätten,” 6.

23 the “all-too-frivolous” and “over-lightness,” Translation mine. Ibid., 10.

image” promised to illuminate the rift between life and death. Fenneker’s spectral portraits appear to hover in this intermedial state, emphasizing the film’s capacity to uncover fundamental, even metaphysical truths that undergirded the physical, natural world. This supernatural tenor is grounded, however, by Fenneker’s simulation of the actual look of the projected film image. Like film, then, it manages to suggest simultaneously material substance and immaterial presence.

The smudged shadows that give dimension to Vernon’s frame are like the plush contours of the projected photograph; yet Fenneker enhances black and white shapes with coruscating pinks and greens, yellows and purples. These secondary colors act as highlights to the black and white contrast of the design, vitalizing but not erasing the photographic antecedent to the image. The poster could not ever be mistaken for a mere reproduction of a promotional still, though the luminous hues of Vernon’s dress resemble the wash of pastel that characterized hand-colored photographs popular since the late 1800s in Germany. Benjamin described the “penumbral tone, interrupted by artificial highlights” in gum prints as an attempt to simulate aura, bringing the art of painting into the technological process of photo-printing.

Fenneker’s colors, like the bold greens, blues and reds of Expressionist paintings, increase emotional intensity of a black and white photograph. Correspondingly, the angular, explosive patterning in Vernon’s purple dress gives the impression of undulation and movement to the figure. This suggestion of movement makes the poster appear more akin to the hand-colourized prints by George Melies than any Expressionist portrait or still photograph. It is a representation of fantasy and illusion evoking multiple media and nonetheless displaying an image as constructed by the cinema — through light.

With its grainy chiaroscuro, Fenneker’s poster manages to emulate the tendency of the Expressionist film to expand and collapse space, transform a stairwell into a geometric form, lend a profile the sharp relief imagined in cubist drawings, and otherwise create distinctive visual effects through lighting. With carefully orchestrated electric lights, the real world became “expressive” in the film image. As Rudolf Kurtz astutely observed in 1926, “Das Licht hat den expressionistischen Filmen die Seele eingehaucht. Die ‘Lampenstellung’ war vielleicht die schwierigste Arbeit. Und es ist ein unverlierbares

25 Mulvey, Death 24x a Second, 18.

Erbe der expressionistischen Filme, daß die Beweglichkeit, die raumgestaltende Kraft des Lichts gerade durch sie zur bewußten Klarheit erhoben worden ist.”27 Similarly, Elsaesser explains in his history of German cinema that lighting “turns the image into an object endowed with a special luminosity (being lit and at the same time radiating light) which is to say, light appears as both cause and effect, active and passive. In short it suggests ‘authenticity’ and ‘presence,’ while remaining ‘hidden’ and ‘ineffable.’”28 Emanating from the inky backgrounds of the poster plane, the misty figures in Fenneker’s posters likewise appear both material and ephemeral and offer a method of transcending that unwieldy space between the human mind and physical reality.

Referencing Rembrandt, poster critic Paul Mahlberg reminds the readers of Das Plakat that chiaroscuro played a significant, expressive role in visual art long before the invention of the cinema; and yet because cinematic light provides the very stuff of the projected image, it is all the more important, he argues, to attune the potential viewer to variations in light and dark through the film poster.29 Thus, Mahlberg identifies Fenneker’s mastery of crafting a cinematic glow as the skill that set him paces ahead of contemporaries and brought a life-like quality to his often haunting portraits. At times, Mahlberg notes, the strange corporeality of the figures roused the concerns of official city censors. Mahlberg’s description of Fenneker’s Totentanz, for instance, points out the potentially destructive power attributed to these images (Fig. 1.2). He writes, “‘Tanzende’ kann man nicht sagen, aber eine leiblich ‘Entzückte’, nackt, in Farben von grünlichem Grau zu rötlichem Lila. Und dies

27 “Light breathed the soul into the Expressionist film. Lighting arrangement was likely the most difficult work [in filmmaking.] And it is an unassailable legacy of Expressionist film that movement and the power to craft space are elevated through light to conscious clarity.” Translation mine. Kurtz, Expressionismus und Film, 60.

28 Elsaesser, Weimar Cinema and After, 44.

29 Mahlberg, “Die Bedeutungsformen der Kinoreklame,” 123. Rudolf Arnheim provides a suggestive anecdote in his Film as Art whereby a distributor was convinced to launch of Cecil B. de Mille’s films because the director attributed his innovative lighting technique to Rembrandt’s influence. Able to dub the film the first “lighted in the Rembrandt style,” the distributor charged double for admission “and got it,” Arnheim quips. Arnheim, Film as Art, 72-3. The story evinces the promotional value of such comparisons between high art and reproducible art.
aufreizend perverse Hautfarbe, zusammen mit der orgiastischen Biegung dieses sanft handgreiflich lebensgroßen Lebewesens macht sie zu einem Fressen für die Phantasie zahlreicher Betrachter, und Jugendlicher insbesondere.\textsuperscript{30} Anxious onlookers worried about the potential effects of this pervasive image on the psyche of the young, not because of its nudity, (bare skin was common in advertisements of this era), but because of the abstract fleshiness and erotic position of Asta Nielen’s body. Though the figure is executed in unrealistic colors and extreme, almost cartoon-like lines, Fenneker’s composition of light and dark aroused viewer curiosity to the same troubling degree attributed to the cinema itself.\textsuperscript{31}

To ameliorate this affect, Fenneker’s posters, though uniquely representative of the cinematic image, explicitly evoke more established media at the same time. For instance, the title of the film \textit{Das Frauenhaus von Brescia} references the piece of popular literature from which the narrative was drawn. The blazes of white light that shape Vernon’s profile produce the effects of stage lighting, while the prominent billing received by Ernst Deutsch, then the most famous Expressionist stage actor, both reference the theater. The poster combines these intermedial citations under the banner of its cinematic aesthetic and, through composition, privileges the cinematic experience over those offered by more established media. Thus, Fenneker pictures a murky crowd of on-lookers in the bottom portion of the poster, but places the viewer in line with the bound figure “on stage.” The movie patron, the poster suggests, is granted greater proximity to the silvery film icon and given access to her position above (and yet enslaved to) the crowd.

Notably, while these references do seem orchestrated to position the film within an already existing framework of traditional media, they do not necessarily suggest high art ambitions. Rather, the intermedial references seem to normalize film as another mode of entertainment whose singularity rests in its ability to combine and transcend those that preceded it. The proximity to Asta Nielsen’s and Hedda Vernon’s star personae, the sexualization of the body, and the adaptation of entertainment literature leave

\textsuperscript{30} “One cannot say ‘dancer,’ but rather a fleshy enchantress, naked, in colors of greenish gray and reddish purple. And these salacious, perverse skin tones, together with the orgiastic bend of this soft, palpable, life-sized form makes her a meal for the imagination of scores of viewers, the young in particular.” Translation mine. Ibid., 123.

\textsuperscript{31} Film historian Sabine Hake’s work on early film criticism highlights the suggestive power attributed to the cinema in 1920s Germany. For example, she cites Kinter’s defense of censorship laws for protecting the youth. Kinter writes: “The youngsters get improperly excited; they are kept from educating their minds and souls and become overly receptive to quite indecent kinds of entertainment. That is not good for the mental and physical development of our youth; even in regard to the latter, the movies have long-lasting effects, especially on the eyes and the nerves.” Hake, \textit{The Cinema’s Third Machine}, 55.
open the paths to interpreting film as an endeavor in distraction and titillation rather than aesthetic edification. Thus, today’s widely held assumption that Expressionist poster designs aimed to aggrandize the film industry in the eyes of upper- and middle-class patrons provides only a partial explanation of Fenneker’s work.

For example, Fenneker’s provocative poster for Richard Oswald’s Die Prostitution (1919) depicting Anita Berber, may have been partly to blame for the moral outrage that the film incited (Fig. 1.3). “Viewing this poster,” writes Smith, “one could see why Brecht and Tucholsky accuse the film of promoting prostitution.”32 The poster depicts a skeletal young woman surrounded by dwarfed admirers. Her dress drapes down below her bared breasts and her chin tips confidently upward. Her eyes display a kind of tiredness, but stare unselfconsciously out at the viewer above unnaturally pink smudges and blue-glowing shadows. The confident stance of the prostitute, like the abstraction that emphasizes the bones and angles of her face, does in fact draw from art historical and literary trends of the period.33 Like Kirchner, Döblin, and Grosz, many contemporary artists and writers dealt openly with the taboo underbelly of urban life and elevated the prostitute as the ultimate muse. Yet commentators and city officials assigned the poster image, like the film itself, a social influence that the painterly and literary works did not possess. Was the poster, like the woman that it depicted, shamelessly promoting a socially disintegrating practice (movie-going and prostitution)? Does her ornate dress symbolize the thin guise of reputability that Expressionism attempted to gain for the film industry? These questions reverberate in the social criticism of the genre of Aufklärungsfilme, (of which Die

![Figure 1.3 Josef Fenneker, Die Prostitution. Das Plakat 10.11 (October, 1920).](image-url)

32 Smith, “Richard Oswald and the Social Hygiene Film,” 17.

33 See Schönfeld, “The Urbanization of the Body.”
Prostitution is a seminal example), but touch also on the social anxiety surrounding the supposed influence of the cinema more generally.

The stylization of the cinema offered an opportunity for film to “pass” as art, but, sharing Berber’s all-knowing smile, the cinema’s promotional materials often carry with them an ironic nod toward the pursuit of pleasure and entertainment that movie-going promised to satisfy. As Elsaesser points out, early German cinema’s promiscuous adaptation of style constitutes one of the hallmarks of the cinema’s modernity.\textsuperscript{34} As such, film qualified as a new type of “living form” as described by Benjamin. As Benjamin observed, “what matters is that they have within them something stirring, useful, ultimately heartening — that they take ‘kitsch’ dialectically up into themselves, and hence bring themselves near to the masses while yet surmounting the kitsch.”\textsuperscript{35} Fenneker’s posters suggest an awareness (sometimes a flaunting) of the presence of low-brow entertainment or kitsch within even ostensibly ambitious films.\textsuperscript{36} They allow the audience to be “in” on the joke, to see through the disguise to the fun underneath an artistic veneer. At the same time, they leave open the possibility that kitsch may indeed be surmounted by the film, appeasing both conservatives and idealists who demanded that the cinema lead to social edification.\textsuperscript{37}

In any case, in Fenneker’s posters Expressionist style ultimately serves as more than mere surface construction. Fenneker’s posters plunge on-lookers into an exploration of the medium-specific

\textsuperscript{34} Elsaesser, Weimar Cinema and After, 42-3.

\textsuperscript{35} Benjamin, Arcades, 395.

\textsuperscript{36} Kitsch is a loaded term, as a review of the poster periodicals of the 1920s will quickly evince. See my history of the term in the introduction, pg 14-16. As Benjamin uses the term it implies an aesthetic that appeals to popular tastes, often employing cliche, sentimentality, and which is poor in formal quality.

\textsuperscript{37} Coming to film reform from different angles, those that assigned the cinema great influential power saw it either as a bastion of hope or anxiety, but in both instances required more than mere entertainment of the cinema.
properties of film. For instance, his poster for Robert Reine’s socially and artistically ambitious film, *Nerven* (1919), highlights the spiritual and scientific properties that lent the film its uncanny position in relation to material reality (Fig. 1.4). In this poster a pale, spectral face rises from a sacramental font in a contorting wave reminiscent of Edvard Munch’s wildly influential *The Scream* (1893). Yet, while Munch’s iconic swirled landscape helps its viewer to visualize sound — showing the landscape undulating with an *urmenschlich* cry — in Fenneker’s poster the figure remains mute. Instead, the drama in this poster centers on the shock of sight. Beams of light thrust outward from round inhuman eyes, functioning like arrows to direct the viewer’s gaze to the strained pink pin-pricks at their center. Much like the enormous animated eyes of the advertisement that would famously appear three years later in the opening sequence of Karl Grune’s *Die Strasse*, the figure in Fenneker’s drawing boldly gazes back at the onlooker.

In part, by personifying light in this way, Fenneker’s poster alludes to the mounting discomfort caused by proliferating electrical light displays in Berlin.38 Frances Guerin notes the role of the movie camera in engendering that discomfort when he observes that “it ha[d] become impossible to escape the observatory eye of searchlights as human beings [were] rendered luminous objects under the gaze of the light of the camera.”39 Looking at Fenneker’s poster, one feels caught by the voiceless gaze of the apparatus, suspended in the space between material and ephemeral world. The street and its occupants, the poster seems to suggest, are merely projections emanating from the cinematic eye.40 Keep in mind that the light-producing effect of Fenneker’s poster would have been intensified at night, when the large-scale composition itself would have been lit both on the front of the theater and on display columns throughout the city. Illuminated in this way, Fenneker’s poster would even more definitively evoke the magical, enrapturing quality of viewing a film in a darkened theater. Fenneker’s poster thus emulates the suspected physiological effect of movie-going on the body, its shock to nerves already dangerously frayed

40 In fact, it was not uncommon to encounter projectors on the streets of Berlin in the 1920s. As Cowan reports, in many Weimar urban centers advertisers had begun projecting short promotional films on sidewalks in order to attract buyers. Cowan, “Taking it to the Streets,” 464.
by the Great War, increased mortal uncertainty, and rapid technological changes. Like the film for which it advertised, it invites its audience to reconsider the implications of cinematic viewership and the mental unrest that it could potentially generate.

Depicting the hallucinations of a factory owner following the onset of violent post-war revolution, *Nerven* was recognized early on as a piece of Expressionist cinema, though it lacks the studio stylization of *Caligari* or its successors. Rather, Reinert’s expressive use of technology (multiple superimpositions and unconventional shot composition to depict psychological disturbances) gave the film an abstract quality that commentators categorized using the vocabulary of the art movement. His integration of shots that were composed to look like classical paintings and that seemed to exist outside of the narrative action of the film, no doubt encouraged viewers to consider the film as in relationship with art historical developments. At the same time, the juxtaposition and blending of expressive and indexical representations within sequences and individual shots calls into question the space between perception and reality.

When viewers retreat from the gaze of Fenneker’s poster into the darkened theater, Reinert’s film immediately calls upon its audience to question the relationship between the physical and metaphysical world: “Nerves, you mysterious avenues of the soul, you messengers of the highest desire and deepest suffering, if you fail, man is but animal. Nerves, are you not the soul itself?” The nerves that the film suggests compose the human soul itself are depicted as a grouping of nude men and women whose bodies form a mist-

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41 The film program reads: “Wer ihr folgen kann und will, wird Neuland finden und Anregungen interessanter Art mit nach Hause nehmen. Niemand aber — er kann über den Film sonst denken wie er will — wird seine Achtung der grandiosen Leistung versagen, die hier zum ersten Male erfolgreich expressionistische Kunst im Film bringt.” (“Who can and will follow the film, will discover new territory and bring stimulations of an interesting sort home with them. But no one — say what you like about the film — can deny the grandiose achievement that here successfully brings expressionist art to the film for the first time.”) Translation mine. “Nerven,” http://www.filmportal.de/sites/default/files/f004725_So1_361.pdf

42 See Bordwell, “Taking Things to Extremes,” 4-19, on Reinert’s expressive use of deep staging in *Nerven*.
shrouded arch, around the title (Fig. 1.5). With this “living intertitle” the film presents a media composite — a mix of text and image, of classical imagery and still-novel moving-image technology. This overt hybridization is repeated throughout the film and is especially prominent in moments that explicitly question the nature of the human psyche.

In the film’s dramatic “Vorspiel,” for instance, we are presented with a medium shot of a middle-aged woman, introduced by an intertitle as a mother whose son is dying in battle miles away from home. Her eyes raise slowly upward before the film cuts to a stylized shot of the dead, piled in a war trench, motionless except for the rising cannon smoke that fills the sky above their outstretched hands (Fig. 1.6). This shot, though made lifelike through the rising smoke, is noticeable stylized to look like a Romantic painting with the limbs of the fallen soldiers stretching upward like the barren trunk of the central, desiccated tree. Nature and humanity are shown as a pile of remains stilled by death and destruction. The poignant image is interrupted by a medium shot of a wounded soldier being carried from the battle field. With the figures crowding onto the right side of the frame and the fallen soldier thrashing back and forth in the arms of his fellow-soldiers, the composition of the shot appears less carefully composed and more chaotic than the previous, more artistically conventional one.

A further shot of the mother precedes an intertitle with the exclamation: “Mutter, Mutter! Du fühlst es... tausend Meilen von ihm... zur selben Minute... Was ist das?” The wounded son in medium close-up is shown leaning with a bandaged head, arms and eyes

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43 Reinert’s film went through multiple variations before release due to the requirements of the Berliner Film-Prüfstelle. Original versions of the film have been lost. I consulted a reconstruction of the film from an American print issued by Filmmuseum München for this analysis. Above is the English-language intertitle as it appears in that print.

44 The image also suggests documentary photographs of the landscapes between trenches, the “Niemandsland,” that would later figure in films such as Douaumont, Die Hölle von Verdun (Heinz Paul, 1931).
open and reaching upwards, as he visibly calls out for his “Mother” (Fig. 1.7). Just then the film cuts to the mother herself crying out in despair in the middle of the street, before once more showing the soldier on his death bed clutching his throat and running his hands over his body as he passes away (Fig. 1.8 and 1.9). A closing glimpse of the mother reveals that she has adopted her son’s wide-eyed gaze into the distance and now slowly lowers her raised arms in horror (Fig. 1.10).

In this sequence, cross-cutting not only collapses the space between mother and child, it also indicates the spiritual alignment of these two symbolic figures. This sequence hypothesizes that mother and son are metaphysically linked, that undergirding their physical actions, (indicated by their physical gestures, which mimic one another) is a subconscious connection that fuses soul to soul. Notably, their tendency to stare off into the distance assumes the importance of visualization as a means of this connection. The sequence implies that the two are actually “seeing” each other as we see them on the screen. In this manner, Reinert’s film begins to equate cinematic visions with those of the mind.

The presence of the stylized shot in this sequence is particularly conspicuous. If mother and son are seeing each other across the distance, who sees this more generalized representation of war?

While the rest of the sequence suggests in conventional fashion the temporal link between the two settings, the stylized shot is separate from this action. It appears to stand in for a notion of the destruction of nature and humanity, a visualized concept that exists in the intervening space between mother and son. Significantly, the battlefield reappears in the context of the story with Johannes, the revolutionary leader and teacher (Fig. 1.11). He recalls or envisions himself trudging through the bodies while warning a crowd of workers that the greed of the upper-classes will result in bloodshed. He moves from the back of the shot, behind the upraised tree trunk, toward the front with careful steps.

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45 Barbara Hales has described the young man’s death as being sexualized, his hands running on his body as the signs of orgasm. I would rather suggest that the young man’s movements appear vaguely sexual because they attempt to draw together unmitigated psychological effects and bodily gestures - marking the moment at which the spirit leaves the body though the movement of the hands. Hales, “Unsettling Nerves,” 37.
before kneeling in tears in the foreground, becoming himself a part of the composition that then slowly fades back to the listening crowd. It is unclear as to whether this is a recollection of a past event or an invocation of an idea used to illustrate his warning for the masses. Moreover, in this sequence it remains ambiguous whether the vision is ascribed to Johannes or to his listeners. The set-up in the prologue, however, suggests that it is indeed a shared vision. The shot asserts the role of artistic representation in serving as a conduit between mother and son, the people and Johannes, and most importantly, between the movie-going audience and the characters represented on screen. Juxtaposing this shot and the “realist” images of the battle scene and home front, the film muddies the boundaries between subjective and objective visualization in order to pose the central question of the film in visual form: what are these nerves that seem to form the soul? How do they align people across distances and join the physical body to mental impulses felt on an emotional level? While the how remains ambiguous, the means suggested by the film is sight.

Shot on-location in postwar Munich, Nerven proceeds to tell the story of a society that is tormented by visions that mislead and embroil them. A factory owner’s nerves, frayed after the explosive uprising of his workers, cause hallucinatory visions of settings real and imaginary to increase at a dizzying pace until he eventually commits suicide. He accuses Johannes of raping his sister — an act that plays over and over in his mind (and on the screen) convincing him that he has seen it himself when, in actuality, the crime was only the fantasy of his besotted sister. The film, interspersed with images both explicitly stylized and more veritable in nature, provides its audience an experience similar to that which is felt by its characters. For both, the image remains unreliable and yet nonetheless potent in its effects. As Kaes summarizes, “The film, then, suggests that it, too, could render things merely imagined real and that those imagined realities could have a traumatizing effect.”


46 Kaes, Shell Shock Cinema, 43.
Correspondingly, the film posits a tremendously close proximity between the workings of the mind and the visions presented on the screen. Precisely this proposed potency gave rise to unease around the persuasive potential of the cinema. *Nerven* on the one hand seems to confirm the power of mass suggestion through visualization. At the same time, however, as the epilogue indicates, the film also provides a means of examining this potency, of attempting to gain greater understanding of the suggestive power of visualization by staging such scenarios for its viewers and trusting the technological objectivity of the camera lens to reveal the inarticulable link binding body to mind. Thus, as employed in *Nerven*, the medium of film is both mystical and scientific, with both seemingly paradoxical elements operating together to probe the human psyche. As both artwork and objective medium, film promises to help the viewer penetrate the secrets of spiritual-corporeal connection.

We see the same magical, critical gaze represented in Fenneker’s poster. Though it portrays little of the convoluted and highly politicized narrative of the film, the poster uses abstract figuration to propose the shocking, personal effect of movie-going on its viewers. It highlights both the manipulative and revelatory potential attributed to photographic moving-image technology with its paralyzing stare. Like the stylized shots interspersed in the realistic settings of the film, the poster offers itself as a channel connecting the physical and mental worlds of its viewers, functioning as a touchstone through which viewers can question the play between these worlds.

Despite these sophisticated allusions, Fenneker’s Expressionist design does not appear to be executed to appeal solely to an upper-class, educated crowd. Even with regard to its similarity to Munch, the design is not particularly refined. Fenneker offers a rather crude rendering of an other-worldly face, more cartoon than cubist. A droll personification of the projector, his is a playful depiction of the technological apparatus. This hint of levity may have served to undercut the slick surface displays that covered Berlin’s streets, calling into question the source of their illusion. Correspondingly, a promotional text on the film argues that *Nerven* “verlangt Aufmerksamkeit, geistige Konzentration, selbständiges Urteil — stellt also Anforderungen an das Publikum, die zu stellen bisher niemand gewagt hat. Denn das

47 Hugo Münsterberg argues precisely this in his early theory of film. There he states that the photoplay gives us “a view of dramatic events which [is] completely shaped by the inner movements of the mind.” What we see on the screen, he suggests, is the visualization not of the three-dimensional world, but the mind’s impression of it. *The Photoplay*, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15383/15383-h/15383-h.htm#chapter9.
Kinotheater war bisher ein Raum, um auszuruhen, zu verdauen, ein Ort für gedankenlose Spielerei.\textsuperscript{48}

Fenneker’s advertisement emphasizes this critical compulsion in the film, countering the widespread understanding of cinema as phantasmagoria, an array of consumable objects and experiences constructed to occlude reality. But it does this with a light wash of satire that invites viewers at various levels of society to participate. Like the readers of print commentaries that playfully derided the cinema, the viewer “who identified with the author’s [artist’s] ironic attitude could enjoy the cinema without losing his self-respect as an educated individual.”\textsuperscript{49} Fenneker’s poster suggests a more self-reflexive use of style than is typically attributed to the early film industry and its advertising apparatus.

The posters’ propensity for heightening such awareness becomes all the more significant when we recall that Fenneker’s work became the hallmark of the cinematic dreamscape in Berlin. In Germany’s capital city, he not only decorated the interiors of movie palaces but designed portions of the city’s Coney-Island-inspired Luna Park. His work gave shape to cinematic spaces that were becoming ever more important fixtures in the cityscape and, many feared, were distracting the population from the economic and material reality of their existence. Yet, his posters demonstrate an explicit engagement with notions of imagination that can be read as reflections of a desire to understand better the effects of entertainment and distraction as constructed by new technologies. In the coming section, I examine this seeming paradox more closely by analyzing the methods through which Fenneker’s designs helped to construct cinematic space.

1.2 CRAFTING THE CINEMATIC DREAMSCAPE

\textit{Die Kunst ist geeignet, den Menschen in eine schönere Welt zu versetzen.}

—Hermann Muthesius\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{48} Nerves “demands attention, spiritual concentration, confident judgement. It makes demands on the public that until now no one had dared to make. Up until now the cinema was a space in which to relax, to absorb, an area for thoughtless foolishness.” Translation mine, “Nerven,” \url{http://www.filmportal.de/sites/default/files/1004725_So1_361.pdf}

\textsuperscript{49} Hake, \textit{The Cinema’s Third Machine}, 16.

\textsuperscript{50} “Art is suited to transporting people to a more beautiful world.” Translation mine. Muthesius, “Die Baukunst im Dienste der Kaufmännischen Werbetätigkeit,” 260.
In October of 1921 the *Verein des Plakatfreundes* dedicated a special issue of their journal to “Der Film.” It featured articles on advertising films, analyses and intersections of film and poster aesthetic, problems relating to film and poster censorship, and on the potential for mass suggestion through both media. As was customary, they chose an artist to design a cover thematizing the topic at hand. Here, they employed renowned poster artist, set designer, and film director Paul Leni (Fig. 1.12). Comparable to the cityscapes of Ludwig Meidner and E. L. Kirchner, Leni’s poster features buildings that jut upward at canted angles from a rhythmically sloping landscape in primary colors of blue, yellow, and red. The emotive hues of the houses and hillside are subdued by heavy shading that covers the lower landscape like a dark veil. In contrast, from high above the city, a cubic structure in red-gold emanates a warm, celestial glow. Flowing down from this mecca, a golden pathway carries a stream of pilgrims from one corner of the poster to the other. Conspicuously reminiscent of Oskar Kaufmann’s Union-Theater, the towering building suggests the monumental architectural structures that came to replace the slipshod *Kinoladen* and traveling exhibition spaces where films had been shown at the turn of the twentieth century.\(^5\) As we can see in the photograph of the opening of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* taken in 1927, the Union-Theater, “ein Gebäude so eigenartig in der Linienführung, so ausgesprochen auf ‘Theaterwirkung’ in seinem Äussern gearbeitet, dass man es als ein architektonisches Kino-Plakat bezeichnen kann,” flattened the buildings and figures around it into darkened

\(^5\) Flickinger notes that when the building opened in 1913 it caused a sensation — particularly due to its lack of windows, an innovation that Kaufman based on the theory that “the pleasure of film-watching does not need daylight,” but which also provided space for large-scale advertising displays. “Cinemas in the City,” 79.
silhouettes with its dazzling facade (Fig. 1.13).\textsuperscript{52} As Kracauer wrote of Berlin’s picture palaces: “The community of worshipers, numbering in the thousands, can be content, for its gathering places are a worthy abode.”\textsuperscript{53} The lighted theater occludes a church in the background, suggesting that the spirit of the people had found a new home. Leni’s cover for Das Plakat echoes this sophisticated understanding of the increased social significance of movie-going. Expressionism, with its aim of penetrating the realm of the physical world and revealing its underlying spiritual truth, represented the wildest ambitions of Weimar cinema as a cultural institution and social practice. And yet, in this design the city itself, the space where people supposedly had done most of their living and working, is left in the shadow of the luminous film palace. Does Leni’s design then also suggest the cinema’s production of escapist dreamworlds — visions that Kracauer feared could lead to mass stupefaction and delusion?

As Ernst Meret has recently remarked, consistent movie-goers formed their viewing habits around preferred theaters more than the attraction of specific films. Often the look and experience of these spaces formed impressions in the minds of viewers that persisted long after the various films that they had viewed there were forgotten.\textsuperscript{54} New movie theater palaces in Berlin were architectural marvels that “added to the self-confidence and pride of Berlin as a metropolis and film city of paramount importance.”\textsuperscript{55} The designs of the Marmorhaus, the Mozartsaal, the Gloria-Palast, and the UFA Palast am Zoo employed historicist as well as modern, functionalist styles that in many cases represented a culmination of good taste and design. Along with new department stores, movie theater palaces became monuments to German architectural mastery.\textsuperscript{56} Both regularly included spaces for revolving visual displays, such as shop window arrangements and large-scale posters that would draw patrons inside. These posters supported the overall function of the building’s aesthetic, conceived with the hope of elevating the tastes

\textsuperscript{52} “a building so singular in its construction, so explicitly designed for ‘theatricality’ in its facade, that one can describe it as an architectural poster.” Translation mine. Collin, “Filmreklame und Reklamefilms,” 240.

\textsuperscript{53} Kracauer, The Mass Ornament, 323.

\textsuperscript{54} Meret, “Regie der Verführung,” 66.

\textsuperscript{55} Flickinger, “Cinemas in the City,” 79. See also Schmidt, Agelika, Hänsel, and Bähr, Kinoarchitektur in Berlin 1895-1995.

\textsuperscript{56} Muthesius explicitly discusses the development of department store architecture in Berlin as a national endeavor. “Die Baukunst,” 268.
of the masses.\textsuperscript{57} Covering the interior and exterior of the Berlin’s most luxurious movie palaces, large-scale posters such as Fenneker’s positioned the cinema both geographically and culturally to propagate the whole “Drum und Dran” of movie-going.\textsuperscript{58} Now that we have seen how Fenneker’s posters used abstraction to recreate the texture of the moving image on the poster plane, we can more closely consider the cinematic spaces that they helped to create.

As the contracted poster designer for Berlin’s most prestigious theaters, Fenneker’s work played an important role in defining the experience of movie-going as an Expressionist affair. In photographs of the Mozartsaal interior, Fenneker’s spectral figures dance beneath arches bordered with repeating graphic forms reflective of Expressionist tapestries (Fig. 1.14). At the front of house a curtain seems to tremble with a mix of Fenneker’s jagged and sloping abstract lines. Before the house lights were ever dimmed, Fenneker’s aesthetic helped to imbue the space with the film stream’s uncanny chiaroscuro. His neon flourishes foreshadow the magical effect of the projector as described by Joseph Roth:

> a mysterious light that God could never have created and that nature will never manage to produce in a thousand years poured over the front of the stage in soft cascades . . . The illumination presented at one stroke the first glimmer of dawn and the red glow of sunset, heavenly clarity and hellish vapors, city glare and forest green, moonlight and midnight sun. . . It thus became clear that an unknown and powerful divinity was at play, or at serious work here.\textsuperscript{59}

Roth’s account of the pseudo-religiosity that a visit to the cinema inspired references the colors and contrasts mastered by Fenneker. Applied to the structuring architecture of the theater, Fenneker’s expressive emulation of the film’s effects invited audiences to take part in the film’s imaginative play. The posters promised that, filing in and out of these lavish halls, movie-goers could traverse the space between mental/spiritual impression and physical world.

Fenneker’s designs for the theater palaces of Berlin reflect the wider application of Expressionism in interior decoration and its tendency to spiritualize space. Describing the Expressionist approach to art, (which he sees in all forms of abstraction), a commentator for the journal \textit{Dekorative Kunst} remarks that

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{57} “Die Tausende von Menschen, die täglich die Räume eines Warenhauses betreten und die gute Form dort auf sich wirken lassen (mag diese Wirkung bewußt oder unbewußt sein), können sich auf die Dauer dem Einfluß des Schönen nicht entziehen; sie müssen geschmacklich gehoben und erzogen werden.” (“The thousands of people that enter these spaces daily and allow the good forms to work on them (consciously or subconsciously) cannot but elevate their tastes and be educated.”) Translation mine. Ibid., 268.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{58} Schubert, “Das Deutsche Filmplakat,” 446.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{59} Roth qtd. in Kreimeier, \textit{The Ufa Story}, 114.
\end{quote}
“die Naturerscheinung ist ihnen [den Expressionisten] nichts als ein Mittel, um an ihren mehr oder minder kenntlichen Fragmenten einen jener Eindrücke anzuknüpfen, die keine bestimmte Form besitzen, sondern deren Leben sich eigentlich in der flüssigen Form des Geistigen vollzieht.”

60 As Aynsely explains, prioritizing impression over material in this manner was one of two methods for dealing with the encroachment of industrialized materials in the Weimar Republic: Typisierung or Durchgeistigung.61 On the one hand, magazines such as Dekorative Kunst and Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration presented the argument for utility that often resulted in functionalist, anti-ornamental styles: “In der angewandten Kunst ist aber mehr wie irgendwo das Wesentliche: was der Gegenstand uns sagt als ein Stück unseres Milieus, was er uns wert ist im täglichen Zusammenleben.”62 On the other hand, the position of turn-of-the-century design as influenced by seminal figures such as Henry Van de Velde maintained that part of that utility was the spiritualization of space through emotive designs. The spirit evoked by Expressionist-designed use-objects belonged not only to the individual, but society as a whole. As Wolf wrote in 1920, 

Unserer Zeit und ihren stark zeitgenössisch empfindenden Persönlichkeiten wird hier die ihnen gemäße Innenraumkunst gegeben. Nicht nur in Möbeln, auch in all den kleinen, liebenswerten Zierstücken ist die Zeitstimmung lebendig, in den tausend begehrenswoerten Dingen von der Vase bis zur graziös Federblume, die man in die Vitrine legt. Und darauf kommt es doch an: in allen künstlerischen Gestaltungen, welcher Art sie auch sind, den Geist der Zeit, die Stimmung der Zeit ihrer Entstehung festzuhalten.63

60 “The appearance of nature is nothing to them [the Expressionists] other than an object on which to attach more or less recognizable fragments of those impressions that have no determinate form, but whose life actually occurs in the fluid form of the spirit.” Translation mine. Schumacher, “Expressionismus und Architektur,” 20.

61 Aynsely translates these concepts as “standardization” and “spiritualization,” Aynsley, Designing Modern Germany, 50.

62 “In the applied arts more than elsewhere this is essential: what the object says to us as a piece of our milieu, what value it has to us in daily life.” Translation mine. “Die Münchener Ausstellung,” 223.

63 “Our time, with its highly sensitive contemporary personalities, is given a corresponding interior art. Not only in furniture, but also in all the small, charming decorations, the mood of this period comes alive: in a thousand desirable things, from the vase to the graceful russian knapweed blossom that one lays in the vitrine. And it is truly a necessity of all artistic designs, of whatever sort they might be, to capture the spirit of the time, the mood of the period in its formation.” Translation mine. Wolf, “Die Deutsche Werkstätte,” 10.
In Expressionist interiors, Wolf maintains, the tiniest details of design unite to create a visual articulation of contemporary experience. Fennerker’s curtains, posters, and repeating decorative elements represented that experience as a play between light and shadow that excited the nerves and affirmed the existence of a supernatural world. Most importantly, his design reflected the desire to reconfigure material reality through the lens of human subjectivity.

Expressionist film, interiors, architecture and painting have recently been considered together in an exhibit that celebrates Expressionism as an effort toward Gesamtkunstwerk, an audacious multi-media expansion of the movement into a unified all-sensory experience. In fact, the intersections between objects inspired by Expressionist abstraction are much more scattered and diffuse than the careful orchestrations usually associated with Wagner’s notion of a “total artwork.” As Deborah Lewer suggests in her review of the exhibit, experimentation in various arenas of art was more an aspect of the Expressionist “project of breaking down barriers between art and life” than a pursuit of aesthetic totality. Nonetheless, this perspective on the multi-media impact of the Expressionist movement does well to reassert the wide-reaching rupture with material existence that Expressionism represents.

Writing the first volume on Expressionism and film, Kurtz recalls the bold project of the movement that wished to recreate the world itself. “Der Expressionismus,” he wrote, “will nicht passiv hinnehmen, er will gestalten.” Fennerker’s posters represent the continuation of this attempt, and perhaps its closest simulation of success. They refashioned the world into a creative space where human perspective could shape material reality. This potential is reflected in the posters themselves, which often depict their characters in symbiosis with the stylized representations of their surroundings. The ornamental forms in the background of the poster for Das Frauenhaus von Brescia provide one example suggesting diffuse boundaries between subject and setting; Der Januskopf provides another more explicit and Expressionistically styled example (Fig. 1.15). A fragmented background shoots straight through the

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64 The Institut Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt hosted this 2010 exhibit emphasizing “the synthesis of very different arts as well as the reciprocal permeation and transformation of artistic media so as to achieve — in the best cases—absolute works of art.” Beil, “The Total Artwork,” 14. Also on this subject: Stavrinaki, “Total Artwork vs. Revolution,” 253-76.

65 Lewer, “German Expressionism as ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’?” 1066.

66 “Expressionism does not wish to passively accept, it wishes to create.” Translation mine. Kurtz, “Expressionismus und Film,” 12.
distorted skeletal frame of Conrad Veidt, suggesting mental anguish that extends from the inner world of the figure to the distorted world around him. Even more light-hearted depictions such as Fenneker’s *Die Minderjährige* express a symbiosis between subject and designed setting (Fig. 1.16). An art deco line dividing figure from foreground imitates the graceful curve of the young girl casually sitting just behind (within?) it. This motif, as repeated across numerous posters, essentially reasserts the ambitions of the arts and craft movement (also taken up by the Expressionists) to transform physical surroundings into reflections of inner states. Enterprising exhibitioners of Berlin’s most lavish film palaces correspondingly used Fenneker’s designs to transform their theaters into sites of fantasy and wonder, to make — through lighting and color, abstraction and amplification — the world take on a cinematic hue.

These cinematic spaces gave audiences an opportunity to participate in this re-imagination of reality in a distinctly physical way. They would enter the hall beneath the large posters that seemed to emit their own silver projections of reality and find their seats in a house trimmed in the light and shadow of the film image. Variety shows and reviews, live performances and dance would often precede the film, further eliding the distinction between

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67 The heavily decorated interiors of the film set employ an earlier Jugendstil ideological aesthetic — whereby the intimate life of the individual was projected into the material space of the image. Modernist theory of design and even the designers themselves had begun to turn away from this bourgeois notion of interior decoration. Greenhaigh, *Modernism in Design*, np.
life and simulation. Kracauer gives a stunning description of the “glittering, revue-like creature” that the film exhibition had become in his essay “The Cult of Distraction.” He writes,

The total artwork of effects assaults all the senses using every possible means. Spotlights shower their beams into the auditorium, sprinkling across festive drapes or rippling through colorful, organic-looking glass fixtures. The orchestra asserts itself as an independent power, its acoustic production buttressed by the responsory of the lighting. Every emotion is accorded its own acoustic expression and its color value in the spectrum—a visual and acoustic kaleidoscope that provides the setting for the physical activity on stage: pantomime and ballet. Until finally the white surface descends and the events of the three-dimensional stage blend imperceptibly into two-dimensional illusions.  

For Kracauer, the orchestration of disparate media into the semblance of an artistic unity deprives the movie-going experience of its potentially revolutionary power. The show is most productive where it reveals its own aim toward distraction rather than artistic edification, not attempting to transcend its mass origins. Thus, for Kracauer, Expressionism wrongly strove to unify such spaces with its overt ambitions to reach the soul and help audiences visualize an organic whole among the diverse individuals that gathered there.

When we return to Fenneker’s posters as a prominent example of Expressionist stylization we do see style eliding difference between graphic and photographic imagery, still and moving imagery, and giving the impression of diffuse boundaries between otherwise fundamentally distinct categories such as life and death. So too, in terms of their content Fenneker’s posters combined disparate parts of a film narrative into a single poster design, a feature that garnered praise from poster critics who demanded that the ambience of the advertised film be encapsulated by its ad. Compression and combination were, according to these commentators, the hallmark of cinematic excitement. The mixing of high and low art underscored the entertaining hybridity that resulted. Thus, the artistically ambitious cinema palace existed alongside spaces such the Luna Park, where the low-culture dimension of Fenneker’s cinematic style was more heavily exploited. The Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung reported on the sensational, painterly quality of the park when it re-opened in 1920:

68 Kracauer, The Mass Ornament, 324.
70 Tannenbaum, “Kino, Plakat und Kinoplakat,” 237.
Heute vormittag, Himmelfahrt, wird der Lunapark wieder eröffnet. [...] Eines vor allem: der ganze Park ist neu gestrichen. Ein Hektoliter Farbe ist vergossen. Lustig, lasterhaft sieht der Park aus, ein Gemisch von Expressionismus, Kubismus, Dada und Caligari, und man kann hoffen: Kommt der Provinzler nach Berlin in Erwartung bunter Abenteuer, wird er sie nicht so sehr auf der Straße finden, aber gewiß in seiner Phantasie, wenn er sie an den bunten Farben dieses phantastischen Parkes entzündet.71

The art-infused space engendered a sense of excitement, of cosmopolitanism, and an experience of lavish, abundant fantasy come to life. On Fenneker’s tilt-a-whirl, visitors experienced rapid inclines and dramatic falls amid a paradisiacal setting rendered in abstract flourishes of blue, pink, and purple. Sharing the same visual markers, the film and amusement park were no longer distinct entities — the city appeared to have adapted in order to produce more somatically the cinema’s visual shocks.

Paul Dobryden thus rightly positions Caligari’s aesthetic within the context of the diabolic fairground, modernized for the twentieth-century through the magic of technology.72 The cinema-infused fairground operates as the counterpoint to the movie theater itself — where art and leisure combine in a more structured manner. In both spaces, Fenneker’s Expressionist film aesthetic intervenes to muddy boundaries between profane and sacred, commercial and high artistic endeavor, matter and spirit. If the early Expressionists strove to penetrate the cold exterior of technologically inflected reality through art, Fenneker’s extravagant cinema spaces allowed one to imagine that art had succeeded. Technology, whether in the form of the wild ride in an amusement park or the flickering film stream, had been made the servant of a collective fantasy. And yet, cultural critics were quick to point out that by seeming to transcend the material world, this mode of Expressionist styling, like Jugendstil before it, offered only a dream that one had awakened.73

As Kracauer wrote of multimedia cinema exhibitions, “The stimulations of the senses succeed one another with such rapidity that there is no room left between them for even the slightest

71 “This morning, on the day of ascension, the Lunapark was reopened. . . . Above all, the park has been newly painted. A hectoliter of paint has been spilled. The park looks droll and decadent, a mix of Expressionism, Cubism, Dada and Caligari, and one can hope that when a citizen from the provinces comes to Berlin expecting colorful adventures, he won’t find them so much on the streets, but surely in his own fantasies when he ignites them with the bright colors of this fantastic park.” Translation mine. Kirsch, “Die Filmlakate von Josef Fenneker,” 32.


73 Elsaesser traces Expressionist stylization back to Jugendstil before it, which Benjamin likened to a dream of being awake, an aesthetic that “forces the auratic” in an attempt to come to terms with technology. Elsaesser, Weimar Cinema and After, 38; and Benjamin, Arcades Project, 551-7.
An integral element of this flow, posters would conduct the attention of the patron from the street into the theater, leaving no neutral space in between for productive reflection. Kracauer’s explanation of the process is worth repeating in its entirety:

like Pegasus prancing on a carousel, this spirit must run in circles and may never tire of praising to high heaven the glory of a liqueur and the merits of the best five-cent cigarette. Some sort of magic spurs that spirit relentlessly amid the thousand electric bulbs, out of which it constitutes and reconstitutes itself into glittering sentences. Should the spirit by chance return at some point, it soon takes its leave in order to allow itself to be cranked away in various guises in a movie theater. It squats as a fake Chinaman in a fake opium den, transforms itself into a trained dog that performs ludicrously clever tricks to please a film diva, gathers up into a storm amid towering mountain peaks, and turns into both a circus artist and a lion at the same time. How could it resist these metamorphoses? The posters swoop into the empty space that the spirit itself would not mind pervading; they drag it in front of the silver screen, which is as barren as an emptied-out palazzo. And once the images begin to emerge one after another, there is nothing left in the world besides their evanescence. One forgets oneself in the process of gawking, and the huge dark hole is animated with the illusion of a life that belongs to no one and exhausts everyone.75

Heavenly myth combines with commercial appeal as Kracauer beautifully captures the wonderment that electrically illuminated advertisements strove to elicit in passersby. Positioning the spectator-spirit at the feet of the film diva, Kracauer underlines the seeming perversity of the public enslavement to constant entertainment and distraction. (He also conjures up the problematic power attributed to the female star, the subject of the coming chapter). In Kracauer’s terms, film and poster art are not incapable of rendering real insight, rather, as he writes in his famous essay on the mass ornament: “The very things that should be projected onto the screen have been wiped away, and its surface has been filled with images that cheat us out of the image of our existence.”76 For Kracauer, the inherent danger in this kind of ceaseless distraction, where we take on the subjectivities of the imaginary images that bombard us, must have been compounded by Expressionist styling, which in a short essay describing the “death” of the movement in 1920 he described as being particularly regressive.

In this lesser known text, Kracauer recognizes the initial project of Expressionism as a counter-weight to the changing material reality spurred on by technological advance. “To herald freely his own

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75 Ibid., 332.
76 Ibid., 308.
visions without any kind of consideration for the worldly material at hand: that is the focus of his desire.”

And yet, this embattlement against reality had amounted to a kind of retreat. Instead of revealing the soul to the onlooker, Expressionism creates an illusory experience that, like cinematic distraction, alienates the intoxicated individual from his own soul. The vibrancy of the lighted street, its posters, its musical orchestrations hinder viewers from exercising their autonomy wherever they don’t admit their own adherence to the cult of distraction and instead pretend that theirs is a spiritual, artistic endeavor.

In light of the responses that they garnered in advertising journals and in conceptual representations of urban space, the overwhelming presence of poster after poster on the sides of buildings made a profound impression. Fenneker references instances in which whole subway tunnels were transformed with repeated postings. Similarly, Das Plakat makes note of an enormous advertising campaign for Joe May’s Veritas Vincit (1918) that brought the sense of art deco order often featured within film palace design onto subway platforms where multiple postings side-by-side gave the impression of one unending ornamental line (Fig. 1.17). In his 1928 film Spione, Fritz Lang uses film posters to suggest that urban space is one of dubious femininity and ornate controlling machinations. Werner Graul’s iconic design for the premier of Metropolis (Lang 1927) outnumbers and outsizes the protagonist Willy Fritsch, in this scene where he has learned that his love interest is involved with another man (Fig.

77 Kracauer, “A Turn in Art’s Destiny,” 437.
78 Fenneker, “Josef Fenneker,” 2.
1.18). In a wider shot, the Graul design and its accompanying poster of the female automaton are interspersed with looping text advertising for a “circus” (Fig. 1.19). They mark the urban landscape as one of over-bearing display in which duplicity is part and parcel of the very structure of its walls. Lang’s film goes on to articulate the fear that this circus is being coordinated by an all-powerful ring-leader. The use of advertisements to visualize this oppressive anxiety of control appropriately evokes concerns about mass suggestion and the fabrication of a pleasure-sphere that occludes the material conditions of urban life.

In light of the historical trajectory that followed in Germany and the prominent efforts of the National Socialists to employ the cinema and posters in their political propaganda campaigns, these earlier suggestions of mass manipulation have rightfully engendered criticism. Lang’s poster-filled figuration of urban disorientation and Kracauer’s description of the poster’s contribution to the dizzying pace of commercial life remain compelling. It is not just that they seem to foreshadow the rise of the National Socialists, however. Today, their illustrations of urban life all too closely reflect the harried experience of contemporary masses as we are constantly bombarded with our own novel, technological distractions. The same concerns about the deterioration of social life, the flattening of experience into surface consumption, and the fragmentation of attention that were incited in the early twentieth century have since been intensified by digital media. New texts, both scholarly and popular, are continually being published on the effect of internet distraction on individual and collective psychology. All the while, we watch companies and individuals rake in large sums of money based on our inability to unplug. There is a

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79 According to Gunning this is the suspicion undergirding a number of Lang’s Weimar films. Gunning, Films of Fritz Lang, 87-162.

mounting concern not only that our every day experiences are being degraded by the plethora of digital images that we produce and consume, but that the technological tools to which we have become accustomed will be used to manipulate, control, or otherwise exploit us without our consent. And yet, just as we often allow our own anxieties about technology to misrepresent its effects as primarily negative, we too easily conceive of early poster “propaganda” in light of the negative sense that the word has incurred.

Though we imagine, like Kracauer, the distractions of technology hitting us in a rush of color and speed, spiriting the masses around time and space, new technology also affords us greater opportunity to control and manipulate that speed ourselves. Thus, Mulvey speaks of the pensive and possessive spectator able to pause the stream of the film at will and refigure the still images undergirding moving pictures. In fact, such opportunities for pause have been an aspect of film viewership since the silent era. They were provided by fan literature, illustrated commemorative booklets, and, of course, posters. These materials evoked the speed and shock of the moving image but also off-set it with text and images that could be considered at a longer duration. Notably, this extra-textual material places great emphasis on the craft of movie-making, often including anecdotes about industry professionals and tracking the progress of big-budget productions at the hands of costume designers, set architects, and directors. Like the early exhibition practice of revealing the projector during the show to exhibit the technological mechanism that makes the illusion possible, articles and advertisements reveal the craft that supports the illusion. Feneker’s self-reflexive posters, by emphasizing the novelty of the moving image, heighten the desire to grasp the “how” of moving image technology. Thus, the all-encompassing shock of the cinematic spectacle was mitigated by his posters, which helped to parse out the nature of the illusion even as they constituted its structure.

FIGURE 1.20 Feneker, Die Jagd nach dem Tode (1920). Lithograph, 96 x 74 cm. Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek.

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81 Mulvey, Death 24x a Second, 17-32.
Correspondingly, the city, which for many was characterized by a rush of adrenaline, also included moments of stillness and quietude that have traditionally been less acknowledged by cultural historians. As the commentator for the *Berliner Morgenblatt* already suggests in 1920, the vision of the city as a rushing tilt-a-whirl is one crafted mainly for tourists. The streets, in contrast, included moments of ennui that were just as constitutive of the urban experience. Art critic Kutzke suggests an alternative experience of the city that in his view should guide the next iteration of the *Sachplakat*:


Kutzke’s call for a more complex poster aesthetic reminds us that the pace of the city did include moments of waiting and listlessness. Posters in this setting saturate the inevitable pauses in the procession of a day, giving the viewer a chance to return to complex ideas with a critical, restful eye, while waiting at a bus stop, drinking a cup of coffee, or standing in line. Given the popularity of the Luna Park and new entertaining thrills that had become the rage of the 1920s, certainly Kracauer’s description of the ceaselessly driven spirit characterizes an impulse of modern living toward distraction, and yet a poster in its stillness, its repetition, and reiteration may conversely have served as a kind of meditative mandala, shaping moments of stasis that likewise suffused the city.

FIGURE 1.21 Fenneker, *Anna Karenina* (1920). Lithograph, 72 x 95 cm. Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek.

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82 *“In addition, the Object-poster, impeccable in its clarity and precision, must also satisfy the notion, alongside the poster-column-speculation, that one sometimes must spend the entire night in a waiting room, and that, with a beer glass in hand, one doesn’t run from poster to poster, but instead allows them to effect him while in repose — and often quite thoroughly! Only then will we arrive at an expansion of the artistic possibilities — through the depths of skill and beyond the cliffs from which masked-kitsch sings to the wayward Artist-Odysseus.”* Translation mine. Kutzke, “Kitsch und Plakat,” 385.
These posters brought the impression of multi-media entertainment into these periods of pause, as Fenneker’s self-described “immer wechselnden Eindruck” aimed at capturing “das Wesentliche” in film.\(^3\) Exaggerated perspective and vanishing horizon lines emulated the speed and force of the approaching train that legendarily frightened viewers at the first-ever public film exhibition, as seen in his posters for the Karl Gerhardt’s melodramatic *Die Jagd nach dem Tod* (1920), and the filmic adaptation of *Anna Karenina* (Friedrich Zelnik 1920) (Fig. 1.20-1.21). Similarly, bodily contortions in his poster for the 1920 Lya Mara film *Fasching*, suggest the convergence of music and muscle in modern dance (Fig. 1.22). Swirling forms pull the eye along the poster plane in a looping motion with the largest of the feathery tales in the “F” and the line of Mara’s billowing skirt leading conspicuously toward the small darkened face in the bottom corner of the poster bordered in a gleam of blue.

Fenneker’s posters, like the films they advertised, often included such exoticized and racialized figures tucked into the background of the image. Inciting the Weimar fascination with non-Western people as a font of mysticism and counter-culture inspiration, the depiction of a dark-skinned musician alludes to the jazz craze sweeping through Berlin.\(^4\) Simultaneously, the open, viewer-directed stare andcrudely rendered facial features create a visual interruption to the otherwise fluid graphic composition. Here, we see the compositional treatment of the black guitarist as a reflection of divergent media at play within the the image: music, dance, visual art, and film. His still presence punctuates the undulating movement of

\(\text{FIGURE 1.22 Fenneker, } \textit{Fasching} \,(1920).\text{ Lithograph, 71 x 94 cm. Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek.}\)

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\(^4\) For more on racially-loaded images of black bodies in Weimar poster art see Collar, The Propaganda War in the Rhineland; on the same topic in Weimar film see Nagl, “Lois Brody,” 109-135. The depiction of people of African descent is also critical in Expressionism where the notion of “primitivism” held complex associations with both violence and utopia. See Leja, Reframing Abstract Expressionism, 49-120.
the rest of the composition, building a tension that demands audiences craft, within the mind, a multi-
media experience.

Removed from the movie palace and represented in a still-image composite, however, the multi-
media cinematic illusion becomes provocatively vulnerable to analysis and contemplation. On the street it
must compete with other postings and the coming and going of public life, becoming one face among
many in an anonymous crowd. “Bild-Plakat, Photos, und das aus diesen zusammengesetzte
Clicheeplakat,” wrote Professor Mahlberg in Das Plakat, “können als die Physiognomie des Begriffs Kino
gelten. Sie geben aber auch jedem einzelnen Stück Film das Gesicht, mit dem es sich aus dem Innern
des Hauses heraus an das unumgängliche Leben der Straße legt.”85 The poster infiltrates everyday life
on a much more subtle level than in the immersive spaces it adorns indoors, taking on varied faces to
promote continuously fluctuating programs. In fact, despite Lang’s sea of Metropolis posters in Spione,
we know from critical commentary that during the Weimar Republic film posters were singularly subject to
restrictions that forbade excessive posting in non-designated areas.86 The large-scale postings that were
the norm in American cities were held up in contrast to the confined possibilities for poster advertising in
German urban centers.87 Fenneker described posters as the “‘Visitenkarte’ des Filmes,” an integral
aspect of the cinema’s accoutrement, suggesting that the poster must be capable of a more intimate
address than we might at first attribute to it. In quiet corners of the city, the poster’s filmic juxtaposition of
presence and absence becomes more pronounced, undermining the multi-sensory illusion of exhibition
and revealing the apparatus underneath. Mulvey explains that “narrative drive tends to weaken if the
spectator is able to control its flow, to repeat and return to certain sequences while skipping others.” 88 In
the same manner, the spatial sanctity of the multi-sensory cinema palace is broken down by poster
fragments offered up for audience contemplation around the city.

85 “Image-posters, photos, and their composite in the Clichee-poster can be considered the physiognomy of the cinema. However,
they also give a face to every individual film, with which it can exit the house and proceed out into the indispensable life of the

86 See Sachs, “Filmprüfungstelle / Plakatverbote / Nacktheiten,” 479-81; Eckstein, “Das Reklamepolizeirecht,” 16; and Collin,
“Filmreklame und Reklamefilme,” 236.

87 Jacobsohn, “Amerikanische Filmreklame in Deutschland,” 4-5.

88 Mulvey, Death 24 x a Second, 165.
In this same vein, Dobryden recently described the spectatorial pleasure in Caligari as stemming not from the creation of a seamless illusion but “in seeing through the trick and figuring out how it worked.” This same pleasure, as he, Gunning, and Mulvey have reminded us, was the hallmark of the fairground, where Fenneker’s Expressionism likewise flourished. The designer’s Expressionist cinema spaces, like many Expressionist films, foreground the role of the subjective mind in completing the illusion and offers a heightened awareness of the illusion’s constituent parts. The Fasching poster provokes the mind to hear the lick of the jazz guitar, to animate the light that flows through the dancer’s skirt. Through participation in the exhibition process, audiences become co-creators of the film through their own imaginative play. The poster provides the means through which the movie-goer can both immerse him or herself within the cinematic space — transforming physical reality with the artistic impressions of the mind — and, outside of the theater, engage in a more critical review of its methods.

1.3 STAHL-ARPKE AND PRESENT ABSENCE

In film there is no such thing as the ‘purely’ external or ‘empty’ decoration. In film, everything internal becomes visible in something external; it follows that everything external testifies to an internal reality.

— Béla Balázs

One of the most widely recognized film posters of all time, Stahl-Arpke’s advertisement for the Caligari campaign, rather than depicting a climactic moment from the film to thrill its viewers on sight, uses a still, empty room to invite a sustained moment of contemplation (Fig. 1.23). In his history of graphic design, Stephen Eskilson notes the resonance between this poster and works of visual art in which a vacant chair figures as a reminder of death. The autumnal hue of this still-life, its distorted perspective, and skewed verticality recall Vincent Van Gogh’s painting of his own chair, likely modeled on “The Empty Chair,” by painter Sir Samuel Luke Flides 1870, which depicted the deceased Charles Dickens’s vacant chair.

88 Dobryden, “23 May 1920,” 82.
89 Mulvey, Death 24 x a Second, 41-7.
90 Béla Balázs, Early Film Theory, 29.
91 Eskilson, Graphic Design, 214.
writing desk. This palpable art historical lineage — drawing on the imagery from one of the Expressionists’ most well-known influences — contributes to an educated viewer’s impression of the film. Even without knowledge of the backstory, however, the quiet foreboding of the room suggests death just as surely as its art historical precursors had done.

Blazes of yellow and red are cast against canted walls by a single candle that bows forward in an almost-human crouch. Its light combats the cross-hatched shadows bleeding downward from the darkened ceiling, while in the foreground the raised back of a single chair quivers on squatty legs. The unnatural compression of space produces an ambiance of dreamy befuddlement. Like shards against the darkened rafters, light draws the eye upward to the gothic lettering of the title, which seems to have been conjured there by some kind of magic. As Meret neatly elucidates, “Diese zurückgelassenen, gewissermassen lebendig gewordenen Requisiten ersetzen die Figuren, die sonst in den Filmplakaten stellvertretend den noch nicht gesehenen Film imaginieren lassen, und sie stilisieren das ausdruckshafte Dekor zum eigentlichen Protagonisten des Films.”

Removing the star persona normally at the center of the film advertisements, the poster asks the


93 The symbolism in Van Gogh’s painting has opened the work to repeated analysis and study among art historians. Van Gogh once remarked that after a visit from his father he was brought to tears at the sight of his empty chair after the older man’s departure. Wessels, Van Gogh and the Art of Living, 131.

94 Van Gogh’s influence on the Expressionist artists of Germany and Austria has been well-documented, and it is entirely possible that his chair image served as inspiration for the poster. More importantly than a direct line of influence however, is the recognition that the poster suggests: the stylistic elements from Van Gogh’s work that had been adapted by the generation of German Expressionist painters early in the twentieth century had become a part of the visual cache of the early Weimar Republic. Neue National Galerie president Ronald S. Lauder writes that the Dutch artist’s use of color and structure changed the way in which the young Expressionists approached their work technically, and thereby Van Gogh “almost single-handedly brought a greater sense of emotional depth to painting.” “Van Gogh and Expressionism,” http://www.neuegalerie.org/exhibitions/van-gogh-and-expressionism.

95 “These vacated props, made virtually sentient, replace the human figures that otherwise evoke the as-yet-unseen film in [conventional] film posters. They fashion the expressive decor into the veritable protagonist of the film.” Translation mine. Meret, “Regie der Verführung,” 74.
audience to relate to the material world in the film as they would one of its characters. The uncanny decor prefigures the prophetic lines of the elderly man that open Caligari’s frame story: “There are spirits / They are all around us.” Stahl-Arpke’s rendering of this empty room suggests that these spirits can be seen, but not in a flurry of movement. Rather, when given over to nearly still settings, audience awareness can finally rest with the unnamed ghosts that haunt Stahl-Arpke’s poster.

Like the poster, the film itself does not hurry the spectator along in a wave of intensity — but frequently constructs suspense through quiet visions in which the image takes on the quality of a still-life painting. We witness the jagged outline of Holstenwall, its crooked pathways and empty corridors as static but emotionally saturated spaces through which the actors proceed in and out. The barren room in Stahl-Arpke’s poster resurfaces in the film in just this manner, for instance, as Francis, the narrator of the film’s strange tale, introduces us to his friend, Alan, the eventual victim of the diabolical Caligari. In a composition bearing striking resemblance to the poster, Alan stands in the rear of the shot, dwarfed by the most dominant element in room, the single chair, gleaming in the foreground under a bright light (Fig. 1.24). Alan proceeds slowly forward from underneath the tilting angles of the walls in the background to the front of the shot, eventually resting his arm on the chair before the film cuts in to a medium shot where he visibly struggles to concentrate on the book opened in his hand. Fretfully, the young man looks over his shoulder, chair back still visible in the opposite edge of the frame, before the film cuts back to the original framing and he heads for the window in the background.

After a moment’s happy deliberation there, Alan exits the frame quickly on the right, leaving us alone with the empty chair, a disconsolate lighted lamp, and the mosaic arrangement of the window panes at the rear of the room. In the ensuing pause, the memory of the poster helps us ascertain the aesthetic significance of the shot; we are encouraged to look at its various elements with the same careful attention that we might have brought to a painting in an art gallery. As a

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96 Arnheim identifies the expressive property of inanimate objects as a hallmark of film art writing: “the classification — so characteristic of film — of man as one among many objects is plainly revealed. The traces of human strivings are as visible on inanimate objects as they are on the body.” Arnheim, Film as Art, 143.
result, our anticipation increases until Alan reenters the frame, this time with coat and hat, and affirms our interest in the set by casting one long, wistful look about the room. He then withdraws.

Bringing to mind the striking composition of the poster, the shot of Alan’s empty room strongly foreshadows his impending death even before Caligari’s somnambulist, Cesare, predicts the young man’s ineluctable end. The conspicuous placement of the empty chair carries the poster’s visual eulogy into the world of the film where it simultaneously emphasizes the graphic quality of the film’s aesthetic.

Accordingly, a commentator for Film-Kurier explicated the combination of “Expressionismus im Film” by referring to the haunting anguish embodied in Alan’s attic chamber:


As the commentary suggests, the depth of emotion in the scene is generated primarily by the film set — its carefully composed and uncannily off-kilter details. Moving in real time, the actors appeared absurdly disjunct from these overly stylized, almost two-dimensional settings, leading some to criticize the film for its staginess. Even the typically promotional Film-Kurier conceded, “Man kann sich die schiefen Linien, die Dreieck- und Viereckfiguren der modernen Malerei nicht plastisch im Raume vorstellen, vermutet eine Verdoppelung des Unwahrscheinlichen. Besonders befremdend in der Realität der Filmphotographie.”

Dissonance between the

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97 “I first saw an attic. A low-hanging roof. Far in the background a window with haphazardly sloping, intersecting muntins. In the distance the silhouette of a roof with angled chimneys. In the sitting room, a humble bed and two chairs with never-ending backrests. Effusive painting appears on the wall, overlaps above the bedframe. The details are bizarre, but never in a set have I received the impression of such oppressive desolation, such excruciating loneliness, so deeply and clearly as here.” Translation mine. J.B., “Expressionismus im Film,” 1.

98 The author also picks out the scene from the fairground to describe in similar detail, the same setting taken for Stahl-Arpke’s supplementary poster analyzed later in this chapter. Ibid., 1.

99 See also Prawer, Caligari’s Children, 32; on criticisms that Caligari was merely staged theater.

100 “One cannot imagine the oblique lines, the triangular and quadrilateral figures of modern painting in three-dimensional space, one assumes a doubling of the improbable. Especially anomalous in the reality of film photography.” Translation mine. J.B. “Expressionismus im Film,” 1.
technological-objective eye of the camera and abstract artistic stylization dismantles the illusion of reality often produced in feature films.

By comparison, Jürgen Kasten’s analysis of *Von Morgens Bis Mitternachts* (Karl Heinz Martin, 1920) proves how important the hybridity between photographic and graphic, or realism and style was for Weimar audiences.\(^{101}\) Martin’s film, Kasten argues, was too close a simulation of graphic art to succeed with audiences, thus its failure to attract commercial distributors. *Von Morgens bis Mitternachts* underscores boundaries surrounding what was acceptable for “rigorously abstract tendencies in narrative cinema.”\(^{102}\) In comparison to the flat, strictly black and white etchings that make up Martin’s film, Alan’s attic room is soft, warmly three-dimensional, its angles and abstract lines formed partially by lighting and partially by the painted set (Fig. 1.24 and 1.25). Where the overly abstract stylization of *Von Morgens bis Mitternachts* asks too much of its viewers, the seamless illusion of reality would ask too little. In *Caligari* graphic and photographic tendencies strike a balance, calling attention to the magical ability of the film to animate the inanimate. Alan’s movement in and out of the setting and the moment of emptiness in between allow the audience the space in which to take in that transition between graphic stasis offered by the poster and life-like animation offered by the filmstrip. Correspondingly, in the later fairground sequence, Caligari displays a life-sized poster rendering of Cesare before we ever enter his darkened cabinet to watch him bring the sleeping Cesare to life. A number of contemporary scholars have analyzed the fairground sequence as a self-reflexive moment in which

\(^{101}\) Kasten, “Film as Graphic Art,” 170-1.

\(^{102}\) Ibid., 171.
the magic of movie-going is invoked.103 Few have commented on the role of poster art, which, within the sequence, engenders the cinema’s most provocative charms.

As the sequence opens, the camera is positioned among the crowd, peering over assembled heads to see the large-scale poster elevated in the distance (Fig. 1.26). In keeping with the Expressionist styling of the film, bold black demarcates the somnambulist’s silhouette on the right side of the frame. While the poster drawing leans mutely in the corner, the dwarfed Caligari must wave his arms in a flurry to gather attention. Then, in a stylized intertitle, the film audience is given Caligari’s description of the “death-like trance” in which the young man is caught. Having slept for the entire twenty-four years of his life, the immobile Cesare is as fixed as the poster that depicts him. Caligari hoists the poster upward and brandishes his cane at it and then places it once more against the side of his tent, pulling back a curtain on the left at a corresponding angle. The poster helps to construct the “cabinet” visually, marking the exhibition space for the audience and providing a doorway into that space just as surely as the tent flap that it mirrors in the composition of this shot (Fig. 1.27).

Once inside Caligari’s fairground tent, the film audience joins the crowd of on-screen spectators as Caligari reveals the real Cesare, frozen in a box that contains his angular body like the frame of a photograph, making his countenance a visual match to the poster outside (Fig. 1.28). Caligari, gesturing once more with a special baton, calls the sleep-walker to life. We watch with the audience in close up as Cesare’s heavy eyelids blink open with deliberate, mechanical motions into wide reflective globes (Fig. 1.29-1.30). Cesare’s slow awakening mirrors the practices of early cinematic exhibition wherein the still image would be displayed before it was animated through the spinning projector reel. As Kaes explains, “As Caligari brings life to the catatonic Cesare with the touch of his wand, so does the film


103 Among others: Dobryden, “23 May 1920,” 83; Elsaesser, Weimar Cinema and After, 77-8; Kaes, Shell Shock Cinema, 58; Petro, “The Woman, the Monster, and the Cabinet,” 215; and Scheunemann, “The Double, the Decor, and the Framing Device,” 150.
projector bring life to still pictures.”104 If the show can be read as a transition between media — from photographic (the perfectly still-framed Cesare within his coffin-like box), to the moving picture image itself (the blinking Cesare whose eyes see beyond material reality into the truth), then we must understand Caligari’s poster pre-show as the constructive moment in which the showman identifies his exhibit as an opportunity to penetrate the “image” of reality. Caligari promises to unearth the subject represented by the poster and reveal the supernatural basis of that reality. Thus the wakened, cinematic Cesare can answer any question from the audience with absolute authority—even Alan’s gruesome query: “How long will I live?”

The significance of the poster in this sequence is underscored by another of Stahl-Arpke’s poster commissions for the film (Fig. 1.31). This lithograph, unlike the others that we have seen for this premier, actually gives us some context for recognizing the “cabinet” as an iteration of the fairgrounds where the first silent films were exhibited in Germany.105 A press of spectators in the left corner shows a mix of attraction and repulsion to the large black and white poster of Cesare that hangs on the far right of the design. The image employs a mix of caricature and Expressionist abstraction that hints at a satirical approach to the subject matter, while knife-like bunting makes the fairground’s multiple stages resemble the gaping jaws of toothed dragons, maintaining the sense of foreboding we saw in corresponding advertisements. Modern typography floats across the top of the poster as if from the fairground’s advertising banners, creating an impression of blended old and new world design elements. Inter-framing mechanisms in this poster (the framing tent pole on the far

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104 Kaes, Shell Shock Cinema, 58.

105 Kaes writes: “the movie’s fairground scenes with their crude sensationalism and transgressive subtext are strongly reminiscent of the early Wanderkino, a type of tent cinema” — these housed variety and freak shows, some of which Kaes points out featured hypnosis and occult exhibitions that are suggested by the Caligari film. Ibid., 61.
right and the receding edges of roofs and tent flaps in the back) suggest the mise-en-abyme frequently featured in this self-reflexive film.

As in many graphic design compositions of this period, the eye is directed through the composition by unifying lines, angles, and forms. In the very center of the composition, a mere suggestion of a barker sits underneath a triangular tent. Above his head a wind-mill shape of light and shadow extends outward from a centrifugal point. Graphically similar to conventional depictions of light rays, it subtly suggests the presence of the projected image at work in such spaces. The bodies of a lone spectator and the Caligari-barker figure that flank the star-like blaze are angled like spokes extending from its axis. Thus, this undefined space at the very center of the frame compels the eye out toward the Cesare poster and its audience on the edges of the frame. Glaring sardonically over his shoulder and cast in gray-scale that contrasts with the softer yellow and red tent flaps, the poster of Cesare here is just as life-like as his audience. In fact, towering above their cowering lilting top-hats, Cesare takes control of the composition, even the anonymous-looking Caligari before him appears to serve merely as his medium. This flattening of differentiation between reality and representation highlights the media tensions that come to play in the film.

Cesare’s explicit transition from still to moving image was encoded in numerous silent films and film advertisements of the Weimar period, attesting to the enduring pleasure of watching the illusion of the cinema unfold. Cesare (Robert Wiene 1920), a film meant to piggy-back on Caligari’s success, tells the story of a painting come to life through the dreams of a young artist. In the frame story that opens the film, the audience watches as Fern Andra, posing as a priestess of the occult, steps carefully out of her frame (Fig. 1.33). Before she comes to life, she is but one element in the bourgeois interior where a young artist, Percy, has fallen asleep while reading from a favorite book. The entirety of the room is divided by interior framing mechanisms, doorways, staircases, and draping.
curtains that suggest theatricality and draw attention to the decorative elements that make up the image. The painting of Genuine, flanked by a heavy drapery, sets off the two-dimensional space as a stage set within the interior. As the image comes to life, it affirms the magical potential of the rest of the setting, suggesting that each object within it could have a parallel spiritual dimension, which under the right circumstances could be revealed. Genuine thus allows the inanimate world its own inner life, which the viewer can potentially grasp with the help of photographic technology. Such images, repeated in numerous films from this period, help in “situating cinema at the juncture of science, magic, and trickery.”¹⁰⁷

In such examples, film succeeds in uniting two opposing methods of revelation — the subjective elements of the painterly medium that heighten the spiritual tenor of the image and filmic technology, which represents reality without the distortions of the human mind. By combining both subjective and objective properties, Expressionist film and poster advertisements promised to alter a viewer’s relationship not only with the projected image, but with their own surroundings as well. Thus, a fear arose that the cinema, with its ability to penetrate to the core of the human brain, could result in hallucinatory effects. Stephen Andriopoulos has recently uncovered substantial evidence that early German cinema incited scientific research, articles, and artworks that questioned whether or not the individual could be controlled by means of mass media hypnosis.¹⁰⁸ Andriopoulos’s work identifies the suspected influence of film and advertising media on the unwitting public, particularly the young and uneducated. However, my research into film and poster art suggests that consumers of mass media were invited to share critics’ awareness of medium-specific affects. This is not to say that the suspicions and anxieties surrounding both film and advertising industries and their suggestive powers were not a real aspect of Weimar culture and a shaping force


in these two media. Rather, by emphasizing this subtext, the films and posters promised to reveal their own methods of penetrating the mind to illuminate the differences between perception and reality.

We have seen that Expressionism, broadly conceived as graphic abstraction, was employed by many of the most significant film poster artists of the early Weimar period, notably Joseph Fenneker and the Stahl-Arpke duo, in order to represent the cinematic as an opportunity to peer beyond the veil of material reality. At the same time, these posters helped to construct the very physicality of cinematic spaces and to suggest that fantasy had begun to dictate the formation of the material world. In their deviation from reality, however, the posters’ abstract painterly visions helped to draw attention to the visual devices of the cinema for evoking pleasure and in fact suggest an audience that was aware of (and likely delighted in) contemplating the apparatus behind the cinematic illusion. At times this delight materializes as an ironic, playful quality amidst the notoriously “dark” subject matter of German Expressionist Film. We see it in the softer tones of Stahl-Arpke’s fairground poster for Caligari and the sardonic smile of Fenneker’s prostitute in the poster promoting Oswald’s film. Similarly, in his most ambitious project, Das Wachsfigurenkabinett, graphic designer-turned-movie director Paul Leni laces his heavy-handed style with humorous asides to undercut the supposed power of the seamless dreamworld that Expressionist cinema spaces may have otherwise represented. In the final section of this chapter, I demonstrate that Leni’s appropriation of Expressionism was a method of emphasizing the hand of the artist at work, engaging the audience in that creative process, and suggesting a more democratic construction of the super-material “dream” that had begun to characterize urban space.

1.4 WAXWORKS

Denn Komik ist die Veräußerlichung eines inneren Seelenzustandes, etwa des Verdutzseins, eines maßlosen Erstaunens, eines absonderlichen Schrecks, einer komischen Angst.
— Erich Klein

109 “Because humor is the expression of an inner state of the soul, something of befuddlement, of measureless astonishment, a bizarre fear, a strange anxiety.” Translation mine. Klein, “Psychologie und Reklamekunst,” 321.
The same edition of *Das Plakat* that featured Leni’s Expressionist rendering of the movie palace uses Expressionist abstraction for a quite different effect on its back cover (Fig. 1.33). Turning over the journal over in our hands exposes an advertisement for the highly respected art poster printer, Hollerbaum and Schmitt, where Leni’s repeating patterns of lines and his abstract color usage create an unmistakably playful tone. The Expressionist design depicts a city street as a jungle in which the poster acts like the trumpet blast from an elephant’s raised trunk. The art poster, the design asserts, is exotic, larger-than-life, and unavoidably loud. As a charging behemoth, it topples *Litfaßsäulen* (advertising columns) and sends newspapers fluttering in the wind. In response, the hapless pedestrian can only gawk or duck and run for cover. Leni’s impish design undercuts his figuration of the spiritualizing tendency of the art movement on the front cover of the journal. In this manner, Leni’s design substantiates what Thomas Elsaesser would later call the “cynical courage” of Expressionist cinema. As in Leni’s examples, Expressionist film and the Expressionist designs that inspired and promoted it manage to appeal as legitimate art while poking fun at their sometimes maudlin artistry.

As a film poster artist Leni was most active in the early 1910s. His name is often mentioned along with Leonard and Bernhard in the category of good film poster artists of this period. Even Behne, despite his general censure of film posters, identifies Leni’s prolific work as a welcome release from the more frequent ugly and tasteless examples he derides. Stahl-Arpke in fact modeled their style after his

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110 In 1851 Ernst Litfaß proposed the construction of *Litfaßsäulen* in Berlin in order to contain the ever-more copious postings. These advertising columns were later constructed in Dresden, Stuttgart, Bremen and Leipzig shortly thereafter. During the war and the early years of the Republic public transportation spaces were also opened up as sites for advertisement to allow. During the 1920s these areas were increasingly lit by electricity, meaning that poster art maintained its visual prominence along the cities’ streets even at night. Aynsley, *Graphic Design in Germany*, 56; Ilgen and Schindelbeck, *Am Anfang war die Litfaßsäule*; Cowan, “Taking it to the Street,” 472.


prototypes and set designs, which they credit in a number of examples. 113 These posters have a plushy, cartoon-like appearance in keeping with Leni’s earlier caricature-style. Abstracting the body with a kind of playful cubism, Leni transforms human figures into puppets with the disjointed limbs of a jack-in-the-box.

For instance, one of Leni’s early film posters for the *Tangokönigin* (Max Mack 1914) shows a cartoonish Hanni Weisse dancing off with an advertising column on which the Tango-competition is announced. The column itself serves as her partner, literally and figuratively leading her toward the fame and fortune that she will acquire as tango-queen. The poster thus suggests the new practice of self-promotion that arose with consumer capitalism in this period and is reflected in the star discourse of the time as treated in chapter two. As we can see, Leni does not shy away from explicitly dealing with the absurdity of the centrifugal role of advertising in modern society.

Here, it is important to note that Leni’s use of caricature, though it may at first seem to be at odds with the artistic ambitions of critics for the poster, was the object of praise. Caricature was recognized as a highly appropriate method of visual advertisement that required great communicative efficiency on the part of the artist. The humorous depiction of people or events constituted the first notable examples of poster art in France and shared the same basic tenets of poster-esque stream-lining that came to define graphic design. As one commentator for Das Plakat writes,

> Es liegt im Wesen der Karikatur, zu vereinfachen, zu unterstreichen und zu übertreiben, um dadurch den bestimmten Charakter einer Erscheinung oder einer Person schärfer zu erfassen, und darum ist es ja auch dem Plakat zu tun. Kein Wunder, dass so manche bedeutenden Karikaturisten auch die wirkungsvollsten Plakate entworfen haben. 114

Caricature, described in this way, offers yet another style of subjective abstraction requiring close attention to detail despite an ostensibly “loose” figuration. “An einem Karikaturplakat muss jeder Strich so

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113 *Das Plakat* reproduces several of these in their special edition on film, October 1921.

114 “It is in the nature of the caricature to simplify, to underscore, and to exaggerate in order to more sharply record the specific character of a phenomenon or a person, and thereby it is related to the poster. No wonder that so many important cartoonists have also crafted the most effective posters.” Translation mine. Henkel, “Das höllandische Plakat,” 122.
geführt oder - um im Jargon der Maler zu reden - so ‘hingehauen’ sein, dass er ein Witz für sich ist,” Collin insists.115 These comments suggest that through caricature abstraction had a home in advertisement before it became fashionable to use Expressionism as mode of “artistic” design. It is telling then that the caricaturist Leni achieved enduring recognition for his later work in film; his style has been categorized alongside the premier Expressionist directors of the period. It suggests an affinity between caricature and artistic abstraction that has not been sufficiently acknowledged.

Leni’s most enduring work, Das Wachsfigurenkabinett, was never completed as first planned but released in a truncated version in 1924. Today it is considered the “last” Expressionist film before the industry took a new direction under the umbrella of Neue Sachlichkeit. The episodic film tells the story of a young writer who is hired by the owner of a wax museum to compose short, promotional tales about the tyrannical figures whose likenesses reside there. The stories that build around each lifeless but lifelike figure recommend the fantastic experience of film viewership and propose it as a transmedial one. Each figure is brought to life by the writer’s advertising text, giving the still object a visible moving story to accompany it. Thus, it is no coincidence that the frame setting is identified in the opening sequence as Berlin’s Luna park, the very space that Fenneker had helped to define as a cinematic space with his Expressionist decor.

The fantastic content and visually diverse ornamentation of the three episodes have led to comparisons with Lang’s earlier Der Müde Tod (1921).116 However, in Lang’s film the episodes are organized around a universalizing, elemental principle, personified in the image of “Death.” In this manner, the film suggests a metaphysical reality to which the actors are subject, whereas in Leni’s film the artist himself is cast as the orchestrator of the strange visions that the film presents. Assisted by the museum owner’s cheerful daughter, the writer first composes an orientalist fantasy about a gluttonous caliph, Haroun-Al-Raschid (Emil Jannings), who sets out to seduce a baker’s wife. Eisner calls attention to the “puffy dough-like settings” that are “skillfully matched to the bloated physique of Jannings.”117

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115 "In a caricature poster every stroke must be executed or — to speak in the jargon of the painter — worked so that the line is a joke in and of itself.” Translation mine. Collin, “Filmreklame Reklamefilme,” 240.


117 Ibid., 116.
calif, ornately costumed in jewels and wrapped in a turban the size of a bed sheet, resembles the rounded architectural structures that make up the fantasy world. This symbiosis between setting and character resembles that in Fenneker’s Expressionist posters. In effect, it would appear that the Calif exercises control over the space that resembles him. Correspondingly, at the close of the episode, he takes the young couple under the arms of his luxurious robe, signifying his transitive reach (Fig. 1.36). However, it is the young baker’s wife that has manipulated him and ultimately coerced him into elevating the couple according to her own wishes. At one point she even thrusts the mighty calif into the baker’s oven, suggesting that she is cooking up her own plot. Her actions point to the enduring autonomy of the young couple despite the supposed pervasiveness of the calif’s power.

In each of the episodes the writer and the museum-owner’s daughter are shown transforming — through superimposition — into the episode’s central characters. Costumed as the Bagdad couple, the two exchange a licentious gaze, suggesting the way in which the film functions as a vehicle for their shared fantasy. In the second episode, Ivan the Terrible (Conrad Veidt) interrupts the couple’s wedding in a mysticized Eastern Orthodox setting. Here, as in the Jannings segment, the set mirrors the tyrant who takes pleasure in executing any who feed into his fear of being killed himself. Trapped beneath row after row of ornamental rafters, the young couple suffers the oppressive presence of the Czar who demands their revelry after he has killed the bride’s father. Heavy, ornate framing devices give the impression of entrapment, a feeling that closes in on the Czar himself until he is driven to madness by his own paranoia. Believing that an hourglass will mark his demise, the Czar obsessively turns it over and over. In a closing shot, he clutches the hourglass like a lover, while the young couple are shown reunited just behind him. Here they appear less directly responsible for their fortune than in the first episode, and yet they remain free of the Czar’s mental disintegration in a way that suggests their enduring independence. In the final episode the couple again take a central role in the action when the young artist and his love-interest traverse the fairground with the notorious murderer, Spring-heeled Jack, in close pursuit.
Rendered in a whirl of superimpositions and using shadow and light in an Expressionist manner, the film gives visual representation to the young writer’s troubled dream-state.

Showcasing Leni’s “decorative joy of a co-ordinated jumble of styles,” the divergently styled episodes appear to open the film architect’s bag of tricks for the viewer’s perusal. For Kurtz, this application of the style is what finally brought the movement into the realm of “applied art.” Kurtz asserts of the Expressionist scenes in Waxworks: “so sicher ist Mittel und Material einem starken dekorativen Willen untergeordnet, daß das Publikum diese sehr fernen und subtilen Szenen mit großem Beifall aufgenommen hat. Der Expressionismus ist zu diesem Erfolg gekommen, weil er seine Mittel dem psychologischen Zweck unterordnet. Er wird angewandte Kunst.” Style operates as a function of the psychological expression that the film strives to represent. In her dissertation on Expressionist posters, Chapmann articulates the widely held impression that Leni’s film marks the end of the art movement by employing the style as one “that can be as easily used and discarded as any other.” In this view, Expressionism’s revolutionary re-imagining of the material world does not figure into Leni’s project. Instead, the style is used solely as a means of superficial decoration to give the impression of modernity and novelty. In fact, the film presents a more nuanced representation of the function of design. However, Chapman’s reading rightly indicates the levity in Leni’s otherwise dark matter. As Jürgen Kasten has indicated: “Leni incorporated funny, sometimes even parodistic elements into the grotesque-bizarre framework.” For instance, the first episode is prompted when the arm of the wax figure, Haroud al Raschid, falls off and the writer decides to write a story based on how he lost the limb. Interweaving humor with his tales of tyrranical madmen, Leni emphasizes the pleasure of constructing these dark visions. Correspondingly, the final Expressionist illusion of a madman on the loose includes moments of happiness and enjoyment for the two protagonists even as they are chased by Spring-heeled Jack.


119 “Medium and material are so assuredly subordinated to a strong, decorative will, that the public accepts these extreme and subtle scenes with great approbation. Expressionism achieves this success, because it subordinates the medium to psychological purposes. It becomes applied art.” Translation mine. Kurtz, *Expressionismus im Film*, 80.

120 Chapman, “Expressionism Multiplied,” 326.


122 Ibid., 184,
The final episode in waxworks begins, like the others, with the writer taking his pen to the paper to write about “Spring-heeled Jack — the notorious character — [who] pounced suddenly and silently upon his victims.” Alone in the darkened wax museum, however, the writer quickly nods off over his work. Suddenly, the tinting changes from a warm amber color to a dark blue and a superimposition of a spinning ferris wheel, a meandering crowd, and a man on a megaphone overlays the sleeping writer (Fig. 1.37). We understand that the young man has begun to dream as this vision of the Luna park from the establishing shot of the film resurfaces on the screen. The setting constructs a bridge into the dream world — for only a moment after it has arisen, the young man ostensibly starts and awakens though the superimposition remains.

The dream continues as the showman’s daughter rushes into his arms and points fearfully over her shoulder. The superimposed image then shifts from the ferris wheel to one of the criminal lurching forward before a series of receding doorways. Through layered images the killer seems to lock eyes with the young couple until the showman’s daughter buries her face in the writer’s shoulder and the film cuts closer in to a medium shot (Fig. 1.38). The young writer looks concernedly over the woman’s head in this shot, which is empty except for the young couple and a hint of white with a few floating letters and several lines spinning in a circular motion just behind the writer’s head (Fig. 1.39). The lines spin like the posts on a carousel to visualize the young writer’s racing mind as he contemplates the impending threat. The sequence then cuts out to a full shot that includes one or more superimpositions of the carousel, the couple, and the wax museum (Fig. 1.40). Not only are multiple images overlaid; they are moving together at differing speeds. The carousel races on its axis, the young man turns slowly toward the back of the frame, and a shard of light lies static on the floor in the foreground, illuminating the plaque before the empty pedestal where Spring-heeled
Jack once stood. A tiny sliver of light in the darkened right portion of the shot seems to move with the uneven gate of the killer, suggesting that he is about to appear there.

Before he can enter the scene, the couple turns away and the sequence cuts to the fairground from a different angle with the couple superimposed in the center of the frame, looking over their shoulders as they slowly and then quickly flee into the park. Several shots follow in which we see the killer pursuing the lovers through the amusement park, the chase being represented all the while by multiple superimpositions. The variation of light and shadow, movement and graphic stillness makes for a fantastic setting that is difficult to parse even on multiple viewings. The impression of the sequence of both suspenseful slowness (the slight limp in Jack’s gait) and the whirling of the park rides, the fragmentation of space created by prismatic shards of light on the walls helps us to visualize the writer’s state of mind, which is constructed of overlapping versions of both fantasy and reality. In two shots in particular, the real and imaginary are juxtaposed as Spring-heeled Jack seems to float forward before a static, graphic background labeled with the title “Panopticum” in sansserif letters above his head (Fig. 1.41).

During the nineteenth century, the panopticum was another name for the Wachstfigurenkabinett, a display exhibit where aberrations of normality could be viewed by the public. These included criminals and people from varied racial backgrounds, rare animals, and the insane. But the word originates with Jeremy Bentham’s architectural design for a circular prison in which the inmates would have the feeling of being under constant surveillance. Where earlier in the film the writer was at the center of the panopticum, now it appears as though there has been an shift. He and the young daughter of the showman have become the object of Jack’s gaze — his wide, unblinking eyes always seem to permeate the shot and the question arises as to who is the madman and who does the watching. Thus the film advertises its interest in issues


of control, of madness, and of the power of the imaginary. Bentham’s design, accordingly, worked through
the power of the imagination to conceive that at any moment one was being watched, when in reality, it
was impossible for the prison guard at the center of the ring to view all prisoners simultaneously.

The style of the text here and that of the background in the shot that follows it, where a drawing of
a lone lamp shines to the right of the criminal’s head, are reminiscent of Leni’s set designs as well as the
advertisements executed by Stahl-Arpke that emulated them (Fig. 1.42). An early newspaper
advertisement from Stahl-Arpke discovered by Kasten features both this lettering and a hanging lantern
that is almost the exact replica of the one that appears in the film. In fact, an entire series of color plates
were reproduced in Das Plakat by the artist duo “nach Leni” that feature
the same graphic style and text; the poster for Caligari discussed above
also shares the same look. These images preceded the completion of the
film by four years, opening the possibility that they directly influenced the
look of the film itself. In fact, it is easy to imagine the shot of Spring-heeled Jack as the advertisement brought to life: the mixing of graphic
and photographic and the explicit reference to the writer’s work as an
advertising man support this conclusion. Thus the final episode embodies
the fear that advertisements, though seeming still and mute, were actually
quite coercive. They could look back at and actually pursue their viewers,
threatening their sanity, controlling their actions. The graphic-photographic dreamworld that the poster
creates in the writer’s mind, however, is not only a realm of fear but of pleasure.

As the young couple make their retreat through a canted doorway and into a graphically rendered
interior, both gaze up and down the sloping walls with obvious delight. The young writer begins to watch
as the showman’s daughter observes her surroundings. As the architect of the space would, he gestures
to the walls as though displaying them for the showman’s daughter’s benefit (Fig. 1.43.) Spring-heeled
Jack, a cross-cut demonstrates, is still on their tail, but they take a moment in their retreat to flirt and
share a loving embrace.\textsuperscript{124} The setting remains obscure and divided by the use of extreme stylization, but finally solidifies when the couple are alone in a shot almost devoid of setting at all. The background is completely dark with only a small corner of the shot providing any context to the brightly lit couple in the center. This corner displays the word “Mode” — “Fashion” — in the poster style, marking the space as some kind of commercial show room. Suddenly the young woman notices a luxurious fur coat lying at her feet. She turns to the young writer for approval before lifting the mantle and throwing it over her shoulders (Fig. 1.44). The writer exits the shot with his eyes on the young woman as she takes center stage, posing in the coat, until, suddenly, Spring-heeled Jack appears out of thin air in the darkness behind her from the same portion of the frame that the young writer had previously occupied. Now, the criminal is suddenly able, through superimposition once more, to surround her on all sides as multiple versions of the man appear at various angles and depths within the shot. She cowers in a dramatic spotlight, until the young writer rushes to her side. We see the killer then from behind crouching in superimposition over them. In a medium shot, and then in a close-up, Jack stares into the writer’s widened eyes until the young man is caught by a knife to the chest. At the moment of the stabbing, the writer’s hand replaces the killer’s and he is transferred back to the panopticum where he first fell asleep. He looks down at his chest and sees that he has mocked stabbing himself with his own pen, laughs at his own foolishness and explains his dream to the showman’s daughter, who has appeared to rouse him from sleep (Fig. 1.45). The two share a joke over the dream, and with one last startled look at the wax figure, Jack, behind them, they laugh off the whole affair and share a kiss to end the film.

\textsuperscript{124} Kasten writes, “Not only have the tyrants lost their potential to evoke fear and terror in a kind of ironic alienation effect, but also the night, a frightening symbol of horror where psychopathic tyrants populate the narrow alleyways, has once more been reclaimed by lovers and their activities — even if they only entertain each other with scary tales of horror.” “Episodic Patchwork,” 182.
To some extent the happy ending normalizes the subjective impression presented there, closing off anxieties that more open-ended narratives like that of Caligari leave to percolate. As Kasten argues, “the uncertainty and ambiguity as to who is supposed to be mad and who is normal — which characterized Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari . . . and still has traces in Genuine . . . is clearly missing.”

As we have seen, Leni’s film indeed raises the same concerns about madness and subjectivity, but unlike other Expressionist films, it combines that troubling ambiguity with moments of humor and pleasure. The goofy smile on the writer’s face in Waxworks only manages to avoid seeming non-sequitous in that it resonates with the earlier moments of humor in the film. With this smile of relief, Leni’s writer-protagonist affirms, with a more ingenious tone, Mabuse’s assertion that like everything else in Weimar Germany, Expressionism is merely a game and “why ever not?” The film, as was clearly articulated in the production notes, “is all about people subjecting themselves to the horror of the waxworks, conscious and fully aware of its function as a place of scary entertainment.”

Film posters provide the tools with which the audience is allowed to play along. They create the space in which the fantasy is rendered, as we see symbolized in the shot of the Jack the Ripper superimposed before the panopticum. There Leni shows us a shot in which the film appears as a poster brought to life. The space that the film creates on the screen and that surrounds the spectator in the theater is generated by Expressionist-poster style. Posters further cue the audience where to look and remind them that they are indeed participants in a collective game.

Moments of intermedial dissonance within the film that draw on the poster’s appearance disclose the illusionary nature of the film image. There is power in this revelation because it attributes the work of art to the artist/writer’s hand. The designer, writes Leni, “must penetrate the surface of things and reach their heart. — He must create mood (Stimmung) even though he has to safeguard his independence with regard to the object seen merely through everyday eyes. It is this which makes him an artist.”

Leni’s somewhat abstruse mention of the necessity of “safeguarding his own independence” from the object, indicates the importance of maintaining objective distance, recognizing the critical space between the

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125 Ibid., 175.
126 Ibid., 175.
127 Leni, qtd. in Eisner, Haunted Screen, 127.
subject and object in creating the artwork and — by extension — in viewing it. Thus, it is telling that the young writer in Das Wachsfigurenkabinett stabs himself with the implement of his own craft, the pen, at the climax of his dream. In this way the film suggests that the writer has become a victim of his own mind. However, the stabbing offers a release of subconscious tension; with its happy ending the film suggests that such release is the “normal” function of the artwork. Thus the viewer need not fear the hypnotic potential of art works and advertisements. Recognizing their own hand in the effect, the viewer can simply enjoy the vision without surrendering their maintain the pleasure of the visions that film and posters engender without surrendering their autonomy.

Because the film insists on the independence of the artist/writer from outer coercion, Kasten rightly criticizes the tendency to read this film as an expression of Germany’s collective “longing for tyrants” as Kracauer had done.¹²⁸ For Kasten, the absence of this diabolical dictator sets the film apart from other Expressionist films of its era. Many of the most enduring works of Expressionism suggest that behind the facade of capitalism a master-dictator exploits the desires of the populace to serve his own fantasies. Kracauer suggests that these plot-lines evince a predisposition toward fascism. However, the use of Expressionist stylization was much more widely used than in the seminal examples of German Expressionist Film that we are familiar with today. The ubiquity of such stylization in film posters indicates that artistic abstraction was far too broadly utilized to be equated solely with a desire for subjugation. If not overtly parodistic, Expressionist film posters often carry a tongue-in-cheek application of style, suggesting that a more self-aware approach to the “tyrant” plot than scholars have traditionally acknowledged. Stylized posters offered a way of breaching the facade of capitalism by emphasizing the craft involved in creating these Expressionist visions and the spaces that they decorated. The film posters deny the notion of an all-powerful dictator orchestrating modernity like a Dr. Mabuse and instead assert the existence of a wider range of individuals creating a world that the public either supports or opposes with its own use practices.

This understanding of the cinema gives another meaning to the phrase: “You Must Become Caligari” that so famously opened the advertising campaign for Wiene's film. It suggests not only that you

need to track down the identity of the mysterious psychologist/showman, Caligari. You, the spectator must become both hypnotist and hypnotized. Proceeding through the cinema’s material spaces, you must knowingly and actively give yourself over to the illusion of the cinematic experience. The posters provide reminders of the fantastic, fabricated nature of this illusion, and yet nonetheless promise to reveal something about reality if the spectator will join in the game that Expressionism offers. Thus the Expressionist “style” retains the revolutionary potential of the early movement for those who remained sensitive to their part in it, who saw themselves caught by the eye of the projector/camera in Fenneker’s Nerven. By participating in Expressionism’s game of life and death, material and spirit, Caligari-esque movie-goers are given an opportunity to probe media specific affects for mystic-scientific revelations.

Characterized as an artistic, spiritual, but also a playful endeavor, the movie-going experience as defined by Expressionism thus encouraged film patrons to re-imagine their own relationship to the spiritual and physical world. The movie theater became a place in which one’s identity became fluid and adaptable, in which imagined scenarios expanded the possibilities for modern configurations of social and individual life. In the coming chapter, I examine how film and poster art exploited this potential through the figure of the film star, the on-screen personae that arguably served as the most pervasive conduit into the world of the film for audience members. As I explain, the German star system and the critical responses that it engendered suggest an uneasy adaptation of female agency and economic mobility in a country where the male population had been seriously depleted by the war and women had recently gained the right to vote in the fledgling democracy. The image of the Weimar “New Woman” in film and movie posters emphasizes the country’s shifting gender configurations and reveals the industry’s attempts to appeal to varied gendered identities with a broad range of aesthetics and styles.
Writing for Das Plakat in 1916, Ernst Collin remarks, “In einer Berliner Tageszeitung las ich kürzlich die Bemerkung, dass dem Kino dieser Tage nichts so sehr geschadet habe als der ‘Divafilm.’ Ich möchte diese Bemerkung erweitern und sagen, dass auch auf das Kinoplakat dieser Tage der Divafilm verwüstend eingewirkt hat. . . Die Filmdiva wird in ihrer Rolle als Gräfin oder als Streichholzmädchen, das später zur Gräfin wird, so zuckersüß wie nur möglich dargestellt . . . so schematisch gemacht, so auf grobe Plakatwirkung gearbeitet, dass man fast die Hintansetzung jeder künstlichen Absicht zu spuren vermeint.”¹ In Divafilm posters, Collin argues, innumerable heads of female film stars or the interchangeable smiles of “die ‘männlichen’ Divas” posed in a stereotypical lilt attracted only the most uneducated and superficial viewers (Fig. 2.1).² His commentary not only suggests the widely held conviction that poster artists should strive to represent more than mere photographic likeness in their designs, but indicates a general tendency to gender movie-going and its promotional apparatus as feminine. In 1925, H.K. Frenzel, for instance, remarked that “with its pernicious excrescences and high-sounding titles, [the movie poster was] calculated to appeal to cooks and kitchen-maids.”³ Although the earliest study on the “sociology of the

⁠¹ "In a Berlin newspaper I recently read the observation that nothing has damaged the cinema of today so much as the divafilm. I would extend this observation and say it has equally devastated the film poster of today. . . . The filmdiva is represented in her role as countess or matchgirl-that-will-become-countess as sugar-sweet as is possible . . . as schematically as imaginable, as if in support of the crudest poster effects, so that one would almost believe that the rejection of every artistic motivation had been deliberate.” Translation mine. Collin, Filmreklame und Reklamefilm, 239.

⁡ "masculine divas," Ibid, 236.

³ Frenzel, “Twenty-five Years of German Film Posters,” 15.
“Kino” by Emilie Altenloh in 1914 describes a heterogeneous audience of various ages and genders, throughout the 1920s critics and commentators continually insinuated that this movie-going public was composed of young, often lower-class, women.

Such thinking reverberates most famously in Siegfried Kracauer’s essay “Little Shop Girls Go to the Movies” and colors his theoretical analysis of the reproduced photograph of a “demonic diva” in his early essay on the nature of photography. In response, feminist scholars Patrice Petro and Heide Schlüpmann have discussed the way in which mistaken notions of female spectatorship underlie early film criticism and later scholarship of early German cinema. Their influential work in the 1980s promoted a more nuanced understanding of female spectatorship and indicated that earlier assumptions about female film audiences were largely a reflection of the tendency to dismiss significant cultural objects by labeling them as women’s entertainment (Fig. 2.2). Today, the gap between women’s lived experiences and the trope of the Neue Frau continues to incite scholarly interest as an ever-increasing number of books and articles seeks to reinvestigate the position of women in Weimar.

Scholars’ recent discussion of the ways that women’s images were used to express cultural reactions to modernity and consumerism is particularly relevant to Weimar film poster art. These two highly charged aspects of interwar culture exerted substantial influence on critical and popular responses to the growing film industry; perhaps no icons of the 1920s better exemplify the representative use of the female figure

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4 See Schlüpmann, “Kinosucht;” and Petro, Joyless Streets.

5 See Sutton, The Masculine Woman in Weimar Germany; Canning, et. al., Weimar Publics/Weimar Subjects; Schönefeld, Practicing Modernity; and Jensen, Body by Weimar.

6 See also Stanley, Modernizing Tradition; and, peripherally, Nolan, Visions of Modernity.
than do the German film stars whose faces adorned city streets, populated periodicals, and traveled the world in multi-reel features.

Discourse surrounding the New Woman in Germany and debates about female stardom in the early years of the Weimar Republic converge in the images of female stars that dominated film posters of nearly all genres and styles. As the primary means of communication between the film industry and their audiences, these posters have much to reveal about Germany’s early star system, an area that has remained surprisingly under-explored by academics. In the following chapter I will address this gap by asking what kinds of viewers film star images imply? In what ways may these implications then be contested by the actual experience of the film? and how might both poster and film have simultaneously built and challenged audience assumptions about femininity in 1920s Germany? Design and film archives house an abundance of film posters that elucidate this subject. I have chosen, however, to focus on the advertisements for Ernst Lubitsch’s German silent films, as they provide a concentrated cross-section of varied types of female stars that were popular in Germany and illustrate the central position of the New Frau as one tied to both commerce and new forms of modern expression. Lubitsch’s stars — Ossi Oswalda, Pola Negri and Henny Porten — are important figures in this respect, while Lubitsch himself, as Germany’s Meisterregisseur, provides a complimentary example of male stardom in the early industry’s apparatus. As I will show, the major feature films directed by Lubitsch in the years before his move to Hollywood, reveal simultaneous engagement with the popular appeal of the Divafilm alongside a concerted attempt to improve the reputation of film aesthetic and increase the market appeal of the medium.

7 While the development of the star system in the United States has been extensively studied and theorized most notably by Richard DeCordova, Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald, the German star system has only relatively recently moved beyond biography to an examination of star personalities as a shaping force of the early film industry.
2.1 WOMEN IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Perhaps surprisingly, two years before Collin reproached *Divafilme* for their influence on poster design, another contributor to *Das Plakat*, A. Halbert, had denied that posters spoke to female audiences at all. Women, he argued, were too much like artistic posters themselves (“plötzlich, überraschend, fast faszinierend”) to see past their own similarity to the images on paper and understand the selling point of an advertisement.\(^9\) Attempting to ennoble poster art by likening it to a beautiful woman, Halbert denigrates women’s perception. His comments point toward the enduring assumption that female viewers engage with representative art through processes of over-identification, a notion that would later be questioned by film historians 1990s.\(^10\) Halbert shows more discernment when he attributes female unfamiliarity with poster art to a separation of spheres that offered women only limited opportunities to view street advertisements. He writes, “Das Plakat schreit einem öffentlich etwas zu. Eine Frau von Sitte und Anstand lässt sich aber nicht etwas zuschreien.”\(^11\) However, by the end of the 1910s the war had substantially dismantled these divisions and women were no longer accessible only through privately read newspaper and pamphlet advertisements. Women’s daily routes to work and during leisure hours resulted in an upswell of posters designed to

\(^8\) “Would that not be the moment in which to call upon capable female artists, that they would not have to watch as the poster depiction of women’s demands remained in incompetent hands?” Translation mine. Brückel, “Die Frau in der politischen Propaganda,” 162.


target them on the street. This change is most apparent in the propaganda posters aimed at women who on November 12, 1918, had just achieved the right to vote. In 1919, Das Plakat also revised Halbert’s assertion that women were not employed in poster design, (“Die Frau als Schöpferin des Plakats, als Künstlerin von Selbständigkeit und Wirkungskraft, spielt, soviel ich weiss, gar keine Rolle”) when it devoted an entire issue to the work of professional female designers, opening with an article from Anna Adelheid Goetze that outlines the development of their noteworthy careers (Fig. 2.3). Goetze discusses the work of these individuals within the same context as their male counterparts, with reference to education and the stylistic choices that brought their posters close to the realm of visual art. Despite women’s increasingly visible role in this field, the full extent of women’s participation in design during this period cannot be obtained by the sketchy information that remains for us. Most articles and biographies still focus on the accomplishments of the male artists who dominated the field. Yet, graphic design appears to have been a professional arena in which women had some opportunity to shape and reflect on the image of modern femininity. In this respect, the emerging field was not unlike the fashion industry, wherein women produced publicly influential modes of self-expression.

Jeanne Mammen, who worked as an illustrator for Der Sturm, Die Dame, and executed a number of book publications to support her living as an artist, is one of the few female designers from the period

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12 “The woman as creator of a poster, as self-supported and effective artist, plays, as far as I know, no role at all.” Translation mine. Halbert, “Die Frau und das Plakat,” 158. Also, one year earlier, definitive design journal Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration had changed its title to reflect the growing importance of women in the design industry Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration: Illustrierte Monatsshefte für moderne Malerei, Plastik, Architektur, Wohnungskunst u. künstlerisches Frauen-Arbeit and featured occasional articles on women in the decorative arts.

13 Mila Ganeva’s Women in Weimar Fashion: Discourses and Displays in German Culture, 1918-1933 (2008) most extensively discusses the importance of the fashion industry as an arena in which women could professionally and privately shape and participate in modernity.
about whom preliminary critical work has been undertaken. In her surviving drawings and paintings from the 1920s one sees evidence of the talent for which Kurt Tucholsky praised her in an open letter published in “Die Weltbühne”: “Die zarten, duftigen Aquarelle, die Sie in Magazinen und Witzblättern veröffentlichen, überragen das undisziplinierte Geschmier der meisten Ihrer Zunftkollegen derart, daß man Ihnen eine kleine Liebeserklärung schuldig ist. Ihre Figuren fassen sich sauber an, sie sind anmutig und herb dabei, und sie springen mit Haut und Haaren aus dem Papier” (Fig. 2.4). Mammen’s designs evinced her eye for significant detail and her talent for capturing quite personal renderings of human figures that she brought to life with an evocative use of color. A producer of uncannily succinct caricatures, Mammen defined her figures through facial expression, posture, and their adaptation of the

FIGURE 2.5 Jeanne Mammen, Das Martyrium (1920). Lithograph, 92.2 x 68.7 cm. Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek.

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15 “The delicate, filmy watercolors that she publishes in magazines and comic papers tower above the undisciplined smearing from the majority of her peers to the extent that one owes her a small declaration of love. Her figures are clean and at the same time charming and austere. They spring from the paper as flesh and blood.” Translation mine. Tucholsky, qtd. in Reinhardt, Mammen, 91.
latest fashions with what has been aptly labeled an “Absicht des Erkennens und Durchschauens.”

Before achieving the recognition of Berlin’s art community, Mammen created several posters for UFA in the early 1920s. A number of them mix lithographic reproductions of stills with illustrations in the manner of rather low-budget wartime designs. However, the most striking examples of her surviving posters make use of her well-practiced proclivity for capturing the human countenance. Her design for Ludwig Stein’s 1920 film starring Pola Negri, *Martyrium*, offers a vivid example of her accomplishment in this regard (Fig. 2.5). Negri’s dark bobbed hair, pale skin, and shadowed eye-lids, her characteristically upturned chin: these were already established elements of the actress’s iconography. Yet, Mammen skillfully adapts these features to produce an expression of wistful despair by slanting the lines of her eye-brows and giving the lids a heaviness enhanced by the bruise-like orange and purple blush in her cheek. The exaggerated asymmetry of Negri’s hair evokes the popular lines in fashion of the time, as does the off-the-shoulder draping of her costume, dark against the tertiary shades of orange and purple that flicker like a sacrificial fire in the poster’s background. As the actress leans against their ascending lines, the poster gains a sense of suspension and friction through their intersecting diagonals.

In terms of its content, the poster may well qualify as an example of the *Divakopf* film poster criticized by Collin; yet, the positive response to Mammen’s watercolors of a similar style among prominent male critics proves that her work appealed to both sexes and further suggests that Collin’s gendering of the film industry was more rooted in a rhetorical strategy than a careful account of poster design. The subtlety with which Mammen has rendered the star’s plaintive gaze suggests that so-called women’s films and their star portraits may have been all too easily written off by early detractors. The impact of contrasts rendered through the poster’s limited pallet and dynamic composition makes the work appear anything but static. Rather, it seems to vibrate with energy and variation. Mammen’s skillful execution of Negri’s portrait appeals to viewer sympathy for her character’s precarious and, given the title of the film, supposedly undeserved plight. For the posters intended viewers, the striking style and content of the poster would have borne simultaneous evocations of the dangers of female self-determination as dictated by the narrative arc often experienced by Negri’s on-screen persona. In the early decades of

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16 “an approach of perception and penetrating insight” Sinsheimer, qtd. in Reinhardt, *Mammen*, 93.
feature film production, star personas had already begun to carry a host of agglomerate connotations that make it nearly impossible to speak comprehensibly about film posters without acknowledging the star system with which they so often corroborate. In the upcoming section I will give an account of this system as formed by the many still-image paratexts that accompanied film premiers in Weimar Germany.

2.2 GERMANY’S EARLY STAR SYSTEM

Das Frauenbild hat noch immer das größte Publikum in dieser sinnlichen Welt.

— Gustaf Kauder 17

In 1920, Seidels Reklame noted that the depiction of a film star in an advertisement “hält den direktesten Weg zwischen Darstellung und Anpreisung.” 18 As a result of this reality, Germany’s film star images were abundantly reproduced and referenced in the public sphere, reaching iconographic status. Film studios and distributors used star images repeatedly in their promotional materials; their pictures accompanied articles printed in newspaper and magazines, and portraits of them circulated on postcards and even stamps (Fig. 2.6). As in the United States, the star system had come to play a defining role in the way that the industry communicated with its customer base. Yet, as Joseph Garncarz has pointed out, the development of the German star system was particular to its own cultural context. In an article for Christian Rogowski’s The Many Faces of Weimar Cinema, Garncarz outlines several factors that differentiate Germany’s early star system from that of the United States: a) the majority of film stars in Germany

17 “The image of the woman still has the largest audience in this sensual world.” Translation mine. Kauder, “Ludwig Kainer,” 102.

retained greater personal control of their personae as they were not as permanently tied to the single
studios that in America exercised authority over a star’s public image; b) these personae were developed
with reference to professional achievement rather than to personal information; and finally, c) the German
film industry produced a greater number of star directors early on than was the case in the U.S. For
Garncarz the heightened level of professionalism in star discourse is the most significant differentiating
factor between the two national industries and plays into the other two.19 Yet, rather than responding to
varied moral and religious structures in Germany versus America as Garncarz suggests, further evidence
indicates that in withholding personal information about its stars, the German industry was primarily
responding to anxieties about its future, which faced financial threat from the United States internationally
and suffered from ill-repute locally.20

After conducting extensive research into the discourse surrounding the star system in Film-Kurier,
Stephanie Buettner reports that the inability of the German film industry to match Hollywood’s star salaries
became emblematic of the fear that Germany would not be able to compete with the US film resources,
and indeed the first flight of stars who left to work for Hollywood in the mid-1920s seemed to affirm the
basis of this anxiety.21 The cultish fixation on interchangeable beautiful faces of American film stars
collided with fears about America’s particular brand of modernity, one based upon commercial success
and little regard for artistic achievement, which was seen as a social imperative for personal and civil
progress in Germany.22 Stardom, with the exorbitant salaries it belied, began to be cast by the German
press as a kind of sickness degrading the quality of the film industry as a whole and ruining those who
were ill-fortuned enough to rise to the top. The incentive to envision a more ‘artistic’ actress suggests an
on-going discomfort with America’s overt commercialization of film, which consolidated in the image of the
luxurious gluttony of the film ‘Diva.’ As one commentator for Film Kurier remarked, in order for German

20 Ibid., 129.
22 Ibid., 50-1.
film to progress “Die falschen Reklamegottheiten müßten verschwinden, um den wirklichen Schauspielern und Schauspielerinnen den Platz zu räumen.”

A return to film’s promotional materials makes the division between male and female stars strikingly clear. Male star-directors and character actors like Emil Jennings were the artistic counterpoint whose fame legitimized the screen, while female actresses remained alarmingly suspect, the constant source of ridicule regarding the commercialism of the industry, and were even likened to prostitutes in one Dresden newspaper article from 1920. As Buettner confirms, the star system was largely cast as an outcropping of female decadence. Thus, smart advertisers had to be particularly sensitive to the portrayal of female stars in promotional material. They had to negotiate the desire among film audiences to see their favorite film stars and at the same time downplay the importance of the filmdiva, who for many signified the suspect consumerist undertones of the film enterprise.

2.3 LUBITSCH, PUPPET MASTER

Ein Regisseur von Wert muß so in den Geist des Films eingedrungen sein, daß er jede Szene des Films jeden Augenblick geistig bis in die Einzelheiten hinein hinstellen kann.

—Ernst Lubitsch

23 “The false advertising-ids must disappear in order to make room for the real actors and actresses.” Translation mine. Illes, “Wann kann der Film dem Theater gefährlich werden?,” 1.

24 Reporting on the stars in attendance at a racing event in the Grunewald a reporter for the Dresdener Unabhängige Zeitung remarked: “Die großen Filmkoketten mischten sich unter das niedrige Volk und führten ihre ‘durchbrochenen’ Beine auf dem Markt spazieren, von Henny Porten bis zum Fern Andra, alles zu Ihren des Modenkapitals, das sich in der Reklame zu überschreien versuchte...Was in Berlin zur Gesellschaft gehörte war vertreten. Drumherum ein schaulustiger Amüsierpöbel, froh, einen lächelnden Blick aus einem Paar Dimenaugen zu erhaschen oder von ferne die Seide des Unterrocks einer Kinohure knistern zu hören, froh schließlich auch, vom kargen Wochenlohn, um den die darbende Frau und das hungrige Kind daheim betrogen wird den größten Teil auf irgendeinem Gaul riskieren zu dürfen,” (“The great film-coquettes mixed with the lower classes and led their ‘break-through’ legs on a stroll through the market. From Henny Porten to Fern Andra, everything from the fashion capital that overflowed in advertisement...What had been society in Berlin was replaced. Here and there the scopophilic rabble, happy to have caught a glance from the laughing gaze of a harlot’s eyes or to hear from afar the crackle of silk from a cinema-whore’s underskirt, happy as well to have risked the greater part of a week’s wages on some nag, betraying the suffering wife and starving child at home.”) Translation mine. “Filmkoketten und Filmhuren,” 1.


26 “A good director must be so saturated with the spirit of the film, that he can arrange every scene, every instant, down to the smallest details in this spirit.” Translation mine. Lubitsch, “Ernst Lubitsch über Film Filmkunst und sich,” 1.
In 1924, two years after he had been successfully solicited to work in Hollywood, Lubitsch remarked that the major flaw of the German film industry was a lack of female stars. Although he worked with fine male actors, his central characters were almost always female, and his discussions about directing often revolved around the necessity of working with competent female leads. He remarked in 1920, “Stars sind keine Pilze, die man züchten kann. Wenn man kostbare Toiletten über einen schönen Körper hängt, hat man noch gar nichts gewonnen. Gerade weil so viele Frauen ohne Talent, nur weil sie gut angezogen sind und eine hübsche Maske haben, stark in den Vordergrund treten, werden viele Intellektuelle vom Film zurückgestoßen.” Acknowledging the talent that his leads possessed, Lubitsch counters the pervasive assumption that a successful actress merely provided a beautiful face to pose before a camera. Yet, likely aware of the advantage to his own publicity, Lubitsch preserved the idea that a strong director was necessary to guide these otherwise unruly personalities. In an interview printed in the Berliner Zeitung, Lubitsch offers an anecdote about his attempts to organize shooting so that he would never have more than one of the three volatile female leads in Sumurun (1920) on the set at one point in time. When it finally could no longer be avoided, he explained the outcome: “die eine der Darstellerinnen schrie, die andere fluchte, die dritte weinte” before Negri and her male counterpart came to a final fierce upset. Lubitsch’s report demonstrates his recognition of the conflicting desires of his audience. On the one hand these audiences craved information about the film stars that they saw so often on screen. On the other, the social power that these stars accumulated stirred some anxieties about female autonomy and was therefore best mitigated by the notion that theirs were immature, raw

27 Hake, “Passions and Deceptions,” 44.

28 “Stars aren’t mushrooms that you can just grow. Hanging costly attire over a beautiful body achieves nothing. Precisely because so many women without talent are taking center stage simply because they’re well dressed and have pretty masks, many intellectuals will be repulsed by film.” Translation mine. Lubitsch, “Ernst Lubitsch über Film Filmkunst und sich,” 1.

29 “one of the actresses screamed, the other swore, and the third cried,” Translation mine. Lubitsch, “Interview,” Deutsche Kinemathek.

30 Although Garncarz makes much of the fact that Germany’s studios revealed little information about actors’ personal lives, it appears that this information was nonetheless desired by audiences. The plots of films reproduced in Illustrierte Film Woche often attributed the on-screen traits of an actress to her innate character, making the films seem to speak to the real lives of stars as well. Sophisticated reviewers like Olmsky slipped in information about the marital status of its stars, while newspapers built sensation around actresses and actors through civic reports, like those of the famous thefts of Asta Nielsen’s and later Pola Negri’s jewels that were satirized by Berlin’s monthly Film-Hölle: “Bitte nicht drängeln,” 5-6.
abilities in need of male intervention. Lubitsch staged himself as the actor that organized and contained these feminine forces.

Correspondingly, Joseph Fenneker’s poster for the detective farce Der Fall Rosentopf (1918) emphasizes Lubitsch’s role as a master manipulator (Fig. 2.7). It reflects the star power that Lubitsch, the lead actor and director of the film, had already accumulated before its release. While Fenneker’s representation of the lead actor lacks the abstraction that would later help define cinematic Expressionism, the poster nonetheless features a creative play with color and scale that shows the designer moving toward the more emotive style for which he would become well-known. Balancing a delicate ballerina at the end of each outstretched finger, Fenneker’s Lubitsch plays up the director’s role as the instigator behind the movement of his female leads. Yet, the depiction of Lubitsch here is not entirely flattering. The sense of jocularity and feminine agency that we generally associate with Lubitsch’s comedies is decidedly absent here. Like many of the sickly male figures that would later consolidate in a staple of Fenneker’s style, this portrait of Lubitsch over-emphasizes the bones of the face and hands and

![Image of Der Fall Rosentopf poster](image.png)

**FIGURE 2.7** Josef Fenneker, Der Fall Rosentopf (1918). Lithograph, 68 x 95 cm. Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek.
elongates the fingers. This combined with the actor/director’s grin and empty monocle visible on the right side of the face lends Lubitsch a vaguely sinister look of concentrated delight as he regards the twirling figures in his hand. Given Lubitsch’s often-cited reputation for playing “jewish” roles in his earliest films, it is possible to see this poster engaging racial stereotypes, whether they were used to evoke laughter or raise tensions related to the poster’s erotic undertones.\textsuperscript{31} Lubitsch figures here as a kind of evil mastermind magician, not unlike a Rotwang or the reviver of the Golem, cleverly bringing about a magical cinematic performance here embodied in the female form. The film has unfortunately been lost, so there is no way of knowing to what extent these tensions may have been relieved or intensified through the film’s screening. Yet, Fenneker’s poster may indicate, among other things, an uneasy transition between Lubitsch’s “othered” actor-persona into the legitimate role of director. In fact, Lubitsch’s somewhat dubious reputation among later film critics as a director who never left the “rag-trade,” one whose main focus was on crafting a film to draw profits, evokes the stigmatization of the money-hungry, americanized film diva to whom he was closely aligned.\textsuperscript{32}

However, before he left for Hollywood in 1922 Lubitsch was highly praised in the German press with trade magazines putting forth particular effort to claim him as a sign of the viability of Germany’s blossoming film industry. One of his early successes in Germany was \textit{Die Puppe} (1919) starring Ossi Oswalda, a film in which he diegetically emphasizes his control over the work. At this time transitioning almost completely out of acting (his final role was that of the hunch back in \textit{Sumurun}), Lubitsch opens the film with a shot of himself emptying the contents out of a large toy box to set the stage on which the rest of the film will play. The actors are placed into the frame as inert dolls before Lubitsch stirs them to life. Lubitsch’s play with animate and inanimate forms provides the basis of the narrative of the film as well. The male protagonist resists his uncle’s demands that he should marry in order to inherit his fortune, and instead takes to hiding in a cloister of monks who convince him to marry an electronic doll. That way the young man can inherit the money and give it to the monks with whom he can live for the rest of his days as a bachelor. The doll that he purchases, however, is no doll at all but Ossi Oswalda, standing in for a

\textsuperscript{31} Hake, \textit{Passions and Deceptions}, 29-31; McCormick, “Desire versus Despotism,” 70.

\textsuperscript{32} Sabine Hake describes the dismissive overtones with which Lotte Eisner, among others, have attributed the sumptuousness and materiality of Lubitsch’s films to his petit-bourgeois background in textile trade. Hake, \textit{Passions and Deceptions}, 32.
broken model. For the remainder of the film, Oswalda acts as Lubitsch's on-screen double, driving forward his self-reflexive farce. Oswalda's highly developed star persona acts within this framework to call into question gender constructions in the process. In the coming section we will examine Theo Matejko's poster advertisement for *Die Puppe* to obtain a clearer sense of how the film and poster interact to engage the star’s public image.

2.4 OSSI OSWALDA, DANCING DOLL

Theo Matejko's illustrative poster for *Die Puppe* features an assemblage of symbolic references to Oswalda's on-screen persona (Fig. 2.8).34 The star's referential importance is displayed in her recognizable portrait and underscored by the curving sprawl of her name underneath the title of the film. The curious lack of directorial billing in Matejko's design may ostensibly undermine Lubitsch's position as star-director. However, given that the film was one of the first to premier at the luxurious UFA-Palast am Zoo, this poster, designed in Vienna but printed in Berlin, would have been part of an immense advertising campaign in which Lubitsch’s name and headshot are likely to have also been featured. In addition, Oswalda, who acted alongside the director in her film debut *Schuhpalast Pinkus* (Lubitsch 1916), had afterwards remained his frequent collaborator. As a result, a reference to Oswalda's comedic

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33 “She enchanted him not through her beauty, it is said, but through the thrilling charm of her dance, through its captivating movement. In it Herodes saw two factors that convinced him to grant Herodias's daughter every wish. Lust and desire. That the latter was only a means to achieving an end, he did not suspect, and had he suspected it, then he never would have granted the wishes of his petitioner.” Translation mine. Grosser, “Der Tanz im Film,” 18.

34 Matejko's poster for *Die Puppe* survives along with those by Paul Scheurich discussed later in this chapter in the Central Saint Martins Museum and Study Collection, a selection of holdings from the St. Martin's School of Art (1854-1989) and the Central School of Art and Design (1896-1989) in London. The posters are among small number of German film posters from the early 1920s that were relatively recently found in the collection. Although the archivists do not know the means through which the posters were acquired by the school, their presence among teaching artifacts demonstrates the international influence of these designers. See: Backemeyer, *The Silent Screen* (1999)
style conjures up the recollection of Lubitsch’s own early roles. In the immediate post-war period, as Lubitsch almost exclusively confined himself to work behind the camera, a complex identifactory relationship with his female protagonists blossomed, which contributed to the unique depth of character demonstrated by his heroines.\(^{35}\) The lack of Lubitsch’s name in Matejko’s design suggests the possibility that on some level the actress had become synonymous with the director in the public sphere as well.

Yet, perhaps even more important to the poster’s composition than Oswalda herself, the young actress’s out-stretched leg dominates the center of the action in this poster as the obvious object to be looked at, providing a significant reference to Oswalda’s comedic style and popular appeal. First and foremost the leg suggests Oswalda’s allure as an object of sexual desire. Having recently been revealed by the shorter hemlines of the period fashions, the leg and ankle were often fetishized during the 1920s and featured in countless close-ups in early feature films, making the content of this poster an erotic reference that would not be missed. The teddy bear and male dolls crowding around the appendage further promise a measure of exhibitionism, while on another level the unselfconscious thrust of the leg outward suggests the highly physical and often sexually forward elements of Oswalda’s on-screen persona. In *Die Austernprinzessin* (Lubitsch), which had premiered earlier in 1919, Oswalda’s character, a rich heiress daughter to an American oyster tycoon, demands a noble husband, boxes with another woman for the right to ‘reform’ Harry Liedtke, and needles her way through romantic relationships with both Liedtke and his lackey-counterpart, played by Julius Falkenstein. In *Ich möchte kein Mann sein!* (Lubitsch) released in October 1918, Oswalda cross-dresses in order to enjoy the freedom of her male counterparts, to be able to drink, smoke, and gamble, though, as the title

\[^{35}\text{Hake, Passions and Deceptions, 39; and McCormick, “Desire versus Despotism,” 75.}\]
suggests, she decides it is easier to be a woman. Although the conclusions of both narratives normalize Oswalda’s gender and sexuality with the culmination of romance between herself and a male co-star, her comedic edge relies on her irreverence for the dictates of gender roles. Instead she undertakes the uninhibited pursuit of her own desires for food, drink, dancing, and erotic relationships. Matejko’s poster for *Die Puppe* draws on the earlier characterization of the star with the outstretched leg, that, rather than existing solely as an object of (presumably male) desire, also seems to prompt Oswalda’s own joyful bemusement as she smiles and cocks her head in its direction.

In the poster, the protruding eyes of Oswalda’s male onlookers, other anthropomorphic toys, register shock, interest, and, perhaps in the case of the red-hatted doll, disapproval. They recall cultural anxieties regarding liberated female sexuality — fears that are played out in the film during a scene in which a massive crowd of female suitors chases down the rich male protagonist through the streets of a small German town. At the same time, however, the toys also undercut what may otherwise qualify as brazen sexuality by infantilizing the content of the poster. In this way the design is in keeping with the adolescent naivety at the heart of Oswalda’s comedic performance. Matejko’s doll, like Oswalda’s personae, lacks womanly modesty; her extended leg takes on an awkward quality in comparison to the feminized poses with toes pointed and ankles crossed that made up fetishized images (Fig. 2.9). Tellingly, after the film’s release, a reviewer for *Der Kinematograph* enthusiastically endorsed the film not only as a victory for Germany but as a film uniquely suitable for children, indicating that the actress’s child-like quality as represented in the poster was maintained in the film as well.36

![Image](image-url)


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In a comparison that was no doubt invited by the star’s jejune disposition, the press often referred to Ossi Oswalda as the “German Mary Pickford.” In this regard, Gaylyn Studlar’s analysis of Pickford’s stardom in America becomes suggestive for the characterization of Oswalda. Studlar argues that the youthful Pickford was especially popular among American audiences because she fulfilled male fantasies of a traditional Victorian feminine object that, like a child, acted out of innocent desires and at the same time drew in female audiences who could find her (seemingly unwitting) provocation of gendered roles compelling.³⁷ Both Pickford and Oswalda utilized a play of adolescent femininity to explore gendered social restrictions. Yet, Sabine Hake has rightly noted that Oswalda’s persona resembles Pickford’s less so than it does those of the American flapper types Clara Bow and Coleen Moore.³⁸ This discrepancy can be accounted for by the fact that Oswalda does not maintain the same level of sexual innocence that Pickford’s persona exhibits. Although Oswalda often looks the part of a Pickford character, being dressed in curls, large bows, and frilly lace that suggest a youthful quality, her sexual humor is more blatant, and she is rarely, if ever, passive (Fig. 2.10). Instead, a sense of sprightly inexperience imbedded in Ossi Oswalda’s performance style defines her humor and ameliorates its potentially threatening implications. For instance, the more radical aspects of Oswalda’s feminine autonomy electrify the plot of Die Puppe, wherein Oswalda’s character is able to allay the fear of the young male protagonist by acting the part of a mechanical doll, a masquerade of feminine passivity that she removes as soon as her bridegroom turns his back.

³⁸ Hake, Passions and Deceptions, 45.
Reviews for *Die Puppe* emphasized the suitability of the content to the film medium. *Der Film* gushed, “All diese Mitarbeiter hier aufzuführen, hat bei diesem Film-Kunstwerk volle Berechtigung denn der Film zeigt, daß jeder von ihnen etwas ganz Besonderes geleistet hat. Jeder hat sich bemüht, alle Möglichkeiten des Films künstlerisch zu erschöpfen, und dieses Bemühen hat zu einem Resultat geführt, das selbst alte Fachleute und Kritiker in Staunen und freudige Überraschung versetzt.”39 While *Der Film* stresses the combined work of all those that were involved in the production of the film as a vehicle for the film’s success, with Lubitsch and Hanns Kräly receiving particular praise for the story and the film’s use special effects, Oswalda also received attention from the press. Her performance was pivotal to the film’s self-reflexive visualization of the turn from inanimate to animate that was offered by moving image technology; yet, in some ways her creative capacities were nonetheless down-played. The film critic Fritz Olimsky explained,

“Ueberhaupt die kleine Ossi Oswalda, ihr war die Rolle natürlich auf den Leib geschrieben, und sie spielte denn auch in einzigartiger Weise. Kein Kunststück, eine süße Puppe wiederzugeben, wenn man selbst eine süße Puppe ist (doch ich will nichts gesagt haben, sie ist ja jetzt verheiratet!). Jeder Zug an ihr war köstlich, ganz besonders wie das Püppchen im Kloster, durch den Gesang dreier vorbeiziehender Handwerksburschen verlockt, ein Tänzchen beginnt und durch ihre bezaubernde Anmut sogar die Mönche dazu verführt.”40

Olimsky elides the difference between Ossi, her character, and the doll that she pretends to be. This kind of treatment of her on- and off-screen persona was typical as in many of her roles she played an individual named “Ossi” although the films were not part of a serialization and the characters, though similar, were placed in different circumstances. The deliberate coalescence of character and actress was reflected by the fact that Oswalda’s success was not perceived to derive from her acting ability, but rather on the physical expression of her own self. In part, by praising Oswalda’s natural appearance before the camera, Olimsky’s review prefigures later criticism of German acting style as influenced by the development of *Neue Sachlichkeit* in the mid 1920s. Such criticism would cause many to rethink the suitability of Germany’s ‘artistic’ (pantomimic) performances and begin instead to see them as too

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39 “All those listed here had full rights to the film-art, as the film itself shows that each of them has achieved something especially noteworthy. Each attempted to exhaust all of the artistic potentials of the film and this effort led to results that puts even old experts and critics in a state of awe and happy surprise.” Translation mine. “Die Puppe,” 47.

40 “On the little Ossi Oswalda: the role was naturally written on her body and she played it in her unique manner. Not a great feat to play a sweet doll when one is a sweet doll oneself (though I've said nothing, she is married now after all!). Her every trait was delectable, especially when, as the little doll in the abbey, she was enticed by the song of three passing journeymen. A little dance begins and her enchanting charm beguiles even the monks.” Translation mine. Olimsky, “Die Puppe,” Deutsche Kinemathek.
theatrical for the objective medium. Yet, rather than a premonition of the coming aesthetic movement, Olimsky’s praise clearly seems to have been influenced by Oswalda’s background as a dancer, as evinced by his admiration of her bewitching “Tänzchen.”

In fact, given Oswalda’s reputation for lively dance sequences, the outstretched leg in Matejko’s poster can also be seen as a reference to the Foxtrot and Charleston, on which these sequences were modeled, and which also famously emphasized the leg and ankle. Despite the absence of synchronized sound, the vision of the dancing body was a frequent draw of silent film. The composition of Matejko’s poster can only allude to the dance’s frenetic energy with the lid to Oswalda’s toy box flaring out at an angle that suggests it has just flown open. The cinema, conversely, could reveal the body in motion on a massive scale. Dance sequences, thus, foregrounded the unique property of the medium at the same time that it tied it to an already established art form. Dance probably would have appealed to both the masses as well as refined tastes of aesthetically critical viewers. Hoping to draw interest from both spheres, Ossi once even performed a live skit in which she sang and danced after a showing of *Ich möchte kein Mann sein*. The performance received a positive review in *Film-Kurier*, though it seemed to admit to the superiority of live performance even as the exhibition’s orchestrators attempted to draw the two together to elevate the film. From the standpoint of developing star personas, dance training could ennoble film stars by

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41 A popular Charleston verse by Oscar Straus, Ernst Marischka and Bruno Granichstaedten (1927) playfully exclaims: “Augen kokettieren müssen / und der Mund, der ist zum Küssen! / Doch wozu hat man die Beine nur? Was? Sie wissen nicht, wozu Gott diese Beinchen erschaffen hat?...Man tanzt Charleston, nur immer wieder Charleston!” (Eyes must flirt, and the mouth, it is for kissing! And why does one have legs? You don’t know why God created these little legs? To dance the Charleston, always and again the Charleston!) Translation mine. qtd. in Portenlänger, “Kokettes Mädchen und mondäner Vamp,” 54. The song is just one manifestation of the leg’s emblematic suggestion of female sexuality as well as popular dance.

42 “Wenn dieser Sketch auch weder durch Geist noch durch Witz überlastet ist, so freut man sich doch, die beliebte Diva in ihrer beweglichen Lebendigkeit auf der Bühne zu sehen, sie plaudern zu hören, sie in reizenden Kostümen zu bewundern und sich an ihrem flotten Tanz ergößen zu können, der mancherlei verborgene Reize enthüllt, die auf der nur zweidimensionalen Leinwand (des Filmes) doch nicht voll zur Geltung kommen.” (“If the sketch isn’t overloaded by spirit or wit, then one still enjoys seeing the darling diva in her moving vivacity on the stage, to hear her chatting, to marvel at her in her glamorous costumes, and to take in her jaunty dance, contains many hidden charms that don’t come through as completely on the two-dimensional canvas of the film.”) Translation mine. Frankl, “Ich möchte kein Mann sein,” 1.
suggesting professional and artistic accomplishment. Thus, many of Germany’s stars — Pola Negri, Lya Mara, Lya de Putti, and Leni Riefenstahl as well as Ossi Oswalda — were trained as dancers before they became film actresses.

By alluding to this aspect of Oswalda’s persona, Matejko’s poster aims not only at an audience with varied aesthetic tastes, but also one that is made up of both genders. Studlar’s findings about the role of dance in the context of female spectatorship in America, would have generally held true for Germany as well: she argues that the popularity of dance among women, manifest most notably in fashion trends and their participation in leisure time activities, made dance a particularly salient aspect of visual pleasure for female movie-going audiences.43 Yet, in Germany, the attraction of audiences to dance sequences and actress/dancers may have achieved further interest in light of the pervasive body culture movements that dominated there in the post-war period.44 Wilhelm Tank’s Wege zu Kraft und Schönheit (1926) provides a prominent example of a film engaging with the body culture movements in a way that combines film, dance and sport (Fig. 2.11). We can also see remnants of the movement’s influence in Film-Kurier, which included sections on Mode and Sport in each of its daily publications, attesting to a general cross-section of interests in these areas among film enthusiasts. Similarly, dance fit within the spectrum of images and articles on women’s sports and sport clothing in Illustrierte Film Woche, which featured female stars as models of healthy living, and, most importantly, offered an image of star culture that helped to mitigate the stereotype of the puffed-up and pampered diva (Fig. 2.12).

FIGURE 2.12 “Ossi Oswalda badet in der Donau.”
Illustrierte Film Woche 7.29 (1919)


44 See Jensen, Body by Weimar. Jensen points out that body culture movements in Germany responded to the dismantling of the human physical and psychical body during World War Two, while they also supported a democratic mindset which focused on individual health and wellness as a means of gaining social acceptance and praise.
Within the context of Weimar film, however, the dancing female body was not always depicted as salubrious and appropriate. Michaela Petrescu notes that a number of Weimar films, most famously *Metropolis* (Lang 1927) and *Der Blaue Engel* (1931), foreground the dancing female body as chaos-inducing and threatening to masculine control.\textsuperscript{45} Indeed, in the American context as well, the dancing female film star was often characterized as a malevolent vamp.\textsuperscript{46} These motifs can be read as reactions against women’s increased influence in the public sphere. Oswalda, however, provides an intriguing counter-example to these vamp figures, for her jazzy undulations manage to escape censure within the narratives of Lubitsch’s films. The chaos that her dancing produces is a joyful one with all of the unencumbered sensuality of Oswalda’s ingenuous flapper-girl type. Like Matjeko’s poster for *Die Puppe*, Lubitsch’s films starring Ossi Oswalda imbue the heroine’s quest for pleasure with a childishness that both adds to its comedic effect and allows it to remain within the realms of social acceptability. Correspondingly Oswalda’s persona as crafted in film publicity and poster advertisements protected her from the stereotypical criticisms often aimed at film stars, namely that they were driven above all by financial aims and were often sexually dubious (Fig. 2.13). Not only did Oswalda’s dancing doll persona legitimize her physical performance, her characterization allowed material, sensual desires to play out with abandon, making them an intrinsic part of her humor and charm to be laughed at rather than feared. Thus, Oswalda offered audiences an opportunity to play vicariously with the gendered boundaries of appropriate desire that she so often humorously transgressed.

\textsuperscript{45} Petrescu, “Domesticating the Vamp,” 276.

2.5 POLA NEGRÌ, DEMONIC DIVA

‘If you must be an actress, why can’t you go back to playing nice girls like Hedwig or Aniela?’

I laughed and took her in my arms ‘Mama, Mama. Writers don’t write plays about nice girls anymore. They make such dull plays.’

— Pola Negri

Unlike Ossi Oswalda, Pola Negri’s highly eroticized persona was not refracted through the ungainliness of adolescent inexperience. Characterized by her ability consciously to wield her sexual power against men, Negri has long been identified as the progenitor of the modern vamp type that dominated throughout the early twentieth century. In keeping with Laura Mulvey’s theorization of the male gaze structuring cinematic form, the type has generally been understood to have reflected male fears about the menace of autonomous female desire, yet more recent scholarship on vamp types adjusts this thinking to account for the likelihood that these figures also served as points of identification for female audiences. Extra-textual images and articles from the silent film era have helped to reconstruct the historical response to the morally dubious, yet compelling vamp (Fig. 2.14). In the German context, reviews and articles sidestep the questionable influence of Negri’s vamp-type by concentrating on her expressive abilities. Although her collaboration with Lubitsch for Carmen (1918) had already established her celebrity, it was particularly after the international success of Madame Dubarry (Lubitsch 1919) that Negri

47 Negri, Memoirs of a Star, 120.

48 Diane Negra’s “Immigrant Stardom in Imperial America: Pola Negri and the Problem of Typology” (2002) outlines Negri’s role in the establishment of this type in the early international film market. The role of the vamp has gone through many subsequent iterations as indicated recently by Michaela Petrescu’s “Unmasking Brigitte Helm and Marlene Dietrich: The Vamp in German Romantic Comedies (1930-33)” (2010), which discusses of the satirization of the vamp type in the later part of the Weimar Republic as an on-going attempt to “renegotiate ever-changing definitions of femininity and to reconfigure constellations of gender relations” Petrescu, “Unmasking Brigitte Helm,” 313.


50 The italian diva film genre preceding world war one contributed to the rise of Negri’s passionate “southern” persona. Angela Dalle Vacche’s work on the quasi-documentary relation of the genre to women’s social struggle is illuminating in terms of its suggestion of the emancipatory potential of Negri’s type. Vacche, Diva, 199-224.
was held up as one of “unserer Allerbesten” by reviewers, complimented for her “Rasse, Feuer, Klasse, Glut, und Glanz.”  51 By keeping to reports on her passionate performances rather than her personal life, film publications could also emphasize the artistic superiority of Germany’s film professionals over those in the United States who were thought to be motivated mainly by the promise of bloated star-salaries.  52 The promotional materials executed for the premier of Madame Dubarry demonstrate the industry’s stake in promoting the film as an important cultural, rather than merely financial endeavor.

As the first film to premier at the grand opening of Berlin’s UFA Palast am Zoo, Madame Dubarry warranted a huge ad campaign crafted with the help of exceptional designers. The UFA-Palast employed Robert L. Leonard, acclaimed for his work for the U.T. Lichtbildbühne in Berlin, to design a poster for the premier (Fig. 2.15). Although he has remained virtually undiscovered by design scholars, as a prolific film poster designer, set designer, and regular editor and contributor to Illustrierte Film-Woche, Leonard exerted considerable influence on the visual culture of the film industry in Germany. Leonard’s poster enjoyed exceptional visibility and acclaim in 1920 having been reproduced in a color insert in Das Plakat in accompaniment to an article discussing the contributions of notable film poster artists to German design. The author of this article, Walter F. Schubert, praises Leonard’s ability “aus den Kilometerbündeln der schwarzen Filmstreifen Funken, Licht


52 In 1921, Film-Kurier ran an article/interview celebrating Asta Nielsen that frames her return to Germany after travel to the United States as a sign of the German film industry’s artistic superiority, particularly in regards to its actresses, which Asta Nielsen argues are far better equipped to meet the expressive demands of film. America, she criticizes, relies on sensational film-making to overcome the lack of talent among its actors. Lüthge, “Wilson als Partner Asta Nielsens,” 1.
Leonard’s talent for creating jarring poster effects that imbued the still image with the electrifying energy of motion pictures was specifically discussed in contrast to Lutz Ehrberger’s illustrations of “Ewigweiblichen,” idealized pictures of film heroines that, according to the author, had become clichés in the public sphere.

Indeed, Leonard’s poster for Madame Dubarry demonstrates a marked departure from the many low-quality posters that circulated in the 1920s. The design not only fails to mention Negri by name, but the poster’s depiction of Jeanne Dubarry being dragged to the guillotine during the climactic final sequence of the film does not resemble the actress with any particular clarity. Instead of drawing on the appeal of her star persona with a posed portrait, the poster emphasizes intense movement through the feathery lines that vibrate in the muscled appendages of her executioners. Their appearance, shirtless with heavily lined faces and blood-red accents at the head and waist, give a sense of feral impulse to the execution scene, one that dramatizes the horrors of revolutionary France as a turn away from cultural sophistication toward senseless violence. Working within a limited white, black, and red pallet, color-contrast heightens the drama in the scene by pulling attention to the luminous white stretch of Dubarry’s neck and making the headrest of the guillotine float like an orb between the rising planks of the infamous killing machine. The left-most executioner leans dramatically toward the site at such an angle that his own head is obscured from sight, his curved shoulder forming a swoop in the direction of the guillotine’s aperture, a premonition of the decapitation that awaits the hapless Dubarry.

Through the looming presence of the guillotine, a technological marvel of its own time, the poster revitalized recent memories of the Great War, wherein the tools of progress were turned into instruments of unprecedented annihilation. By casting a glance backward to the bloody ruptures of the past, the grave yet dramatic imagery agitates concerns about the ineptitude of modern society to curb seemingly innate tendencies toward violence and destruction. On another level, however, the poster provides a vivid outlet for gender anxieties with its uncompromising image of violence against one of history’s most sexually and

53 “to strike sparks, light, and life out of the bundled kilometers of black film strip and to throw new, enthralling posters based on the productions of his clients at the jaded nerves of city dwellers.” Translation mine. Schubert, “Das deutsche Fimiplakat,” 447.

54 Ibid., 447.
politically powerful women. In this sense, Leonard’s execution scene relates thematically to contemporary Lustmord imagery in the work of Otto Dix and Georg Grosz, images that such scholars as Beth Irwin Lewis and Maria Tartar have argued reveal potent misogynist fantasies undergirding modernist art. Suggesting that this was the dominant motif preferred by the film’s advertisers, Matejko’s Viennese poster design, though it works with a similar content and style, downplays the historical-political reference by omitting the guillotine and instead renders the violence more sexually explicit by pitting a single executioner against a dark-haired female figure (Fig. 2.16). Here Dubarry seems to faint, falling away from the executioner’s torso with her breast exposed in what essentially appears to be rape fantasy. In effect, little could be further from the portrait-like illustrations of film stars to which the public had become accustomed. Rather than exulting the beauty and fame of the lead-actress, these posters depict the title figure of the film at a moment of her humiliation and annihilation.

Yet, a wealth of complimentary promotional materials do indeed feature portraits of Pola Negri that elevate her well-known features: the heavily lidded eyes and characteristic lift of the chin. Karl Petau’s design, for instance, is representative of the types that were featured in illustrated magazines and

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55 These two spheres often collided in the artistic works of the Weimar period in which violence toward women was seen as part of the psychologically damaged post-war culture. Alfred Döblin’s works, for instance, provide a significant examples of narratives wherein military and sexual violence combined. See Fuechtner, Berlin Psycholanalytic.

56 See Lewis, “Lustmord, Inside the Windows of the Metropolis.” Lewis draws on Tartar’s Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany (1995). Both see the frequent eroticization of violence in Weimar Germany as an outcropping of our fascination with “its perversion of love into hate” and as an act of “sons seeking revenge against women—against mothers as agents of sexual prohibition or against women in general as icons of licentious sexuality.” Tartar, Lustmord, 7.

57 Matejko’s poster was, perhaps unsurprisingly, withheld by censors. Yet, in a 1920 article “Ich studiere Zensur,” attributes the censorship to the perceived racial difference between Dubarry and her executioner rather than to the violent sexual content of the poster. Matejko, “Ich studiere Zensur,” 480.
pamphlets handed out at screenings of the film (Fig. 2.17). Negri’s portraits were often accompanied by lithographically reproduced stills from the film as well as a cast list and a summary of the plot. Inevitably these materials would feature either a drawing or still of the execution scene, but more often the portrait of Pola Negri was given the preeminent cover position. Thus, Negri’s star persona remained a significant aspect of the film’s promotional ‘branding,’ despite her obscurity in Leonard’s poster design. As Petau’s depiction of Negri revisited the aesthetic of the historical Dubarry’s portrait, it was somewhat better able to showcase the film’s sensational historicist texture than were the more modern posters featuring Dubarry at the guillotine (Fig. 2.18). Why then did marketers steer away from this type of representation for the UFA-Palast poster?

Like the exhibition space itself, Leonard’s film poster was likely designed to appeal to upper- and middle-class audiences who would have been familiar with the thematic trends of modern art and who, in light of the dubious reputation of film divas among both film enthusiasts and the wider public, may have eschewed a film crafted around a well-known star. If we consider the content of the poster to have misogynist undertones, it would seem plausible that these more “sophisticated” viewers were imagined as male viewers. But drawing a strict gendered binary in respect to Leonard’s poster and Petau’s design

FIGURE 2.17 (left) Karl Petau, Design for Madame Dubarry (1919). filmportal.de


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58 Little is known about the artist Karl Petau (1890-1974) who worked with the Düsseldorf printer Bagel, although a number of his posters survive and have recently been circulating in international auction houses such as Swan Auction Galleries in New York and Jörg Weigelt Auktionen in Hannover. Much of his surviving work from the mid-1920s makes creative use of scale and angle to build visual interest; his sketch of Negri incorporates the figurative aesthetic of the twenties that often appeared in posters of this period.
would unfairly preclude the very real possibility that instead of dividing their audience, these varied representations of the film worked together to combine interests and bring in box-office receipts. The contrast between the smiling, static diva and the helplessly struggling woman could be used to cultivate a morbid curiosity among potential viewers as to the arc of the star’s imagined downfall. As if punctuating this comparison, the images of Negri that advertised for Madame Dubarry draw attention to the actress’s neck through the inclusion of a black ribbon or a draping necklace. These details suggestively allude to the decapitation, recalling the swan-like stretch of the figure’s neck in Leonard’s poster.

The contrast in style between the two designs also alludes to the project of the film and the uniqueness of the medium. The more modern aesthetic used by Leonard dominates the public-facing promotion of the film because it more successfully encapsulates the excitement of the moving image, while Petau’s historicist image of Negri indicates that the film will draw from the artistic riches of the past, engaging with the aesthetic tradition that preceded it. Rather than reviving the past exactly as it was, the advertising campaign promises a temporal collapse signified by the modern aesthetic in Leonard’s design and Negri’s face in Petau’s. The resulting anachronistic tension invites audiences to project anxieties about contemporary femininity into the historical setting. In this regard, Sabine Hake’s remark that Negri, rather than playing an actual historical persona, could be playing the flapper vamp of any number of films set in the 1920s, is quite important for understanding the way that the film functions.  

The story of Jeanne Dubarry’s rise from seamstress to mistress of the king of France would have been particularly resonant for movie-goers given the criticism hefted upon film stars at the beginning of the decade. Commentators in film-related periodicals consistently attributed the fame of starlets to the influence of male friends, denigrating the film stars’ intelligence and artistry. One contributor to Film-Kurier describes the careers of film stars as follows: “Der ‘Freund’ hat sie durch Beziehungen ‘zum Film gebracht’ — warum, aus welchem inneren, etwa künstlerischen Grund, das ist absolut unerklärlich. Jetzt wird also gefunden, daß sie die schönsten Augen, die schönsten Beine und andere ungemein schöne

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59 Hake, Passions and Deceptions, 131.
Körperteile hat.” The sole aim of these career girls is to earn money, as a satirical poem in Film-Holle indicates. It assumes the voice of actress Aud Egede Nissen to give advice to a girl asking how to make it as a “Diva,” instructing “geht zu einem Regisseur;” she promises that if one does not speak too much (he does not like it) results will quickly materialize:

Er engagiert Dich nun vom Fleck
Und Du kriegst Riesengagen.
Die Stadtbahnkarte wirfst Du weg
Und kaufst Dir Equipagen
....
Die Fürsten folgen Deiner Spur.
Du bittest: “Nur nicht drängen!”
Und sagst Du oftmals ‘mir’ statt ‘mich’
 Brauchst Dich das nicht zu stören,
Denn falsches Deutsch, das tröste Dich,
Kann man im Film nicht hören.  

These articles reinforce class and gender divisions that the rags-to-riches success of the film star seemed (so compellingly) to bypass. Dubarry’s ascent in the French aristocracy mirrored these stories about film stars and supported the underlying notion that female financial success was only possible through sexual exploitation in relation to powerful men. In this sense, the historical Dubarry is in fact a prototypical “Diva,” appropriately sharing many of the same traits of the flapper film starlets that dominated the popular press in the 1920s: unprecedented political influence, sexual promiscuity, and a lavishly exquisite life-style.

Negri’s fame and her vamp type provided a significant subtext for the film, making her incongruity to the historical setting strangely appropriate.

In key sequences we can see how this context might influence a viewing of the film. First, in the opening sequence Lubitsch shows the crowded dress shop where Negri’s Jeanne works as a

60 “The ‘friend’ uses his relationships to ‘bring her to film’ — why, out of what inward, artistic reasoning, is absolutely inexplicable. Now it’s been found that she has the most beautiful eyes, the most beautiful legs, and other uncommonly beautiful body parts.” Translation mine. Lüthge, “Filmkritik,” 1.

61 “go to a director,” she instructs, “He’ll hire you on the spot and you’ll get a massive salary. You’ll throw away your light rail card and buy yourself an ‘equipage,’
....
Princes follow in your trail.
You ask: ‘Just don’t push!’
It need not concern you that your german is incorrect, console yourself, in a film no one can hear you.” Translation mine. “Wie kann ich Diva werden?,” 11.
seamstress, but he delays her appearance until several shots into the film. When she does appear in a three-shot with a seamstress flanking her on either side, she stands out because she cannot keep herself from laughing. Lubitsch cuts in to a close-up of Negri’s face, framed by an oval-shaped mask and undergoing the visible struggle to suppress her snickers while her hand thrusts a needle up and down below her chin (Fig. 2.19). This first, close portrayal of Jeanne/Negri, shows a woman whose dynamism threatens to explode with barely concealed playful energy out of the close framing of the shot. The oval-shaped mask, a common formal device for introducing important characters in silent film, perhaps coincidentally invites a comparison to the similarly framed Divakopf portraits of Negri in circulation. Negri’s undulating gesticulations disrupt the ideal beauty of older still-portraits, showcasing the expressive potential of the moving image. While Lubitsch may not have calculated the direct effects of this contrast, it nonetheless perfectly introduces the content of the film, which in animating the diabolical diva allows her destructive energy to wreak havoc on the French monarchy, eventually debilitating the highest member of the French patriarchy, until he is literally kissing the diva’s small feet.

Traditionally, the vamp, or the femme fatale to whom she is related, was punished by the culmination of the film narrative, as is also the case in Madame Dubarry. However, Lubitsch does not provide a definitive censure of Negri’s Jeanne. Though calculating in her dealings with men, Negri is shown to be a victim of her own magnetism in many respects and demonstrates redemptive features through her repeated attempts to protect the young student she once loved. Sympathy for Dubarry builds especially through the second half of the film until Lubitsch’s final sequence implicates the masses for their brutality against the title figure. In a sequence constructed with fast-paced cuts, Lubitsch juxtaposes Negri’s desperate struggle against her executioners with the seething masses of anonymous faces and the ominous presence of the guillotine that will kill her (Figs. 2.20-25). With the exception of a single cut-
away to a medium shot of one executioner, whose grim unmoving face and wild hair induce fear rather than sympathy, Negri’s is the only face on which the camera fixates while she thrashes about in her final living moments. The film invites its viewers to identify primarily with Jeanne’s position as a victim of cultural barbarism, rather than with the masses acting against their suffering under an irresponsible government. In the theatrical space of the town square, a setting that Lubitsch fittingly allows to expand from black as though he is parting the curtains of a stage, the diva acts as an unwitting symbol of the extreme economic stratification that she sought to defy. She becomes a martyr for the scopophilic pleasure of the roaring crowd and, by extension, the movie-going audience as well.

Yet, the experience of the movie-goer has been differentiated from that of the crowd in light of the camera’s proximity to Jeanne’s personal story. The close-up of Negri’s expressive face epitomizes this unique cinematic perspective. Thus, the final terrible image of Negri’s head, ostensibly removed from her body with her eyes closed in a still-framed, iris shot, offers a poignant insight regarding the nature of film stardom and the film medium (Fig. 2.25). Punctuating the swift-cut rhythm of the previous scene like an awful fermata, the shot breaks the engrossing temporal flow of the film and forces the audience to
confront the static image of death and destruction caused by the masses’ misplaced vengeance. This moment encourages the film audience to rethink its own judgments against or for the star personalities that the filmic Jeanne Dubarry emulates, as the still shot strangely binds together the promises of the two-pronged advertising apparatus. The final sequence provides a play between the dramatic, violent movement in Leonard’s poster and the fixed perfection of the star portrait, here re-rendered as a death mask. In its presentation of Negri’s Madame Dubarry, Leonard’s and Petau’s advertisements reflect the ambivalent position of an entertainment industry demonized for its commercial interest and yet loved for its visions of wealth and success. Seen in this light, Lubitsch’s film provides a kind of defense for the diva, while at the same time acknowledging her destructive potential.

2.6 HENNY PORTEN, LIVING PORCELAIN

Dieses Bild hier zu erklären
Ist nicht nötig, den es mehr
Portenfilme stets den Gewinn,
füllen die Kassen, schaut nur hin!
—Advertisement for Hansa Film Verleih, Der Kinematograph

One year after the release of Madame Dubarry, Lubitsch followed up its international success with a related historical “Prunkfilm,” Anna Boleyn, based on the infamous life of the second wife of Britain’s Henry VIII and starring the highly acclaimed actress Henny Porten. Like the advertising for Madame Dubarry, the promotional apparatus of Anna Boleyn exploited the tension between the new medium and the historical period from which the film drew its content. Yet, for Anna Boleyn an even greater emphasis was placed on imbedding the film within already-established artistic traditions. Porten’s particular type of femininity, which drew on traditional gender constructions, proved an exceptionally useful vehicle for this kind of promotion.

Two complimentary posters for the film designed by Paul Scheurich are particularly interesting in this regard, one featuring a single portrait of Porten as Anne Boleyn and the other depicting Porten with

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62 “To explain this image is not necessary, for Porten-films constantly increase profits; they fill the register, just take a look!” Translation mine. Hansa Film Verleih, n.p.
Emil Jannings as Henry VIII. First, the choice to employ Scheurich as poster designer is indicative of the intended artistic purview of the film. At the time the poster was commissioned, Scheurich had an established reputation as a versatile and talented artist. His work ranged from set design for Max Reinhardt’s theater to porcelain design for the famous Meißen porcelain factory where he was employed as a professor. His porcelain figures were at once traditional and modern in that they blended the lightness of Rococo ornamentation with theatrical and exotic subject (Fig. 2.26). Through his work for Meißen, Scheurich was marked as an artist for the elite art collectors of Europe and the United States. Correspondingly, Das Plakat saw him as an exemplary graphic artist with the ability to transcend boundaries of craft into artistry: his work extended “aus dem Kunstgewerbe hinauf zur freien Kunst.” His graphic designs were praised in the magazine as early as 1912 and a featured article on the artist in 1919 lauded his ability to execute designs that were at once “sachlich und schlagfertig” yet exhibited “eine Welt künstlerischer Gesichte.”

Scheurich had worked as a poster designer since 1905, but had only recently begun designing large-format film posters when the design for Anna Boleyn was set to release in 1920. In it, one sees clear marks of Scheurich’s distinctive blend of traditional and modern style (Fig. 2.27). Typographically and iconographically the poster revisits masterworks of the past. First, Scheurich’s hand-lettering for the title emulates the earliest German black-letter type that had become symbolic of the country’s national inheritance. At the same time, from Jannings’s commanding stance to the iconography of the gloves and sword in his hands, the portrait of the actor offers a recognizable adaptation of the German artist Hans Holbein’s painting of Henry VIII from 1540 (Fig. 2.28). Porten’s figure also revisits the same formal posture of the period that we see in Holbein’s portrait of Henry VIII’s third wife, Lady Jane Seymour. Educated members of German society would

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64 “objective and witty” yet exhibited “a world of artistic faces,” Ibid., 7.
presumably notice these references and experience the unique pleasure offered by intertextual reference: the appearance of the words of a poem, the sight of a work of art, or the glimpse of a face that one has known and even admired in a place it was not quite expected. The positive association with Holbein’s work could have captured a potential patron’s attention, yet, to convince a would-be audience member of the value of the film itself, the poster also had to transcend the artwork that it referenced.

Rather than copy Holbein’s images, Scheurich adapted them within the aesthetic of the “sachlich” poster styles of the turn of the century. On the one hand, the economics of mass printing technology mandated this simplification of detail, but the artist’s bold color usage, block-forms, and textured quality of line advantageously resulted in an unprecedented convulsion of styles that was fresh and contemporary.
The posters became collectible works of art in their own right; yet Scheurich’s designs also remained on-target in their aims to promote the unique experience of viewing the film.

The relative darkness of the inks used in these posters gives them a haunting, ephemeral quality that recalls the strange temporal experience of viewing a historical film, wherein the dead are seemingly revived in the dark setting of the film palace. The indefinite details suggest pulsating movement, while the marked difference between light and shadow, particularly in the double portrait, recalls the chiaroscuro of Expressionist lighting techniques associated with Germany’s cinematic success. Anne Boleyn’s place in the shadows at Henry VIII’s side, her gaze away from his shoulder into the darkness where the title and credits of the film are displayed, promises the potential viewer a privileged look beyond the overbearing historical figure of the king into the life of the woman who he famously exalted and then destroyed. That no Holbein portraits of Anne Boleyn survived after her expulsion from the king’s favor makes the portrait of Henny Porten that much more emblematic of the historical exposé that the poster promises to viewers of the film.

While Scheurich’s poster campaign tied the film to the visual art of the past, another intriguing para-textual element imbedded the story into the contemporary art scene. Expressionist artist Lovis Corinth famously visited the set of Anne Boleyn during filming and from his sketches completed numerous lithographs of the actors and actresses, which were arranged in a large-format book. Printed in the fall of 1920, the book was clearly designed to serve as an elite collector’s edition with an early page providing detailed information about the size of the run (“125 Exemplaren und 50 Vorexemplaren” — of which the “Vorzugsexemplaren” included three additional original lithographs) and descriptions as to where Corinth’s signature appears in the pages. Corinth’s lithographs are arranged around a narrative by the reputable poet and author Herbert Eulenberg, while the portraits of the actors form a visual link between the film and the text. Although the names of all the key players are included beneath their portraits, the book appears to be quite deliberately constructed around Henny Porten, who receives the artist’s dedication on
an opening page. The book reads like a diary written in the voice of Porten's Anne Boleyn according to the events as they happen in the film. Thus fashioning the actress as the passive inspiration behind the male artists' work, the text fully bypasses reservations about the artistry of the film star.

Porten's persona operates as that of an artistic muse, rather than as a creator in her own right. Harkening back to an earlier understanding of women in relation to great art, her type was based upon fantasies of ideal womanhood rooted in patriarchal values that had been deflated by the more subversive vamp and flapper types. She may have therefore appealed more to male than female viewers, as one reviewer for \textit{Das Tagebuch} suggests. He wrote of her performance in \textit{Anna Boleyn}: "Wenn sie sich über ihr kleines Wurm [Baby] beugt, die blonde deutsche Mutter, noch geschwächt von der sanften Müdigkeit der Niederkunft, dann klopfen alle mütterlichen Herzen, also namentlich die der Männer, denn die Mütterlichkeit ist in diesem Zeitalter zu den Männern geflüchtet."\footnote{65 When she bends over her little worm [baby], that blonde mother still weak from the soft fatigue of labor, all the maternal hearts begin to patter — that is the hearts of the men, since maternity has fled to men in this day and age." Translation mine. \textit{Anna Boleyn}, Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek, Schriftgutarchiv.}

A seven-page advertisement in \textit{Der Kinematograph} features cartoons and rhyming couplets that lyricize her popularity among cinema patrons. Notably, the crowds that the ads depict are almost exclusively male (Fig. 2.29). Nonetheless, Porten's appearance in \textit{Illustrierte Film Woche} suggests that a more modern version of Henny's persona was also in circulation. On the cover she is dressed in the masculinized fashions of the day — with a tie and a straw hat on her head, while inside she is featured engaging in a boxing match with another woman. These images may reveal an attempt to expand the reach of Porten's popularity among female audiences who embraced these more playful relations with gender types.\footnote{66 The \textit{Illustrierte Film Woche} likely had a readership of mixed genders; however, based on the products advertised and the content of the articles printed there, it appears to be at least primarily aimed at a female readership. J.U., "Henny Porten," 2.}

These varied representations of the star suggest the industry's comprehensive reach.

\begin{figure}[h!]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Tapfer Stürmer, die hier stehn Woll'n nur Portenfilme sehn." Advertisement for Hansa Film Verleih, Berlin. \textit{Der Kinematograph}, no. 539 (25 April 1917).}
\end{figure}
for both male and female audience members. The text accompanying these images retains the common emphasis on Porten’s theatrical acumen.

An experienced professional in the German film industry who had begun making films with her theatrical family in 1906, Porten once prompted director Alfred Halm to write of her performance in the cinematic version of the play Rose Bernd (1919):

Henny Porten ist keine Kinopuppe, wie die vielen Divas und Divetten, sondern eine aus innerster Seele nachschaffende, die feinsten Seelenregungen oft nur durch ein Augenspiel zeichnende Filmschauspielerin. Ihr ernster Wille, mehr zu sein als eine Postkartenberühmtheit, ihr energisches, doch nicht zu beirrendes Streben, im Lichtbilde wirklich edelste Volkskunst zu bieten, wurde mit dieser Leistung [in Rose Bernd] reichlich belohnt.\(^\text{67}\)

Porten’s accomplishments seemed to be measured by an entirely different standard from that applied to her peers.\(^\text{68}\) Her superiority was not only attributed to her theatrical training, however, but was also reinforced by her on-screen manifestation of feminine traits that were tied to traditional notions of race and nationality. For instance, *Illustrierte Film Woche* answers its own rhetorical question “what traits have made this particular star such favorite?” with the explanation:

Sie liegen sowohl in dem echt Deutschen ihrer Erscheinung als auch in gleichem Maße in dem Charakter der von ihr dargestellten Rollen. Henny Porten ist das schöne, blonde deutsche Mädchen, die schöne, blonde deutsche Frau, von echt deutscher Sentimentalität, von echt deutschem Humor. Südländische Rassigkeit fehlt ihr ebenso wie ihr das ganz Hochdramatische nicht liegt.\(^\text{69}\)

\(^{67}\) “Henny Porten is no cinema doll, like the many divas and divetten, but one that is modeled after the innermost soul, an actress that can conjure the finest impulses of the soul often through a mere play of the eyes. Her sincere wish to be more than a postcard celebrity, her energetic, yet not-too-misleading endeavors to offer truly noble folk art in the cinema, were richly rewarded with this performance.” Translation mine. Halm, “Der ‘Rose Bernd’-Film und Seine Wirkung,” http://www.filmportal.de/node/43439/material/608731.

\(^{68}\) This becomes especially apparent in an open letter to the star in *Film-Kurier* where by the author responds to Porten’s appeal (made in an autobiography) for film-acting to be taken more seriously by critics. The author responds that although Porten demonstrates artistic talent, her female colleagues do not and that introducing more vigorous criticism would not ennoble the vast majority of bad performances. He writes: “Man kann über einen schlechten Komiker im Variete geistreiche Worte sagen. Man kann eine literarische Kabarettkritik schreiben. Ich sage, man kann. Es ist möglich. Aber bleibt dadurch der Komiker nicht eben noch ein solcher und wird er dadurch nicht Moissi [the famous Austrian stage actor], das Kabaret nicht Reinhardt?” (“One can write spirited words about a bad comedian in a variety performance. One can write a literary critique of the cabaret. I say, one can. It is possible. But doesn’t the comedian remain just the same as before, does he not fail to become Moissi [famous Italian stage actor], and the cabaret fail to become Reinhardt?”) Lüthge, “Offener Brief an Henny Porten,” 1.

\(^{69}\) “They lay in the genuine Germaness of her appearance as well as to an equal degree in the character of her represented roles. Henny Porten is the beautiful, blonde, German maiden, the beautiful, blonde, German woman of a genuine German sentimentality, of a genuine German disposition. She does not possess southern passion any more than she does intense fervency.” Translation mine. J.U., “Henny Porten,” 1.
As the description suggests, Porten’s type was envisioned as a cinematic adaptation of the mythic heroines of Germany’s past and imagined in stark contrast to a Negri-esque ‘southern’ persona more closely related to image of the Neue Frau (Fig. 2.30).

Porten’s so-called “asexual” and “maternal” persona also contradicted the promiscuity and exhibitionism characterized by Oswalda’s type of dancing doll, who was stylistically youthful, single, and interested in pursuing her own desires. Hake has argued that Porten’s less contemporary look and physicality also “made her less interesting to Lubitsch.” She implies that in addition to Porten’s performance quality, the roles that she typically portrayed did not serve as sites of identification for Lubitsch the way that those of Oswalda and Negri did; nor did they share the other stars’ “encompassing eroticism,” as reflected in their narcissism and love of consumption, also part of the director’s earlier on-screen persona. Yet, Porten’s persona suggestively illustrates the problematic commodification of her outdated type, just as the historical narrative of Anna Boleyn illustrates how this version of femininity has consistently been transformed into a consumable object throughout history, one that in the past was exchanged exclusively by men.

In fact, despite his artful rendering of the design, Scheurich’s poster portrait of Porten retains markers of the consumerist element at play in the film (Fig. 2.31). Incorporation of Sachplakat aesthetics implies Porten’s/Boleyn’s position as commodity in the film by equating her with tobacco, shoes, typewriters, and other consumer products that were typically advertised using this style. Correspondingly, Scheurich’s painting shows enhanced precision and clarity in two critical areas of the portrait: Porten’s right eye and the large ring on the right index finger. Color contrast and atypical detail in these two points allow them to

FIGURE 2.30 Döri, Luise, Königin von Preussen (1931). Lithograph, 137 x 94 cm. Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek.

70 Hake, Passions and Deceptions, 47.
71 Ibid., 47.
72 Ibid., 47.
operate as the necessary resting points for the wondering eye of the busy passersby, and both open up the imagination to the double draw of the film. The tantalizing piece of jewelry eludes to the rich, elaborate fashions for which Lubitsch’s costume dramas were famous, while the emphasis of the eye promises a personal look into the subject’s life. At the same time, the dark circle surrounding the eye and the oval-shaped ring on the finger mirror each other’s composition to suggest a possible merging between the abstract, historical figure and the consumable object.

In an odd but revealing coincidence, preceding the advertisement for this film, Porten often appeared in images and films where she would play a “living porcelain” figure, her first film being a short in which she played a Meißner Rococo cavalier (Fig. 2.32). Given Scheurich’s position as a porcelain designer this poster for Anna Boleyn may bring up associations with these collectors’ objects, further attesting to the artistic value of the film, while also reasserting Porten’s artistic persona as one that plays within the objectified ideals of femininity established by the aesthetic tradition. Though this overt objectification ennobled the actress in the sense that she was seen as a work of art made animate, as such, Porten could not possess the activity and energy that her female counter parts would wield. While Negri and Oswalda also allowed themselves to be traded they took charge of their own brokering. Porten remains at the mercy of the men and the older media that define her role. Thus, in Lubitsch’s film she is outlived by the more cheeky Aud Egede Nissen who plays Jane Seymour, and the final execution scene, which lacks the grotesque imagery of Madame Dubarry, reveals a kind of complacency regarding the actress’s demise despite its melodramatic tenor. Porten’s Boleyn is guided through a doorway by two anonymous executioners, walking toward the camera until she exits.

FIGURE 2.31 Paul Scheurich, Anna Boleyn (1920). Lithograph, 125 x 93 cm. Central St. Martin’s.
the frame left in slow trance-like steps. Where the final shot of *Madame Dubarry* implicates the viewer for his or her desire to view the violent execution, the absence of a visual depiction of Anne Boleyn’s death and her dignified approach to it merely highlights her self-damning passivity. Porten’s conventional femininity is called into question by the contrast of these two films, which Lubitsch conceived of as a complementary pair.

As I have shown, many of the posters featuring Lubitsch’s female leads, Oswalda, Negri, and Porten, suggest that advertisers were eager to use the image of the film star to garner interest for increasingly ambitious film productions. Yet, marketers were also pressured to downplay the diva-like qualities she might possess and integrate references to established arts in order to elevate the reputation of the film medium. Given the shifting gender roles that female star personae often came to represent, it became necessary to craft advertisements that could be variously interpreted so as to appeal both to those who would commend and those who would condemn women’s recently increased autonomy. For this reason Oswalda is at once demanding but childlike, Negri is desirous but in a way that leads to her own destruction, Porten is placed on a pedestal but bound to fall. Though Lubitsch does not imagine his heroines outside of a world that requires their own self-objectification, his films engage with these ambivalences, demonstrating a sensitivity for modern women’s challenges. Female film stars such as Oswalda, Negri, and Porten provided unprecedented vehicles for audience members to re-imagine femininity through images that for the first time had to take the interests of a growing female consumer base into account. They remain a testament to women’s shifting role in the Weimar Republic as well as to various cultural responses to these shifts.

My upcoming chapter provides an opportunity to consider how film posters treated depictions of the male film star in comparison. There I examine Theo Matejko’s poster for the premier of Fritz Lang’s epic film *Die Niebelungen, Siegfrieds Tod* (1924). As I will show, Matjeko’s dramatic illustration of the
moment of the German hero’s death uses idealized figuration of the male body to evoke the political imagery of propaganda posters that were simultaneously in circulation as the film was released. The poster uses a new, wide-spread type of reportage-illustration from illustrated magazines where excitement and climactic movement fed into a sense of social urgency. The poster thereby attempts to compel viewers to take part in the film exhibition as a way of signifying national cohesion.
CHAPTER THREE

Political Movement: The Film Posters of Pressezeichner Theo Matejko

Walking down a Berlin street in 1919, you would have seen very few of the artistic posters that had coaxed you to pay out before the Great War. Fine soaps, chocolates, drink, and nights at the theater — these luxury items were no longer within reach for the depleted population, and those few businesses that remained to offer such goods could no longer afford to include advertising posters in their budgets. Film exhibitioners proved a feeble exception to this rule. Their advertisements, though ubiquitous, did little to advance pre-war developments in poster art. Plastering the streets with their *Diva Köpfe*, they rarely invested in hiring reputable designers for their ads. For the most part, the beckoning temptations of the commercial poster were replaced by a bevy of dramatic images and stark catchphrases that screeched for support of the German Worker’s Party, the Social Democrats, the Spartacus League, the Freikorps, and the Anti-Bolshevist League, among others. As Ernst Carl Bauer reported, “the street presented the picture of unrest, it reveled in color and gave lively expression to our agitated times.”¹ The fury of intersecting ideologies represented in political posters echoed the violence that sparked between opposing groups in the streets. Thus, the postwar period of intense political advertisement became known as Germany’s “posterwar.”²

Amid the onslaught of propaganda posters that ushered in Germany’s new democracy, poster critics held discussions, organized exhibitions, and printed a number of journals and short texts dedicated to political propaganda posters. Critics were quick to agree that war propaganda had prompted notable changes in poster aesthetic. For some, this was a positive development, as it helped to break German designers out of their perhaps too-strict allegiance to the precepts of the *Sachplakat* developed earlier in the century. For others, including Kurt Tucholsky, Hans Sachs, Robert Hösel, these unappealing posters stoked the basic, primordial urges of men and women with visual hyperbole and sometimes outright

¹ qtd. in Rigby, “German Expressionist Political Posters,” 33.

² Goebbels often referred to the “Plakatkrieg” that had begun with the voting process in the immediate postwar period. Simmons, “Grimaces on the Walls,” 17. See also, Gerhard Paul *Aufstand der Bilder: Die NS-Propaganda vor 1933.*
misrepresentation. This so-called “Hurrakitsch” was often accused of “Chauvinismus” and undermined poster enthusiasts’ earlier efforts to assert the value of the poster as an art form. Increasingly, political propaganda posters exhibited neither the simplicity of form and function seen in sachlich posters of Stiller and Bernhardt nor the mystical properties of organic ornamentation in turn-of-the-century Jugendstil designs. Instead, they attracted attention by pulling together culturally provocative symbols without the aid of an appropriate aesthetic to unify them. As a result, debates began to circulate around which poster styles could most aptly and artistically communicate complex political ideas — a task often regarded as being separate and significantly more difficult than promoting material, commercial products.

In a 1919 volume dedicated to political posters, art critic Adolf Behne argued that the political poster artist would need to fulfill two primary objectives in order to be successful. First, he or she would have to create work that followed the same “inner logic of the masses, the uneducated,” and those without “preconceived notions” of art. Second, the work must speak to the “spiritual foundation” of humanity, awakening the feeling of “moral connection” among the masses. In other words, the posters would have to be comprehensible to the largest segments of the population and must grip them at a higher, moral level than commercial advertisements had done in the past. For Behne, Expressionist works like those included in Max Pechstein’s famous tract An Alle Künstler most closely complied with these conditions. Their vibrantly patterned lines and shapes were thought to communicate the political position of the left on an emotional, spiritual level. But while the Expressionists certainly increased the aesthetic quality of the political poster, the effectiveness of the style in advancing social aims quickly came under question. Hans Friedeberger, for instance, argued that Expressionism failed to resonate with

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3 Scheutzinger, “Angelsächsischer und deutscher Chauvinismus in der politischen Bildreklame,” 143.

4 Translation mine. Behne, Das Politische Plakat, 12.

5 Translation mine. Ibid., 13.

6 Susan Sontag maintained Behne’s distinction between political and poster art in her introduction to Douglas Sterner’s The Art of Revolution (1970), explaining that: “As the aim of the an effective advertising poster is the stimulation (and simplification) of tastes and appetites, the aim of an effective political poster is rarely more than the stimulation (and simplification) of moral sentiments.” Sontag, “Posters,” n.p. While such a distinction reflects the shift in visual culture brought about by war propaganda (to include more calls to morality), both critics fail to fully recognize the way in which the most stimulating political and commercial posters often incite both appetite and morality in order to garner attention and muster support.
the working classes it was meant to reach. The masses, he argued, were not used to viewing abstract imagery drawn from the fine arts, and thus faced potentially insurmountable boundaries in their ability to be influenced by Expressionist posters. Instead, steeped as they were in quotidian surroundings, the masses were thought to be most susceptible to visual messages that employed recognizable images from life.

Perhaps this assumption regarding a mass preference for realism accounts for poster artist Theo Matejko’s frequent commissions for political parties in the 1920s and, eventually, his employment as an illustrator for Die Wehrmacht, a National Socialist periodical that glorified the German army. As with all poster studies, the actual effect of Matejko’s posters on the public remains an object of speculation. Yet, critical commentary and comparisons to be made between his posters and those of contemporaries make clear that Matejko built his reputation around a style that was at once accessible and artistically relevant. Many of the terms used by critics to describe Matejko’s dominant style are similar to those used in relation to Expressionism: sketch-like, with agitated tempos, and lines that seem to vibrate off the page, suggesting that his style was every bit as exciting as the more “artistic” posters commissioned during the early 1920s. At the same time, however, Matejko’s work would have remained familiar and comprehensible to a wide segment of the population in both content and form. His political posters drew upon the same simplistic, “chauvinist” imagery that had become the norm during the First World War, while the style of these posters, indebted as it was to Matejko’s early success in documentary illustration, remained deeply integrated within everyday visual culture.

After being wounded early on during World War I, Matejko began his artistic career in Austria as a war correspondent (Kriegsmaler) for K. und K. Kriegspressequartier and afterwards became internationally renowned for his journalistic illustrations for the Ullstein Verlag in Berlin. A lively personality in the press, he sketched exciting current events such as boxing matches, fighter-pilots engaged mid-air, and car races, (he even drove a car in one of these races), but he also illustrated literary works — a poem

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7 Rigby more recently confirmed Friedeberger’s findings, arguing that the German socialist government, as well as artists and intellectuals who espoused the same, incorrectly assumed that “avant-garde idioms would more deeply affect the urban masses than would traditional styles.” Rigby, “German Expressionist Political Posters,” 37.

by Tucholsky and a novel by Vicki Baum, for instance.\(^9\) His work straddled fiction and documentary, mirroring the increasingly muddy division between journalism and entertainment that so concerned cultural critics of the Weimar period.\(^10\) Accordingly, Matejko’s versatile work was not long confined to newspaper illustration. Not only did he design numerous political posters, but, near the close of the war, UFA began to commission him to complete on-set sketches for publicity images and to design film posters, many of which promoted Germany’s largest-scale productions in the interwar period, such as *Sumurun* (1920), *Die Nibelungen* (1924), and *Der letzte Mann* (1924). Matejko’s work became ubiquitous as did his imitators. Hans Liska, creator of the most well-known propaganda illustrations of the Axis powers at war, named Matejko as his primary influence.\(^11\) Today, many of Matejko’s propaganda posters still serve as prominent reminders of the upheaval of interwar Germany. At the same time, the artist’s dramatic illustrations prefigure the style that would eventually dominate in classical movie posters of the 30s and 40s, suggesting that his work was particularly suited to large-scale feature film advertisement.

Despite this legacy, Matejko’s poster art has not sparked the same level of art historical interest as that of contemporaries who drew more definitively upon movements in the visual arts. Yet, precisely because of its affinity with newspapers and illustrated magazines, his style speaks to an important phenomenon of interwar popular visual culture that warrants critical attention, particularly for film and media scholars interested in the dynamic give and take between still and moving images. For, as this chapter will show, Matejko’s work exhibits a timely obsession with movement as the hallmark of modern reality. His ability to reproduce the visual effects of split-second action provided the critical element of his success. This movement aesthetic allowed him to employ more accessible forms of symbolism and suggestion without sacrificing the sense of immediacy and the contemporary edge that characterized Expressionism and both new and old *Sachlichkeit*.

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\(^9\) Weber, *Der Pressezeichner*, 60.


\(^{11}\) Weber, *Der Pressezeichner*, 53.
This chapter considers the premier poster for the first section of Fritz Lang’s two-part film Die Nibelungen (1924) as a primary example of Matejko’s movement aesthetic. With this example, I demonstrate that Matejko’s designs invited politicization at a time in which Germany understood many of its social and political issues in terms of an unchecked momentum punctuated by moments of intense cultural upheaval. As production firms and exhibitors strove to make their products appear sensational, yet also socially relevant, Matejko’s movement-rich style proved especially fitting for film advertisement. Not only did his aesthetic allude to the potency of the moving image, Matejko’s posters encouraged a range of political readings that suggested the film industry’s own stake in the ongoing “posterwar” of the Weimar Republic.

3.1 SIEGFRIED, FALLING HERO

Es ist nicht nur wesentlich, was eine Zeit und ihre Menschen jeweils sehen, sondern weit mehr, wie sie sehen. Und hier entscheidet Erziehung und Gewöhnung.
— Hans Friedeberger, 1919

At the time of its release in 1924 Die Nibelungen was undoubtedly the largest undertaking in German film history in terms of its scope and ambition. During the unprecedented two years of production time taken to complete the two-part film, the trade press had charted its makers’ progress with articles on Fritz Lang’s artistic decisions and the technological achievements of his crew. They effused about the completion of the “malerischen historischen Kostüme” and Lang’s insistence on creating a flowering forest at Babelsberg rather than use the landscape surrounding Potsdam. Finally, the premier of the first of the film’s two parts, which tells the legend of the ascendancy and tragic death of medieval hero Siegfried, was scheduled for February 14. Invitations on thick paper stock with decorative type summoned a select group of film critics, political dignitaries, and other social elite to the UFA Palast am Zoo. Covered from

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12 “It is not only essential what an epoch and its people see at any one time, rather far more how they see. And here education and habit are pivotal.” Translation mine. Friedeberger, “Das Künstlerplakat der Revolutionszeit,” 275.

13 “picturesque historical costumes,” Translation mine. See “Neues vom Ufa-Konzern,” 26; “Fritz Lang blamiert Werder,” 2; and “Siegfrieds Tod,” 2.
floor to ceiling with repeating patterns of art deco designs modeled on the opulent set, the theater had been redecorated to appear as an apparition of the palace at Worms. On arrival, each attendee was given a commemorative bound booklet featuring images and articles written by the creators of the film, and a select few followed the screening by attending a special dinner with a menu based on medieval culinary traditions (Fig. 3.1). The larger public participated vicariously in these events through journals' reports on this celebration of what was hoped to be a breakthrough moment in German film history.14 Not unlike the historicist spectacles orchestrated in nineteenth-century Germany, the hype surrounding the release of the film was calculated to build toward an outpouring of support for the country through a revitalization of its cultural inheritance. Siegfried Kracauer would later write of the film that it was created with the hope that “it might be considered a true manifestation of the German mind.”15 From its elaborate paratextual apparatus to its opening intertitle dedicating the film “to the German people,” Die Nibelungen represented an attempt to repair the fractured unity of the nation.

Despite the heady optimism accompanying its release, Theo Matejko’s poster design for the premier of the film, approved by the censorship board almost two months beforehand and likely to have made an early appearance on the streets, offers a moment of blunt fatalism (Fig. 3.2). The hero of the film is shown gliding downward toward the eternalized instant of his death, brought low by the treacherous spear of his false kinsman. Given the plethora of heroic imagery that dominated in political propaganda as well as film advertisement at the time of the release of Die Nibelungen, the choice to advertise UFA’s greatest film triumph with a depiction of Siegfried’s downfall demands critical consideration. For the poster’s viewers, this particular image would have been heavily laden with cultural associations, as the Nibelungen legend itself already held great significance for German audiences. Multiple versions and adaptations of the medieval epic had been abundant since the nineteenth-century. Wagner’s operatic

14 See Film-Kurier’s report on Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann’s toasts and speeches held at the premier banquet in “Reden und Trinksprüche beim Nibelungen-Bankett,” 1-2.

15 Kracauer, From Caligari to Hitler, 92.
masterpiece *der Ring des Nibelungen* is one of the most prominent of these, but the story was also repeated in children’s books and in stage productions. Siegfried’s heroic figure and the story of his death would have been well-known. As Anton Kaes reports: “In 1924, it would have been nearly impossible to watch a film about the Nibelungen without being already familiar with both the story and the character of Siegfried.”\textsuperscript{16} In fact, as the primary hero of one of the oldest legends of the Germanic literary tradition, Siegfried had come to stand in as a symbol of the German nation itself.\textsuperscript{17}

Yet, as Matejko’s poster was being plastered all over Berlin, the hero’s downfall was simultaneously being employed as a symbol for intense political and social division within Germany. General Paul von Hindenburg, who had been instrumental in the founding of UFA, called upon this symbolism when he famously remarked that the German army had lost the war not through its own failure, but through a loss of support on the home-front: „Wie Siegfried unter dem hinterlistigen Speerwurf des grimmigen Hagen, so stürzte unsere ermattete Front; vergebens hatte sie versucht, aus dem versiegenden Quell der heimatlichen Kraft neues Leben zu trinken.”\textsuperscript{18} The so-called *Dolchstoßlegende* (stab-in-the-back legend) built upon such comments and became a rallying point for right-wing political parties throughout the 1920s. In light of the “legend,” it is difficult to imagine how advertisers for the UFA film could have chosen an image with more potential for provocation than this depiction of Siegfried’s death. Citing a report in the *New York* 

\textsuperscript{16} Kaes, “Siegfried — A German Film Star,” 65.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 65.
\textsuperscript{18} “As Siegfried under the deceitful throw of the fierce Hagen’s spear, so collapsed our languishing front; in vain the army attempted to drink new life from the ebbing spring of strength in the homeland.” Hindenburg, *Aus meinem Leben*, 5.
Times, Jan-Christopher Horak notes that UFA's “inflationary ad campaign” sparked protests against the premier of Siegfrieds Tod.\footnote{Horak, “Die Nibelungen,” 2.} Although the contemporary German trade press does not report on any such public response, it is possible that given on-going protests against the Fridericus Rex serial (1920-3), which was said to have been proof of UFA's right-leaning politics, such unrest extended to disapproval of the Nibelungen film. In fact, the two films were linked in at least one article in Der Film, which argued for the propriety of using national themes in commercial film.\footnote{Zerbe, “Siegfried und Friedericus Rex,” 19.} In light of the association between Siegfried and Fridericus Rex, it is easy to assume that in presenting Siegfried's death in its initial advertising campaign, the film’s producers aimed to profess their right-leaning politics. The resounding approval that Die Nibelungen garnered from both Hitler and Goebbels in the 1930s has seemed to affirm this inference.

Indeed, since the film’s release many scholars and critics have been rightly uneasy with its nationalist overtones.\footnote{Mueller, “14 February 1924,” 139.} Kracauer famously read the figures of the film as prototypes of Nazi-figureheads, announcing that Hagen, Siegfried’s killer and the vassal of the king, foreshadows a “well-known type of Nazi leader” with his loyalty “motivated by a nihilistic lust for power.”\footnote{Kracauer, From Caligari to Hitler, 93.} In the 1960s, however, Lang claimed to have seen the epic not as “a heroic poem of the German people’ as co-opted by “the Rightist imbeciles before and under Hitler,” but as a story about a “decadent social class that was already on the decline.”\footnote{Lang, qtd. in Mueller, “14 February 1924,” 138.} The lesser-known second part of the film confirms Lang’s statement by demonstrating the total destruction of society and myth via the adherence to the outmoded codes of honor that undergirded that decadent society — none of the characters (excepting Attila the Hun) is spared the brutal killing spree that these codes bring about. Accordingly, scholars Tom Gunning and Anton Kaes have identified the unyielding bent toward the destruction of heroic myth as the prominent impression to be taken from the film.\footnote{Gunning, The Films of Fritz Lang, 34-51; Kaes, Shell Shock Cinema, 130-66} Their arguments resist generalized readings of the film that link the work to fascist spectacles of the Nazi era, which mobilized such mythology. However, the political appropriation of the Nibelungen remains
a troubling aspect of the history of the film and cannot easily be absolved. Even the destruction that characterizes the second half of the legend, the so-called Götterdämmerung, has been evoked to describe the last days of National Socialist dictatorship.\textsuperscript{25} The paratextual claim made by advertisers, promoters, and within the film itself that it should represent “Germanness” reasserts the questions that this history aggravates.

The content of Matejko’s poster raises similar concerns. The poster undeniably operates with established tropes of political posters encouraging politicized responses and corresponds to the film industry’s attempts to unify its national audience. By the end of the First World War in Germany the silent film industry began to be perceived not just as an economic enterprise advanced by sideshow-type peddlers, but as an important national undertaking. In the press German film became a symbol of the country’s intellectual, artistic, and commercial prowess and was made to compete with the productions of former military adversaries. Militaristic metaphors were used to dramatize the perceived success or failure of Germany’s cinematic endeavors. As one reporter wrote on the premier of Fritz Lang’s \textit{Nibelungen}, “Ich hatte das Gefühl einer Schlacht. Wäre sie verloren gegangen, so wären wir alle verloren . . . Halleluja, der Film hat gesiegt!— \textit{wir} haben gesiegt!!”\textsuperscript{26} With these metaphors proponents of the new medium raised the stakes of the industry to a level of national importance on par with the military battles of the Great War. And in so doing they discussed its potential to cultivate a renewed sense of national identity in Germany and to demonstrate that identity to an international audience.

Matejko’s poster activates these feelings of national interest through its politicized imagery, yet modifies its tropes for mid-1920s viewers. By encapsulating a sense of movement at a pivotal moment in time, Matejko's poster appears to give direct access to dramatic events that demand interpretation. Yet, for commercial purposes, he abstains from guiding that interpretation in a particular political direction. A closer look at how his \textit{Nibelungen} poster relates to political propaganda imagery affords new insight into the increasing significance of movement as a visual narrative strategy in Weimar visual culture and

\textsuperscript{25} Bendersky, \textit{A History of Nazi Germany}, 229.

\textsuperscript{26} “I had the feeling of being in combat. If the battle were lost, so all of us would be lost. . . Hallelujah, the film was victorious! — \textit{we} were victorious!!” Translation mine. H., “Die Nibelungen,” 1.
suggests how Matejko’s poster could have appealed to a broader spectrum of potential viewers than we might at first expect.

The very depiction of the mythological hero in Matejko’s poster situates the film advertisement within a tradition of political imagery. As Susan Sontag has argued, depictions of “heroes” in early war propaganda operated as primary symbolic figures, inciting feelings of group cohesion with a shared impetus toward a higher moral purpose, just as the “pretty girl” stood for the satisfaction of individual corporeal desires in earlier commercial propaganda. Indeed, medieval heroes and Siegfried-types were not uncommon in Germany’s wartime posters. This was true for example of artistic posters such as Lucian Bernhard’s 1917 poster, with its combination of sachlich minimalism and a Schriftplakat call to action, as well as in the posters of less-accomplished designers such as Paul Neumann’s “Der Letzte Hieb ist die 8. Kriegsanleihe” (“The Final Strike is the Eighth War Bond”) and Anton Hoffmann’s “Zeichnet Kriegsanleihe!” (“Purchase War Bonds!”) (Figs. 3.4-6). These posters illustrate how the medieval hero was often blended with imagery of the contemporary soldier — imbuing the contemporary combatant with the mystical past. Visual culture historians Kazecki and Lieblang have rightly argued that these images distance the viewer from the reality of war by cloaking it in overwrought cultural associations. In the Weimar era, the hero was sometimes refashioned as a worker fighting for the socialist republic or the returned soldier joining the Freikorps, but, Kazecki and Lieblang note, regardless of the party promoted, “the individual soldier is identified with the German nation—in a synecdochical process of figuration, in which one (the soldier on the battlefield) stands for the whole (the


28 Stefan Goebel’s “Chivalrous Knights versus Iron Warriors,” 79-110 discusses the differences between German and British use of heroic imagery during World War One, noting how in Germany the hero was more likely to be depicted as an amalgamation of modern and historical soldiers-figures.

29 Kazecki and Lieblang, “Regression versus Progression,” 121.
collective of soldiers and civilians describing themselves as a nation) as well as for the space inherited by the collective.” These images invited civilians to participate in political action either directly or indirectly with the promise of legendary greatness that the traditional heroes from tales such as *Die Nibelungen* inspired. At the same time they drew on collective myths that increased group solidarity and unified the country under a banner of masculine strength. As the above examples illustrate, the propaganda hero is depicted at a moment of triumph, suggesting the inevitable success of the political campaign, should it garner the support it deserves.

Of these three examples, Bernhard’s shows the most aesthetic achievement. Like his famous commercial advertisements, this poster makes a strong impression with an emphasis on simplified lines and limited color usage. Neumann’s poster adopts some of the precepts of the *Sachplakat* with its use of bold contrasting colors, but the execution is less precise than Bernhard’s. He draws more definitively on the symbolism of the sword and helmet to depict his triumphant soldier. Hoffmann’s poster is even more illustrative than Neumann’s and more closely resembles examples of French war propaganda that had begun to influence German poster artists by the end of the war. It uses a variety of colors without departures from “natural” pigmentation. Although the image displays the hero at a moment of dramatic decision — the slaying of the dragon as Siegfried had done, here completed in order to protect the white angelic emblem of peace — the action is somewhat obscured by the business of the background. Thus, posters like Neumann’s and Hoffmann’s were characteristic of a decline in poster art as described by many critics. Such designs were seen as contrived, and, as they did not match the elegant simplicity of the *Sachplakat* style, were also accused of requiring too much symbolic deciphering to be comprehended quickly by the rushed viewer.

Matejko’s Siegfried poster has more in common with the latter two examples than with Bernhard’s work. It too uses an illustrative style combined with mythical symbolism, and in its depiction of a highly

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30 Ibid., 124.
A politicized hero demonstrates its connection with the propaganda posters of the past. Matejko, however, makes some significant departures from these examples in his depiction of the Nibelungen hero, both in terms of content and form. First, although he could easily have chosen one of Siegfried’s triumphant moments to depict in his film poster, Matejko shows Siegfried tragically caught in a moment of weakness. Kaes has suggested that a defeated Germany with its numerous war casualties and diminished international status may have been particularly susceptible to feelings of identification with the fallen idol. In fact, a letter from the wife of a returned soldier that was reproduced in a tract about the actor who played Siegfried describes the wounded soldier identifying with Siegfried’s youthful strength and its mournful loss as depicted in the film. Matejko’s poster, by illustrating the hero’s defeat, offers a vivid image of this loss, eliciting feelings of empathy and sympathy without descending too deeply into the horrific visions that many of the Expressionist painters, Otto Dix and E.L. Kirchner for instance, were crafting to give account of their own experiences of the horrors of the war. Matejko’s poster stays in the realm of the symbolic, but nonetheless manages to assert a sense of artistic relevancy that a heroic pose would have lacked.

Moreover, Matejko’s poster avoids the hyperbole that we see in Hoffmann and Neumann’s wartime posters. Siegfried does not share the weighty symbolism of Neumann’s larger-than-life soldier, occupying the same scale as the great storm brewing behind him, spanning both the past and the present with his emblematic sword and steel helmet, and towering upward from a slightly low angle. Matejko’s poster pictures the hero at a straight-on angle and allows his entire body to fill an otherwise empty frame. Thus, it allows the surface action to create the most dominant impression on the viewer. Unlike Hoffmann’s Siegfried poster which is composed of a wealth of symbols that make sense only in reference to ideas outside of itself, Matejko pares away many of the heroic signifiers that were common to the

FIGURE 3.6 Paul Neumann, Der letzte Hieb (1918). Lithograph 57 x 43 cm. www.loc.gov.

31 Kaes, “Siegfried,” 68.
genre, (the stance, the wielded weapon, dramatic setting, etc.) and emphasizes instead the gravity of Siegfried's fall.

Matejko’s Siegfried invites viewer empathy as a vision of martyrdom might, but potentially incites more complex emotions than other forms of victimhood that propaganda employed to consolidate social interest. His work thereby resonates with other propaganda efforts on the left. Renowned artist Käthe Kollwitz’s posters, for example, often depicted disenfranchised women and children to promote political action in their defense (Fig. 3.7). Yet, Matejko’s Siegfried poster is potentially more emotionally jarring than Kollwitz’s victim portrayals in several ways. First, in picturing a disempowered male hero, the image reflects the troubling crisis of masculinity experienced in the postwar period, whereas Kollwitz’s poster plays on traditional urges to protect women and children, thereby relying on gendered responses despite the poster’s emancipatory purpose.

Secondly, because the poster’s call to action remains less defined than in Kollwitz’s (or, indeed, in almost all other propaganda posters), the viewer is left without an outlet for his or her emotional response. Rather than give direction to a moral imperative, Matejko’s poster leaves its viewer stranded with the impression of loss without recompense.

On the other hand, like Matejko, Kollwitz employed a style that prioritized efficient communication with mass audiences over abstract experimentation. Kollwitz wrote about her own approach in a journal entry from 1916:

[The Impressionist dramatist] E. von Keyserling . . . opposes expressionism and says that after the war the German people will need eccentric studio art less than ever before. What they need is realistic art. I quite agree . . . there must be understanding between the artist and the people. In the best ages of art that has always been the case. Genius can probably run on ahead and seek out new ways. But the good artists who follow after genius — and I count myself among these — have to restore the lost connection once more.32

32 Kollwitz, qtd. in Keams, Käthe Kollwitz, 141.
Kollwitz suggests a need, as an artist, to avoid the tendency to get lost in abstraction and what she calls “over subtleties and ingenuities” and instead to embrace clarity and simplicity in her work. Matejko likewise avoids abstraction in order to communicate efficiently with his audience and crafts a strong impression of realism based in his emphasis in active movement.

Matejko’s poster creates this illusion of movement via the tension in Siegfried’s magnificent body. In the tightened musculature of the hero’s neck, torso, upraised arm and descending thighs, Matejko heightens the physicality of the downward thrust of Siegfried’s fall, while the weightless expanse of his hair licks upward like the flames of a fire around an agonized, distorted face. This is no identifiable star portrait, but instead suggests pain as a rendering from the Renaissance might — through perceived fidelity to human corporeality, but here with an unfinished, hasty edge that contrasts with art historical models. The hero’s dynamic physique creates a sense of depth and dimension despite a limited color palate and minimal background. In fact, the simplification of color and setting pushes the action of the scene forward, while the highlighting on the hero’s upper torso suggests again the surprising vulnerability of his ostensibly indestructible body. By making the hero physically viable, the image takes on an undulating charge that is echoed in the near-haphazard hand-lettering that shrilly announces the name of the film and its director at the bottom of the paper in an uneven blood-red. All this combines with sketch-like stylization to create the impression of effortless execution — the poster has an unplanned, unmediated quality, as if it had simply been snatched from life.

In this respect, Matejko’s Siegfried displays the artist’s most often endorsed talents and separates Matejko from his contemporaries. He neither follows the tenets of the Sachplakat nor uses an illustrative style too complex for poster viewership. Stella Kramrich, writing for Das Plakat in 1920, remarked that “Der Grundsatz der Flächenwirkung bildet für Matejko kein starres Gesetz. Ihm handelt es sich vor allem um Bewegung, die den Blick des Vorübergehenden an sich reißt und nicht wieder freigibt, so lange, bis er das ganze Plakat erfaßt hat.” By grabbing and maintaining viewer attention in this manner, Matejko’s

33 Keams, Käthe Kollwitz, 141.

34 “The fundamental effect of the flat surface proves no rigid principle for Matejko. For him it is movement above all that seizes the eye of the passerby and refuses to release it until the viewer has apprehended the entire poster.” Translation mine. Kramrich, “Die Plakate von Theo Matjeko,” 278.
poster emulates the effects of the new media of his age. He recreates the suspense of watching the
never-ending flow of imagery that one associates with film viewership. In fact, in 1946 a critic for the
journal *Homunculus* directly compared Matejko's abilities as an illustrator to those of a motion picture
camera, writing,

Die Filmkamera ist imstande, dramatisches Geschehen, das in Sekundenfrist über uns
hereinbrechend, Tod und Leben entscheidet, schneller als das entsetzte menschliche Auge den
Vorgang fassen kann, mit ihrer unerbittlichen kaltkristallinen Linse festzuhalten, mit grausamster
realistischer Objektivität aus dem Lebendigen herauszuschneiden. / Uns dasselbe dramatische
Geschehen wiedergeben, ebenso grausam, ebenso realistisch, ebenso objektiv, aber durch eine
Meisterhand und ein menschlich warmfühlendes Herz in ein Werk das höchster künstlerischer
Qualität verwandelt, das kann der Zeichner Theo Matejko.35

The commentator's description of Matejko's style alludes to a historical fascination with the revelatory
propensities of the film camera: it was as much a scientific medium developed to uncover obscure
aspects of nature that were otherwise hidden to the naked eye as it was a medium of entertainment.

Matejko's work, according to this commentator, correspondingly presents the stark reality of those
mysterious split-seconds that decide life and death. Yet, Matejko adds an element of artistry that gives the
revelation a human quality, thus overcoming the technological coldness of the camera, which, for film
detractors, out-ruled its becoming a fine art medium.

Given the distinctiveness of Matejko's designs, Kramrich felt the need to coin a new term for his
style: "das persönliche Plakat."36 She describes Matejko's "personal" poster as decidedly un-realistic and
un-objective, as able to maintain its appeal only when it did not strive for veracity.37 In her approbation of
Matejko's ability to recreate gesture and movement, she describes a kind of hyper-affective subjectivity in
language that recalls descriptions of Expressionism. She explains,

35 "The film camera is capable of apprehending dramatic events that break over us in a split second to determine life and death
more quickly than the appalled, human eye can comprehend; with its remorseless, ice-cold lenses, with the most horrifying realistic
objectivity, it excises the incident. / We are given the same dramatic event, just as horrifying, as realistic, and as objective, but
transformed through a master-hand and a warm human heart in a work of the highest artistic quality. That is what the artist Theo
Matejko can do." Translation mine. qtd. in Weber, *Der Pressezeichner*, 57.

36 "His posters are based in the sketch. They share the same un-mediated, animated quality of individual handwriting; they stir
suggestion through their flowing lines. At the same time they are strictly composed. Their bellowing, capturing gesture and singular,
poster-esque mix of effects grow not out of calculation, but a personally expressive line and bountiful affect. His lines, the way in
which he places the form in the image, are full of suspenseful allure [Erotik]." Translation mine. Kramrich, "Die Plakate von Theo
Matejko, 277.

37 Ibid., 277.
Seine Plakate kommen von der Skizze her. Das Unmittelbare, Lebendige haben sie mit ihr gemein, die persönliche Handschrift, den erregt der Eingebung folgenden Zug. Dabei aber sind sie stark komponiert. Nicht aus der Berechnung heraus, sondern in einer persönlicher Ausdruckslinie und großzügiger Wirkung erwächst die aufrufende, fesselnde Geste und plakatmäßige ganz eigenartigen Mischung von Wirkung zugleich. Seine Linie, die Art, wie er die Gestalten ins Bild setzt, ist voll spannender Erotik.\textsuperscript{38}

Kramrich sees Matejko’s subjective representation of movement combining with a strong sense of composition in order to create a profound sense of suspense. The eroticism that she reads in his images suggests the closeness and immediacy that his hurried execution imparts to the viewer. The poster provides the impression of lived experience simply by emulating the way in which frenetic movement is perceived by the human eye. In this respect, Matejko’s poster does in fact offer a semblance of reality despite its non-objective qualities.

Matejko’s vivid depiction of the hero presents a strange mix of myth and reality that perfectly encompasses the promise of the film: to provide a comprehensible, intimate vision of the hero’s life even through his most desperate death throes. In this manner, the poster corresponds to Lang’s own description of his intentions for making the film: “Today someone who hears of Siegfried’s battle with the dragon should not have to take it on faith, but instead he should see it and experience it fully by seeing it.”\textsuperscript{39} The poster communicates the expectation that unlike the artistic versions of this tale, whose visions had to be conjured by the educated mind through suggestive words or operatic scores, the filmic adaptation of the legend would provide an experiential representation of the epic. Matejko’s Siegfried poster, though highly subjective, (indeed, it depicts an imaginary event), displays the death of the hero with what appears to be brutal honesty. This impression of objectivity is enhanced significantly by the artist’s ability to produce the visual effects of movement within a still-image medium. Due to its correspondingly heightened level of immediacy, the poster makes its strongest appeals on an emotional, experiential level, rather than on an ideological one. Thus, it refrains from dictating an actionable, political response as conventional propaganda posters had done. Rather, his work excites viewer imagination in a way that is at once enticing and familiar, but opens up onto a variety of impressions and interpretations.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 278.

\textsuperscript{39} Lang, “Worauf es beim Nibelungen-Film ankam,” 170.
3.2 STILLNESS AS ART, MOVEMENT AS SENSATION

— Theo Matejko, 1938

The dynamism of Matejko’s Siegfried poster becomes especially striking when considered in opposition to the wider array of promotional materials commissioned for the release of the film. Matejko’s rendering of the fallen hero is markedly more visceral than perhaps any of the other design-heavy visions that were built up to advertise Lang’s film. In the following section I will explore this contrast considering what affects Matejko’s poster might have engendered that other advertising materials did not, how these materials operate in relation to the aesthetic of the film, and what differences or similarities in the ‘look’ of the posters and that of the film suggest about Weimar conceptions of audience engagement. Although we can only speculate as to public reactions to these materials, in exploring these questions we get a better sense of the potentials and limitations of Matejko’s popular style. Thus, we can begin to uncover the elements of his work that were especially attractive to advertisers in the film industry. As I will show, these are much the same elements that made him a preeminent choice for work in political campaigns.

Unlike Matejko’s poster with its raw, emotional tenor, other supporting promotional materials leading up to the release of the film are somewhat restrained. Early newspaper advertisements present the title in a stalwart, though historically inflected type and include little imagery. Unsurprisingly, they lean on the cultural cache of the Nibelungen legend and, to a

FIGURE 3.8 Die Nibelungen. Advertisement. Film-Kurier (9 February 1924).

40 “Above all the ‘event’ interests me; I see man always as the middle-point of that event, in the full, active employment of his vitality. Movement is life, — and the problem of representing that life is what moves me.” Translation mine. Matejko, Das Theo Matejko Buch, n.p.
lesser degree, the reputations of Lang, UFA, and Decla-Bioscop to suggest the quality of the production. The one-page ad from *Film-Kurier* in figure 8 features simple, straight-forward advertisement that does not tantalize with an action-packed photo reproduction or rely on the hyperbolic tag-lines that had already begun to pester some vocal film critics earlier in the decade (Fig. 3.8). It does not even provide a star portrait of the leading actors. Geometric patterns set off prominent lists of cast and crew, while a separate note about costumes, props, and sets constructed specifically for the film alludes to the influence that Germany’s turn-of-the-century design workshops had on both the visuals of this film and the self-perceptions of its makers. Thus, the campaign avoided overt sensationalism and began to construct an ambiance of aesthetic craftsmanship that one would not necessarily expect if viewing Matejko’s poster alone.

Supplementary and take-away materials reveal a more opulent flair. The premier program features ornate typography as its cover art. With an understated elegance it harkens back to medieval illustrated manuscripts in color and form (Fig. 3.1). Most of the *Nibelungen* film’s complementary materials blend modern art-deco style with the suggestion of a medieval setting, often to grandiose effect. They consistently repeat the geometric patterns designed for the film and based on Carl Otto Czeschka’s illustrated *Nibelungen* text published in 1909. In a separate booklet for film exhibitors, UFA encouraged theater owners throughout Germany to use this style in decorating their own venues for local release. The repeated shapes likewise garnished various versions of the *Illustrierte Filmkurier* that were published to be sold at the theaters. Though accessible and consumable, these materials demonstrate conspicuous attempts to situate the film within an art historical lineage. They represent a push to legitimize this new version of the legend and fight against the belief that film only trivialized great epics, a danger that Lang himself feared.\(^{41}\)

Martin Lehmann Steglich’s somewhat later poster for *Siegfried* more closely aligns with these other promotional materials than does Matejko’s (Fig. 3.9). Having been approved for posting by the censorship board under two weeks before the premier it did not appear with the same consistency and

\(^{41}\) Writing in 1924, Lang explains: “Es mußte mir also darauf ankommen, in einer Form, die das Heilig-Geistige nicht banalisierte, mit den Nibelungen eine Film zu schaffen der dem Volke gehören sollte.” (“It came to me to create a film of the Nibelungen that would belong to people in a form that wouldn’t banalize its holy-spiritual quality.”) Translation mine. Lang, *Worauf es beim Nibelungen-Film ankam,* 170.
duration as Matejko’s poster either in reprints or, very likely, on the streets. Rather, Steglitz’s poster can be considered another manifestation of the premier event that transcended the bounds of UFA-Palast. Though it does not follow Czeschka’s models exactly, it similarly demonstrates a high quality of craft through its colorful execution of a widely reproduced promotional still. The ornamental lettering adheres closely to the historical typography that we see in the take-aways provided by the theater. Moreover, it uses color-blocking reminiscent of Japanese woodcuts that were influential in much turn-of-the-century design and uses careful composition (with the sun shining behind Siegfried’s head and the descending abyss below his army) to foretell the hero’s precarious relationship to the civilized world of the court. Despite the elegant balance struck between dark and light, the composition is noticeably static in comparison to Matejko’s poster — only the indefinite rays of sunshine appear to shimmer in the otherwise immovable image. Instead, the difference in scale between the armed procession at the very top of the poster and the vast abyss stretching down below them creates a sense of underlying drama. Steglitz’s visually striking design engages the viewer at a contemplative, distant level, while Matejko uses violent movement to take possession of viewers’ emotions. Matejko’s falling Siegfried promises audiences access to bodily sensations and even sensual pleasures through the depiction of the hero’s body, pleasures that the more subdued promotional materials withhold.42

Unlike Matejko’s poster, Steglitz’s design closely corresponds with the actual aesthetic of the film, which features tableau-esque shots of its monumental sets. Critics have long singled out such shots as bastions of interpretive meaning within the framework of Lang’s film. Kracauer, for instance, remarks of the scene from which Steglitz’s poster is modeled that the relation of the bridge to the deep ravine beneath it “reduce(s) human beings to accessories of primeval landscapes or vast buildings.”43 He rightly

42 According to UFA’s press packet both of these posters were available for exhibitors to order leading up to their screenings. Knowing their own audiences, exhibitors could select the poster they deemed most likely to appeal.

43 Kracauer, From Caligari to Hitler, 94.
points out that this image and others like it seem to subjugate humans to the fatalistic processes of nature, leaving them little ability to determine their own destinies. This reading holds true in the palace sequences of the film as well. Correspondingly, Gunning explains that the “obsessive geometry” of Lang’s shots reveal that “[b]eneath the film’s invocation of a primordial, mythical world rumbles an appetite for the systematic, schematic and the abstract, the steady rhythm of the Destiny-machine.” These abstract forces lead to the total destruction of both the mythical and civilized worlds depicted in the Nibelungen films, but in Siegfried they remain a mere suggestion made by grandiose shots that only allude to the workings of fate. It is not until the second part of the film, Kriemhilds Rache, that the destructive forces of fate become visible in chaotic movements of what Kaes has called the closest thing Lang ever made to a battle scene. Kaes suggests that the bloodbath that kills Siegfried’s main protagonists at the end of Kriemhilds Rache offered German audiences a chance to enact a fantasy of revenge, but that the apocalyptic outcome of the film left Germany once more as the victim. Thus, he writes, “[t]he two parts [of the film] address two divergent responses to the war: the glorification of the fallen soldier as hero, and the hesitant realization of the self-destructive potential of revenge.” In this regard, it is not surprising that the first section of the film was more politically potent than the second — it rallied German patriotism around the figure of the fallen war hero with little overt emphasis of the total destruction its vindication would entail. Matejko’s poster leaves open the suggestion of both responses, as it may have prefigured some of the destructive motion depicted in the second half of the film by providing a direct representation of the brutality of Siegfried’s death. As we shall see, the death scene as presented in the film has none of the coarseness of Matejko’s poster. Rather, it appears, like much of the film, to be staged at a contemplative distance from the viewer.

It appears that either the UFA officials who ordered the commission of Matejko’s poster or the artist himself deliberately shied away from the symbolic and highly aestheticized elements that dominate in the rest of the propaganda material. This maneuver becomes clear when we note the contrast between

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44 Gunning, The Films of Fritz Lang, 36.
45 Kaes, Shell Shock Cinema, 158.
46 Ibid., 165.
the production still of Siegfried’s stabbing and Matejko’s poster (Fig. 3.10). The still, which was later included in the *Illustrierte Filmkurier* program to be purchased at screenings, shows Siegfried in the same manner as he appears in the film: costumed in the deco-inspired tunic that denotes the world of the Burgundian court with arms outstretched on either side forming a perpendicular line to the spear that impales through the chest. The head looks downward at the spear — only the positioning of the body displays the shock of the moment. Otherwise, the scene is idyllic. The forest ground is covered with a blanket of delicate round flowers, the background given depth with a line of slender birch trees. Between the tree trunks runs the silken spring from which Siegfried has just taken his final drink. Lotte Eisner was the first of many scholars to note that Lang’s monumental shots emulate masterworks of art history — here the setting could easily be called a black and white rendering of one of Gustav Klimt’s birch tree landscapes.47 The image shares the tendency toward symbolism that characterized much of the painting of the Vienna Secession, of which both Klimt and Czeschka were members. The life-giving spring recalls the stream of the dragon’s blood that had made Siegfried all but invincible in the first half to the film, while the beautiful surrounding creates a dramatic contrast with the decisive moment of the hero’s death. The meticulous composition of the photograph belies its “posed” nature and asks a careful observer to parse out its symbolic contrasts and references.

Though Matejko would very likely have had access to the film still as a model for his poster, he clearly departs from its imagery to provide a much different representation of the hero’s death. First, he obliterates the lush and verdant background and its allusions. This omission may have been a forced compromise as the poster’s economy of color and scale demanded some simplification. Nonetheless, the alteration produces the added benefit of pressing the viewer to focus only on the suffering hero. As a

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result his impaled body resides at a much closer range than in the still — once again augmenting a sense of immediate action in the poster. Second, Matejko removes the lavish tunic that covers Siegfried's curling body in the still and replaces it with his costume from the first half of the film — the Luchsfell loincloth that reveals the hero's musculature. In the poster, a light blue hue lingers on the outer edges of the hero's body echoing lighting techniques that valorize Siegfried's body in the earliest sequences of the film.

As seen here, the hero's partially nude body connects to several prominent cultural discourses playing out in popular and entertainment culture. Siegfried's idealized body lends itself easily to eroticization while it simultaneously stands in for a perfected form of German masculinity. As Kaes rightly points out, it relates to Germany's 1920s Körperkultur, to the ideal of gleaming masculine perfection as a sign of Germany's racial purity, and provides an alternative to the dark sexualities represented by film stars such as Conrad Veidt and Rudolf Valentino. Moreover, the skin-baring costume has the advantage of seeming to depict the hero in a “natural” state more in keeping with his genuine, naive persona. In contrast, the deco-costume in the still puts up a kind of abstract barrier between the hero and the viewer. Less contrived than the artistically clad Siegfried in the film still, the semi-nude Siegfried appears more immediate. This closeness aids the impression made by the poster that the film will provide a uniquely revelatory view of the hero.

Finally, in contrast to the petrified posture of the photographed Siegfried, the dramatic angle of Matejko's sketch-like image of the hero's body creates the illusion that Siegfried is falling despite the stillness of the poster. The result is that in comparison to the film still, made weighty by its symbolic and compositional details, Matejko's poster has a much more ephemeral quality. Its feathery lines provide a sense of progression and spontaneity that must be speedily experienced by the viewer before it passes away.

By contrast, the first part of the Nibelungen film uses what appears on close analysis to be an opposing emphasis on stillness and careful aesthetic construction to engage its viewers and to make meaning. Both Gunning and Kaes have noted that Lang structures his tale around moments of dramatic stillness which, after a period of action, reassert the dark fate that its characters are powerless to

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overcome. As Kaes succinctly notes, “Action in this film is condensed into pregnant moments of great visual power in which time seems to stand still.” These moments reflect the overarching tendency of the film to draw on narrative mechanisms from the visual arts: making meaning through dramatic composition and symbolism as well as allusion to other artworks. In the midst of the ever-present flow of moving images that make up the fabric of the film, Lang builds in stillness as a means of crafting suspense and promoting audience reflection. Siegfried’s death sequence confirms these findings as it features a dramatic juxtaposition of character movement and a weighty stillness of setting.

In the death sequence, Hagen, Siegfried’s murderer, challenges him while on a hunting exhibition to race for a drink at a nearby spring. As the race is about to start, Siegfried readies himself to run in a medium-long shot that prefigures the stabbing to come. Siegfried waits with his back toward the camera as Hagen peers over his shoulder, seeming to hover above the very place where the hero’s single vulnerable spot has been marked (Fig. 3.11). Looming large in the foreground of the frame, the hilt of Siegfried’s sword has been left innocently leaning against a tree, while the glinting end of a pointed spear towers above it. Oblivious, Siegfried is tellingly angled against this weapon, the spear that will pierce the fateful mark on his back. In the significant pause that ensues, a sense of foreboding builds and then erupts as Siegfried takes off running joyfully through the mystical Odenwald.

Crafted in a studio in mammoth proportions, the landscape dominates an emerging sequence of long shots. A dwarfed Siegfried and Hagen dash through the dappled light and shadow of the forest’s perfect foliage, while the film gradually cuts in on the two antagonists until in a medium long shot Hagen finally takes aim with his spear and impales Siegfried as he is drinking from the spring. Despite small compositional differences, the shot is consistent with the promotional still (Fig. 3.12). Motion, however, transforms the scene. In the film Siegfried is able to look up and move about, holding audience attention within the large-scale setting. A three-and-a-half minute death sequence ensues, wherein Siegfried

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49 Ibid., 139.
stumbles back through the forest to meet his comrades. In their arms he returns to Hagen and the gathered hunters to die there among an assembled party. As he takes his last breath, we are finally given a relatively close shot of the hero reaching out toward an unknown specter before dramatically dropping away (Fig. 3.13). A somber moment of relative stillness closes the sequence, this one constructed in the tableau style that is typical for the film: Siegfried’s body lies amidst the hunters whose heads sink one by one in sadness at his death (Fig. 3.14). Only Hagen remains upright.

This drawn-out death sequence does more than merely correspond to a common trope of silent cinema — reflecting the medium’s strange relationship to mortality and the ghostly suggestion that it may make death’s mystery visible to its audience. It also provides prolonged moments of contemplation that harken back to traditional models of aesthetic experience as described by Kant. It sets up a necessary distance between the image in order to allow viewers to ponder their significance. Rife with foreboding from the momentous pause preceding the race, Lang puts the viewer at a suggestive remove from the hero’s struggle by maintaining a long shot-scale throughout the sequence. Moreover, while the sequence collocates characters’ movements and the nearly immobile natural setting, the expansive presence of the set diminishes the invasive potential of the cinematic medium. The unrelenting flow of images that some critics suspected held hypnotic properties is kept at bay.

When Siegfried finally reaches the arms of his supporters and is able to die beneath their bowed heads, the stillness of the tableau offers a moment of partial closure. The shot may invite political and social concerns to surface in the minds of viewers, but it subsumes them in the immutable presence of the massive foliage that dominates frame. Nature mitigates the tragedy and no immediate action is taken against the murderer. The audience is offered only a suspended moment of mourning, still waiting for the
destruction to come. The sequence features juxtapositions within individual shots of the character’s movement and the nearly immobile natural setting. The experience of movement is thereby diminished by the expansive presence of the set. The natural setting appears to couch Siegfried’s struggle in a air of complacency and thus further emphasizes the consistent impression made by the film that the individual, even the heroic individual, is powerless and small against nature’s underlying progression toward destruction.

Matejko’s poster, in contrast, is much more incendiary. Without the presence of the overwhelming sets to aestheticize the hero’s death, the moment is barren of the suggestions of inevitability that implicitly account for the occurrence of the tragedy in Lang’s film. His vision of Siegfried’s death leaves the hero’s wounds ripped open but provides no account of them. Foisted upon a unwitting passersby, the close, intimate portrait of his suffering employs the excitement of movement to incite passionate response in viewers. However, it does not direct that response in any particular direction, outside of those to which a viewer may be predisposed. Cued to seek affirmation of their own responses, in the theater, audiences might have expected an opportunity to release, to understand, to mourn, or to vindicate the tragic death of the hero. Meanwhile, supplementary advertising materials probably did little to mitigate political responses incited by Matejko’s poster, as their aim was to legitimize the film as an artwork rather than downplay potential political responses to the film. Thus Matejko’s poster provided a separate but complementary assertion of the film’s political relevancy at the same time that it alluded to the novelty of Weimar’s popular media. In its reference to movement and immediacy of experience, the poster emphasized the sensation of movie-going: the suspense and drama which had made it popular among the masses, rather than the quiet contemplation associated with traditional media forms such as painting; thus, the poster possessed the ability to suggest both political importance and the promise of novelty.
3.3 THE WORK OF A MOMENT

The possibility and the meaning of the art of film lie in the fact that each object appears as it is.
— Béla Balázs

While most all of Matejko’s film posters depict the human figure in action, not all of them share the ephemeral quality that heightens the suggestion of movement in the *Nibelungen* poster. A number of his commissions for lesser-known films, such as those that he made before leaving Vienna, make more use of color and have a more finished quality, causing them to appear comparatively heavy and less fluid. His much later posters, showing the influence of American film advertising and its preference for star portraits, lack the visual interest of the Siegfried poster and compare unremarkably to many other works of anonymous poster designers. However, Matejko’s UFA commissions between 1920 and 1925, before the German company was forced by financial difficulties to make distribution agreements with Paramount, almost exclusively employ the movement aesthetic as seen in his advertisement for Lang’s picture. Indeed, this was the style for which the artist achieved his greatest renown. The *Nibelungen* poster in particular was included in an exhibition of exemplary film poster design in 1924 (an exhibition/competition in which Matejko also served as a judge) and reprinted in an edition of *Der Kinematograph* as a model for exhibitors. Political and film posters of a similar style were included in a positive article on Matejko in *Das Plakat* of 1920, and subsequent published commentaries about the artist continued to describe this as his characteristic aesthetic.

The disparity between the artist’s earliest posters and the *Nibelungen* example illuminates the trajectory of Matejko’s stylistic development. His ability to craft movement-rich illustrations did not emerge through his early film poster commissions or his propaganda posters, but rather from his career as a *Pressezeichner*, or press-illustrator, whereby he worked first as a war correspondent and later as an illustrator for the Ullstein Verlag. Because the visual narrative strategies used in the illustrated press were influenced in part by popular film, Matejko’s success as a press illustrator only heightened his abilities as

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50 Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, 100.

51 “Probleme der Film Reklame,” 7.

a film poster artist. Correspondingly, Matejko’s contributions to the illustrative press provide a way to understand better the probable appeal of the Nibelungen poster. In this section, we will explore how Matejko’s connection with the illustrated press lent his film posters an air of contemporaneity and up-to-the-minute social relevancy. Given the highly politicized sphere of the Weimar press, the connection was also likely to invite political readings of the artist’s film posters.

In the 1920s the increased ease of lithographic printing and the invention of smaller light-weight cameras, such as the 35mm Leica, resulted in an ever-expanding number of hand-drawn and photographic images in periodicals. Moreover, the industrialization of society generated more leisure time in which those items could be consumed. Responding quickly to this emerging market, illustrated periodicals enjoyed unprecedented circulation numbers, sparking debates about journalism, art, and entertainment. Kurt Kroff, editor of the Berlin Illustrirte Zeitung, arguably the most influential illustrated periodical in Germany, writes: “The public grew increasingly accustomed to receiving a stronger impression of world events from pictures than from written reports. . . . Without a picture things going on in the world were reproduced incompletely, often implausibly; the picture conveyed the strongest and most lasting impression.” Images seemed to give a more comprehensive account to the happenings in the world than text had done for previous generations. Notably, the format of the illustrated press and the expectations of its readers were shaped by the growing influence of the cinema and its ability to tell stories through images. Kroff, for instance, talks about employing editors who are “capable, like film writers and directors, of seeing life in pictures.” Yet, the public had more consistent contact with the images of the illustrated press than they did with the movies. As Bernhard Fulda reports, “twenty periodicals (illustrated and otherwise) were sold for every movie ticket,” not to mention that illustrated papers were also casually picked up in coffee shops, in train stations and waiting rooms.

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53 Kaes, Jay and Dimendberg, Weimar Republic Sourcebook, 642; Drucker and McVarish, Graphic Design History, 133-5.
54 Kroff, “The Illustrated Magazine,” 646.
55 Ibid., 646.
56 Fulda, qtd. in Magilow, The Photography of Crisis, 6.
Since Matejko contributed regularly to the *Berlin Illustrierte Zeitung*, his drawings would have been familiar to many. As late as 1959 the advertising journal *Gebrauchsgraphik* still described Matejko as one of Germany’s greatest illustrative journalists:

*Gute Pressezeichner aber sind, wenigstens in Deutschland, selten. Ein Matador war Theo Matejko, man hat ihn oft imitiert, kaum je wieder erreicht. Er hatte den Griff, den Schmiß, er vermittelte das Gefühl, Zeuge selbst des ungewöhnlichsten Vorgangs gewesen zu sein. Er riß den Betrachter in eine Strudel, er war immer dramatisch, suchte stets das Gespräch mit dem Betrachtenden.*

Securing attention through shocking and active images, his work prompted viewers to fill in gaps of cause and effect, motive and outcome, suggesting implicit narratives exploding in their own urgent tempos. Kroff identified this type of dynamism as a critical aspect of journalism in an age that had little time for quiet contemplation. He writes, “To the extent that life became more hectic, and the individual was less prepared to leaf through a magazine in a quiet moment, to that extent it became necessary to find a sharper, more efficient form of visual representation, one which did not lose its impact on the reader even if he only glanced fleetingly at the magazine page by page.”

As a result of this new context, editors included only images that were especially shocking, evocative, or intense. The most communicative images depicted moments of potent energy that carried expansive meaning. They activated the mind to probe for more information, but also strove to please the viewer in their own right. One can easily intuit the parallels between this way of theorizing illustrative news reporting and that which was recognized as the objective of good poster design.

Correspondingly, a critic for *Das Plakat* writes in 1921 that a film poster must have “den ganzen Film in sich” and be able to express that “whole” clearly. For this reason, the editorial goes on to explain, photographed scenes or stills from a film rarely made excellent film posters. They most often required some artistic reworking in order to depict the “key of the film.”

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57 “Good press-illustrators, at least in Germany, are difficult to find. Theo Matejko was a matador. Many imitated him, but no one achieved the same success. He had control, verve; he conveyed the feeling that one had witnessed the rare event one’s self. He put the viewer right into the mix; he was always dramatic, engaging the viewer in conversation.” Translation mine. qtd. in Weber, *Der Pressezeichner*, 53.

58 Kroff, “The Illustrated Magazine,” 646.


60 Ibid., 172.
of illustrations over photographic reproductions of actual events, despite the fact that photographic illustrations were increasingly easy to make and reproduce. Photographs also far outreached illustrations in their fidelity to actual events; recording the event in a moment of climax. Yet, Matejko’s drawings did have an advantage over mechanically produced counterparts. While a successful photograph required the fortuitous capture of an event at the right place and time, hand-executed drawings could dramatize the event retrospectively. On the one hand, Matejko’s lucid eye-witness representations shared the perceived legibility and immediacy of the photograph. On the other, they could depict imaginary collisions of movement and symbolism, making for images of compact and sometimes overlapping implications.

As in the case of Matejko’s poster, behind every film poster was the suggestion, if not the outright duplication, of a photographic still, which was often times the only material from which an artist could learn about the film he or she was promoting. These stills were also an important aspect of film advertisement being reproduced in trade and fan magazines and were featured in special display boxes in the front of theaters, yet, their usefulness appears to have had its limits. In the 1910s, posters often included black and white reproductions of stills within an illustrative frame, but this type of poster quickly went out of style in the 1920s and was replaced by colorful hand-drawn designs. In part, this was because printers did not have the capability to print large-scale photographic reproductions inexpensively, and exhibitors saw a direct correlation between size and Fernwirkung. Yet, illustrations also proved more compelling than photographs to many critics by the very nature of their imagery. Collin, for instance, argued that the photograph overwhelmed the viewer with its details. Only the subjective hand of the artist could produce an image capable of being comprehended in the necessarily reduced time frame allotted to a poster.61 Dr. E. Hertel echoed this position in his description of an ad for a typewriter:


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Photography produced direct, indexical representations of reality that, according to Hertel, required translation through the mind of the artist in order to serve as poster advertisements. Matejko’s posters worked satisfied these requirements, they produced the same effect of speed and veracity that made photography stand out against other media, but also included the inflection of the artist’s hand.

Expressing common sentiments about the advantage of photography, Albert Renger-Patzsch asserted in *Das Kunstblatt* in 1928 that “the mechanical procedure of [the photographer’s] medium, the swiftness of its execution, the objectivity of its representations, and the possibility of arresting static moments of fast and even the fastest movements—these represent the greatest and most obvious advantages over every other medium of expression.”

Photography offered viewers and artists the rare opportunity to pause the ceaseless flow of life, opening up compact moments for greater analysis and understanding. Matejko’s hand, though it lacked the technical precision of the photograph, contained an abundance of dynamism that was intended to make one feel as though he or she had lived the experience through the artist’s own eyes. As one contemporary remarked, “Den tausenden Teil einer Sekunde vermag die Fotokamera zu bannen und das Atom einer rasenden Bewegung erstarrten zu lassen. Unter Theo Matejkos Hand erstarrt keine Bewegung — sie scheint sich im Raume fortzusetzen, scheint an Schwungkraft und Schnelligkeit zuzunehmen.”

Where photography was praised consistently for its uncanny ability to keep pace with modern life, Matejko’s work was noted for its ability to emulate that pace.

If the abstract convulsions of Expressionism or, later, the cold forms of *Neue Sachlichkeit* seemed to keep viewers at an arm’s length, potential viewers could relate to the frenetic pace and recognizable

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62 “The fact that it [photography] reproduces all details and all variations of light and dark makes it, in part, so vague, that some of the outlines must be darkened with light strokes already, especially on the key and cogs on the left. Based on this soulless, mechanical photograph a “human” woodcut should be made, . . . this means that the image must go through the eye and mind of the woodcutter. Thereby a wealth of personal traits will naturally adhere to the image, above all that which improves the obscure and useless elements of photography.” Translation mine. Hertel, “Aus der Werkstatt des Plakatzeichners,” 17.

63 Renger-Patzsch, “Joy Before the Object,” 647.

64 “The camera is capable of exorcising one thousandth of a second and paralyzing an atom in its frantic motion. Under Matejko’s hand no motion is paralyzed — they seem to continue to move in space, their momentum and speed appear to accelerate.” Translation mine. qtd. in *Das Theo Matejko Buch*, 3.
figures of Matejko’s drawings that they encountered in daily newspapers. Even Matejko's most symbolic and fantastic images commissioned for commercial and political posters could be associated with lived experience as shaped by newspapers’ presentation of the break-neck pace of modern life. Thus, Matejko’s association with the illustrated press made him an apposite choice for film advertisers, not only because his work was highly legible to broad audiences, but also because it stressed the contemporary relevance of the object to which it was applied. His poster for the opening of Lang’s first Mabuse film, Dr. Mabuse der Spieler (1921) is a case in point. It provides fitting accompaniment to the oft-repeated epithet of the film: “ein Bild der Zeit” (“A Picture of the Time”) (Fig. 3.15). The poster explicitly connects the film to the illustrated press in the short credits to the film in the upper right. There, the poster acknowledges the author of the novel on which the film was based: “Nach dem Roman der Berliner Illustrierten Zeitung von — Norbert Jacques.”65 The direct reference to the periodical places the film squarely within the milieu of Weimar journalism and thus emphasizes the close connection between the film and the most current representations of modern life. As the illustrated press was also the venue in which Matejko’s style was first conceived, the style of his poster enhances the branding of the film as a work situated within a journalistic, contemporary setting. The familiar look of his illustrative style which was known by its reportage qualities, imbues the advertisement, and by extension the film, with an air of timeliness. Indeed, the poster, the paper, and the film all endeavor to encapsulate the fleeting essence of the present moment — a creative act that, in Matejko’s poster, took the form of a swirling vision of Lang’s criminal mastermind, Mabuse.

FIGURE 3.15 Theo Matejko, Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler (1924). Lithograph, 141.5 x 95 cm. Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek.

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65 “Based on the novel from Norbert Jacques in the Berlin Illustratiere Zeitung.”
The poster shows Mabuse as a dark, threatening presence looming above the twisting smoke of a city landscape. Matejko uses scale here to emphasize the dubious control that the tuxedoed villain exacts over the steaming metropolis beneath him. Because of the nonchalance of Mabuse’s stance — the dangling cigarette and the hands clasped casually behind the back, at first glance he appears to lack the sense of movement that we saw so obviously in the Nibelungen poster. However, the effect is calculated to emphasize his uncanny calm in contrast to the swirling turmoil of the city suffusing his dark cloak with its rising smoke. Fires raging in the bottom left of the poster send up waves of anguish from the silhouettes of darkened buildings. A long street jets toward the back of the frame on the right stretched as if by the momentum of the traffic that follows it. Thus, the image is quite active — Matejko uses his movement aesthetic to express the imposing quality of Mabuse’s character who is outlined in thick black grooves. At the same time, diffuse lines covering the poster help to create a sense of ephemerality as if this is momentary glimpse that will soon fade away. Note, in this regard, that the background is colored by a pale ash that slowly recedes as one looks up toward Mabuse’s jagged, grimacing face. The transparent aspect of Mabuse’s jacket beneath him gives the sense that he is a specter forged from the city below him. A similar effect is achieved in the film through the use of superimposition. As Mabuse’s head looms large over the chaos of the stock exchange, it is as if he both controls and merges from the rush of activity. Thus, the poster introduces Mabuse’s almost supernatural ability to manipulate the uncontrollable energies of modern life. It illustrates the impalpable threat posed by the hypnotist/criminal as a personification of modern anxieties surrounding the perceived upheaval of interwar life.

Similarly, Matejko’s aesthetic helped to situate Murnau’s masterpiece Der letzte Mann (1924) within everyday visual culture at its premier three years later. The campaign and the film itself suggest a shift in the perceived value of media associated with the masses, such as photography, illustrative journalism, and film. No longer relying strictly on Expressionist abstraction to lend the image an emotive poignancy, Der letzte Mann exploited the moving camera with greater aplomb. Accordingly, the film garnered effusive critical praise; yet, as Robert Schechtman has argued, “Given that few of its celebrated techniques were truly novel, its critical reception must be read in the context of a German film industry

struggling for cultural legitimacy at home and battling against a flood of imports — mostly American — from abroad.”

The critical response to the film, though positive, may yet imply the enduring necessity of promoting the artistic value of film at that time. Nonetheless, the film represents an ambitious attempt to allow film images to carry a narrative without recourse to traditional forms of artistic media — a significant breakthrough that was recognized by skeptical critics if not by the general public.68 The growing prominence of the illustrated press no doubt encouraged industry professionals to expect that visual story-telling would be more widely accepted. Matejko’s work for the premier of Der letzte Mann indicates the increasing aesthetic cache of illustrative journalism and graphic design.

Matejko created a series of eight black and white lithographic prints that were presented as a commemorative gift to guests of the premier of Murnau’s film. Done in the style of his influential reportage illustrations, the lithographs exhibited Matejko’s ability to suggest an eye-witness account. The dedication page reiterates the journalistic quality of the these images with the assertion that the illustrations were “nach dem Leben gezeichnet” — drawn from life (Fig. 3.16). Despite this nod to Realism, however, one image in particular evinces the imaginative recasting of the artist. The lithograph depicts Emil Jannings in his role as the hotel porter at the humiliating moment in which he loses his outward sign of authority: the uniform that affords him respect in his lower-class community (Fig. 3.17). A color version of this lithograph became a poster advertisement for the film. Once more the lithograph uses scale to emphasize the emasculinization of Jannings’s character as the gilded coat is ripped from his body in a cruel thrust by enormous, anonymous hands. Here again Matejko’s composition works on a diagonal between the upper right and lower left hand corners. The porter’s body pitches forward toward his dropped cap lying

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67 Schechtman, “23 December 1924,” 149.

68 Schechtman attributes this commercial failing to the public’s reluctance to endorse a film that pictures the organic, human community as a source of alienation. Schechtman, “23 December 1924,” 148-52.
prostrate on the ground as if waiting for Jannings’s bending head to join it in its lowly position. The strong white hands in the upper left rend the coat from his shoulders in a counter momentum that seems to pull the whole composition in two. The lithograph thus animates the trauma and shame endured by Jannings’s character.

Although Murnau’s film far outreaches Matejko’s poster in terms of its technical innovation and overall quality, Matejko’s expressive use of symbolism and scale in this movement-rich image corresponds in significant ways to the aesthetic of Der letzte Mann. Murnau’s images of contemporary street scenes deploy scale, distance, movement, and double-exposures to create emotional texture and craft a narrative with minimal use of language. (The lack of intertitles in Murnau’s film has frequently been cited as a mark of its visual strength.) As Lotte Eisner explains, Murnau carefully employs symbols within a “natural” setting in order to emphasize the weight of significant moments.  

She and later film scholars have identified these emotive devices as Expressionist in nature — seeing the film as a developmental marker between the narrative strategies of Expressionist film and the cool, surface approach of New Objectivity that came to dominate later in the decade. This melding of a disinterested account of modern life and the subjective experience of that life in visual terms also bears an affinity to visual narrative strategies, such as those used by Matejko, that filled the pages of the popular press. As Murnau imbues the camera with an embodied subjective role in the film, Matejko’s artistic eye translates stark, irredeemable reality into revelatory visions for his viewers. Matejko’s promotional materials for this film serve as a reminder of the importance of the illustrated press in propagating the type of fast-paced visual story-telling that supported the acceptance and endurance of Murnau’s cinematic achievement, particularly the use of the unchained camera and rhythmic editing style to produce emotional effects.


70 Schechtman, “23 December 1924,” 149.
Matejko’s connection with the press, where national and local concerns were regularly reported, may have also served to underscore the social relevancy of the films for which he created advertisements. Both Dr. Mabuse and Der letzte Mann engaged with contemporary issues, while Matejko’s poster advertisements provided symbolic renderings of the anxieties they considered, thereby providing another avenue through which the film industry could assert its social and political potential. Matejko’s posters, like the films they advertised, opened up politically fraught subjects, but did not necessarily espouse a certain political reaction. Matejko’s work for the illustrated press undoubtedly enabled him to add an element of contemporaneity to the Siegfried poster, creating an intriguing friction between the historicity of the myth, which reaches far back into Germany’s past, and the life-like quality of the film, which plays out in real time before the eyes of the viewer. The special offering of the film medium is invoked by the poster’s illusion of immediacy and movement — promising to provide an understandable art form for the masses that is unencumbered by elite artistic traditions of the past and that would speak to the anguish of German viewers in the present.

3.4 POLITICAL MOVEMENT

In Kaffeehäusern brannten jähre Stimmen
Auf unsre Stirn und heizten jung das Blut,
Wir flammten schon. Und suchen leise zu verglimmen,
Weil wir noch furchtsam sind vor eigner Glut.
—Ernst Wilhelm Lotz

Given the frequent treatment of political and social issues in the press and in film, we can expect that Matejko’s film posters to have invited political readings. In fact, an early incident between Matejko and the Berlin censorship board confirms that his posters were looked at with a politically critical eye. In 1920 Matejko himself publicly lamented the response of the censorship board to his Sumurun poster in the pages of Das Plakat. He recalls an incident in which a Berlin official objected to the contrast in skin-color between Pola Negri and Paul Wegener on the grounds that it would remind viewers of a recent

incident reported in the Saarland, whereby a German woman was allegedly raped by a Moroccan man (Fig. 3.18). Given the tense reaction to the French occupation of the Rhein, whereby colonial troupes of African descent were stationed there as part of the French army, the censor official expressed fear that the poster could incite a pogrom against dark-skinned individuals living in Berlin. No doubt wide-spread Western anxieties about miscegeny undergirded his ruling, but, more broadly, the reaction of the censor suggests the existence of public sensitivity to political or social messages in posters whose products were seemingly unrelated to such issues. Unlike *Fridericus Rex*, which premiered the same year as *Sumurun*, the film, set in the distant East and fantastical in nature, did not harbor overt political content, but nonetheless, the posters were examined for rousing social messages at the same time that they were checked for lewdness and impropriety. Matejko countered that he had only wanted to create a symbolic contrast between Negri, "weiß wie frisch gefallene Unschuld," and her attacker.72 Ultimately, Matejko appeased the censors’ concerns by darkening Negri’s skin before the poster was released, but he felt that the poster lost its aesthetic impact. Quoting Schiller, he caustically surmised, “Es liebt die Welt, das Strahlende zu schwärzen.”73 The line from *Das Mädchen von Orleans* bemoans a general tendency among the public to disparage the most beautiful examples of art. Matejko thus distances himself from the potential popular response to his work and instead attempts to sanction his aesthetic choices by associating it with high art. Yet, given the range of politically inflected commissions he completed, the censor’s reading of the poster is not surprising. Matejko’s commissions for political papers and ads associated his work more readily with political undertones, despite his insistence on artistic reasons for the design.

Though the *Sumurun* poster was the first commission Matejko obtained in Berlin, Matejko had been working in Vienna as a poster artist both for film releases (he made a set of posters for the release of *Sumurun*).
of Joe May’s serial film *Die Herrin der Welt*, political parties (a poster for Austria’s Bürgerlich-Demokratische Partei), and also as a designer of ads for politically charged newspapers, such as the anti-semitic *Deutsches Volksblatt* and the liberal *Wiener Mittagspost* (Fig. 3.19). In Berlin, he continued to create numerous political posters for competing parties across the wide spectrum that constituted Germany’s political landscape. Matejko’s biographer, Otto Weber suggests that the range of commissions that Matejko completed contradicts reports that he was a supporter of National Socialism.\(^{74}\) In reality, Matejko was not unique among artists in applying himself broadly to work in both commercial and political poster design in support of varied parties; the same could be said of many commercial designers at the time. Irrespective of Matejko’s own leanings, the ubiquity of his designs in so many spheres of visual culture point to the effectiveness of his visual strategy for garnering attention within the public sphere.

His political posters most often share the same movement-aesthetic as his film posters, yet they typically employed more heavy-handed symbols, which supported a recognizable party name or call to action. In this respect they do not differ terribly from those propaganda posters that originally caused concern among poster critics during the so-called “poster war” of the early Republic. Though some of Matejko’s posters were mild, such as his poster for the Bürgerliche-Demokratische Partei in Austria, which shows a symbolic rendering of workers collectively raising the country’s flag, others, like his poster for the anti-democratic paramilitary group the Stahlhelm, were outright seditious (Fig. 3.19 and 3.20). This poster is intriguing for our purposes as it reworks the Siegfried imagery of the UFA poster in order to support the 1931 campaign to dissolve the Prussian parliament. It features the same emphasis on Siegfried’s powerful torso and even mirrors the positioning of his body in the angle of the thigh in the center of the frame. The inclusion of more color, a blue heavenly hue around Siegfried’s shoulder and the fountain of red blood issuing from the dragon’s throat adds greater vibrancy to this poster, but the film poster’s

\(^{74}\) Weber, *Der Pressezeichner*, 29.
downward motion is retained in the line extending from Siegfried’s upraised arms down through the body of the impaled dragon. The poster virtually resurrects Siegfried in the energy and increased color of this new design, intensifying any political responses that had accompanied the film or its poster where it made its public appearance seven years earlier. This poster, however, in revivifying the triumphant moment of the Siegfried legend, pairs the possibility of a national resurgence with a particular political action. The screaming dragon who blocks his way to treasure, fame, and bodily invincibility, wears a red cap identifying him with the political party on the left. The poster invites passersby to join Siegfried in reclaiming his physical prowess by voting against the fledgling democracy. This fairly common political strategy is enhanced by the formal qualities of Matejko’s design, which seem to allow a decisive event to speak for itself even while it requires the employment of significant symbolic associations.

Most interestingly, the poster’s pithy saying, “Höchste Zeit, Volksentscheid!” — meaning “it’s high time for the referendum” — gives voice to the poster’s illustrative assertion that the vote on August 9, 1931 will amount to a pivotal moment in Germany’s history. Thereby, Matejko’s exciting, visceral design taps into a prominent type of political discourse recently described by Daniel H. Magilow in his book *The Photography of Crisis*. Magilow explains that the fetishized notion of the moment of crisis — often termed the Augenblick — became a key term in the inflammatory language used to incite decisive political action on both the left and right during the Weimar era.  

As a rhetorical strategy, the Augenblick supported the belief that Germany was nearing a point of such disaster that unprecedented, extreme action could be the only natural response. The emphasis on catastrophe in this language did not just

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75 Magilow, *The Photography of Crisis*, 120.
represent crisis, Magilow argues, but actually helped to create it.\textsuperscript{76} Magilow goes on to explain how snapshot photography proved an increasingly apt means of alluding to these politically pregnant moments during the Weimar Republic. Matejko's work also readily contributed to the sense of impending doom that infused much of Weimar's political propaganda. As we have seen, Matejko's movement aesthetic, like photography, responded to the desire to capture the dynamism of a single instant. His very preference for such moments of extreme, decisive action lent his commercial and journalistic work an underlying political inflection. Made in this pervasive style, his work could easily be used to justify extreme measures such as violent upheaval and revolution throughout the turbulent Weimar period. These visions appropriated the shock and awe of new media entertainment and employed them as a means of engendering a sense of imminent upheaval.

Thus, Matejko's imagery forms an intriguing counterpart to Benjamin's notion of the image as "dialectics at a standstill."\textsuperscript{77} According to Benjamin when we look at images created in the past (no matter how much in the past) they represent our present to us. As he explains,

\begin{quote}
It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: Image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural. Only dialectical images are genuine historical — that is, not archaic — images.\textsuperscript{78}
\end{quote}

Benjamin's claim asserts an alternative model of history encoded in the image and its synthesis between past and present. It suggests a way of understanding the present that refers to the markers of the past. Max Penksy rightly notes that for Benjamin, this dialectical image is marked by its ambiguity. He writes "the centrality of dialectical images for Benjamin's own understanding of the specifically new methodological foundation of the work, is matched by the obscurity of the notion of dialectical images."\textsuperscript{79}

The dialectical image retains its enigmatic stance, emphasizing the inability of comprehension between past and present, whereas Matejko's images promise a kind of immediacy that has no pastness, only

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 121. \\
\textsuperscript{77} Benjamin, Arcades, 463. \\
\textsuperscript{78} Benjamin, Arcades, 463. \\
\textsuperscript{79} Pensky, "Method and Time," 178.
\end{flushright}
present. His work is a closer approximation to Kracauer’s description of the photograph of the “demonic diva” in an illustrated periodical.

Everyone recognizes her with delight, since everyone has already seen the original on the screen. It is such a good likeness that she cannot be confused with anyone else, even if she is perhaps only one-twelfth of a dozen Tiller girls. Dreamily she stands in front of the Hotel Excelsior, which basks in her fame—a being of flesh and blood, our demonic diva, twenty-four years old, on the Lido. The date is September.80

Though the photographic representation of the Diva achieves its contemporaneity through its medium, Matejko simulates the same effect with his drawing. Matejko uses style to make his illustrations appear like snapshots. As all non-technological art objects do, according to Kracauer, the design forms a “magic mirror” that reflects “those who consult it not as they appear but rather as they wish to be or as they fundamentally are.”81 Matejko’s drawings present the desire to make art more like photography: immediate, exciting, evocative. Correspondingly, they present an imaginary image of the present that is unaffected by the past, that bears the mark of unrivaled significance and therefore validates strong, even violent reaction on the part of the viewer.

Matejko’s movement-based aesthetic lent an air of critical importance to the products and projects that it promoted. The artist reworked multifarious visual narrative strategies of political posters, the expanding illustrated press, and contemporary film, all of which combined in an aesthetic that seemed flawlessly to reflect the break-neck speed of the new republic. Emulating this exciting pace, his Siegfried emphasizes the suggestion that the hero’s fall has a greater, existential meaning — not for the past, from which Siegfried’s legend is drawn, but for the immediate, incommensurable present. Matejko’s poster announces Lang’s Nibelungen epic as a timely illustration of Germany’s cultural heritage that culminates in contemporary feelings of loss. The political fervor that accompanied Lang’s film lingers in the shadowy lines extending outward from Siegfried’s falling body. However, to understand Matejko’s poster as an iteration of right-leaning politics obscures its wider implications of artistic and cultural importance. The aesthetic of the poster embeds the film within popular visual culture, reflecting a deeply established contemporary perception of a politically and socially chaotic atmosphere on both the right and left.

80 Kracauer, “Photography,” 47.
81 Ibid., 52.
In the final chapter of my dissertation I examine film and poster art that bears traces of the later aesthetic turn to New Objectivity. As I demonstrate, these objects also respond to the tumult of the political context of the late Weimar period, but with a cool empiricism that demanded artists adopt the technological gaze of the camera lens. By removing the subjectivity of the human eye, experimental posters and films executed in this style strove to subdue the frenzy depicted in illustrations like Matejko’s with compositions of clarity imbued with pattern and repetition. Yet, a number of critics denied the revelatory potential of these experiments, however, claiming that they were not pointed enough in their political leanings. Ultimately, these final, aesthetically ambitious attempts at poster and film art dwindled as technological and economic changes accompanying the arrival of sound inhibited such experimentation.
CHAPTER FOUR

To Capture or Caption: Neue Sachlichkeit in Late Weimar film posters

The promotional poster for G. W. Pabst’s Das Tagebuch einer Verlorenen (1929) demonstrates the increased confidence of Germany’s film and advertising industries in the later Weimar period (Fig. 4.1). Contributing innovative experiments in the emerging style Neue Sachlichkeit, or New Objectivity, marketing material for both industries began to self-reflexively represent their role in present-day consumer culture, while references to the art historical past became less important. Correspondingly, Heinz Schulz-Neudamm pictures the iconic Louise Brooks delicately perching within a gigantic crimson tome, her dancer’s arms closing the pages around her bare frame like a bird folding its wings; yet the girl is little more than a sandwich board man. The symbolism of the composition is candid: not only Brooks’s body, but her most intimate thoughts as penned in her private diary are offered for sale. The bright mustard-gold background, rich scarlet of the diary cover, and high and lowlights of black, white, and gold are reminiscent of the flat color schemes of Bernhardian object posters, but instead of a shoe or a book of matches, the poster offers up the secret life of the wayward beauty to its buyers. The downcast eyes and demure bend of Brooks’s head invite sympathy and sorrow for the figure, but the bright, metallic color scheme remains as joyful as an ad for a confectionary. The color of Brooks’s flesh, like polished marble, and the glossy helmet of her bobbed hair suggest the domination of technology over organic material, the automatization of humanity. Thus the poster launches the film’s critique of modern consumer culture.

Das Tagebuch tells the story of Brooks’s Thymian who is abducted by a family friend, becomes pregnant, is coerced to give away her child (who later dies in the care of a midwife), and is sent away to

FIGURE 4.1 Heinz Schulz-Neudamm, Das Tagebuch einer Verlorenen (1929). Lithograph, 137 x 91 cm. http://www.filmportal.de/node/38587/material/623407
an injurious boarding school. The innocent Thymian is ruined by a system that accommodates sexual exploitation, but one that is simultaneously evocative of a tedious machine. At the boarding school all communal actions from the slurping of soup to daily exercise regimens are carried out by Thymian and her fellow classmates with mechanical precision, following the demands of the cruel head mistress (Valeska Gert). To the rhythm of Gert's gong, the girls are forced to move in endless, repetitive motions, transforming into anonymous parts in a debauched whole. By such strict regimentation, the home only encourages its residents to seek diversions in smoking and card-playing or to escape to the comparatively welcoming space of the bordello, as Thymian eventually does. Thymian is lucky to be rescued from a life of prostitution and scandal by the kindly uncle of her close friend and fellow social pariah the young Count Osdorff, but the count himself cannot re-assimilate into society and commits suicide.

Like the photographers of New Objectivity who captured portraits of microscopic filigree on the stems of flowers hoping to reveal the arcane inner-workings of nature, Pabst confronts complex contemporary issues through close observational depictions of individuals. The intrigue around this particular film was no doubt heightened by the fact that the literary work on which the film was based had been mistaken for the account of an actual person.\(^1\) Eisner writes that in Das Tagebuch the director “employs a new, almost documentary restraint. Pabst now seeks neither Expressionistic chiaroscuro nor Impressionistic glitter.”\(^2\) In keeping with the style’s tendency toward naturalism, he places the object of his vision under the cool gaze of the camera, trusting that the lens will unlock the secrets of her existence. Yet, in his closeness to the subject the director does indeed border on Expressionist subjectivity.\(^3\) As Eric Rentschler writes, Pabst seems to “waver between realistic impulse and fantastic indulgence . . . social surfaces and exotic depths.”\(^4\) Das Tagebuch, for example, crafts a highly disturbing suggestion of sexual perversion in the school’s head master and mistress simply through the record of a subtle sneer or a

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1 See Thomas Gladysz’s history of the novel by Margarete Böhme, “Introduction,” ix-xxx. The book was one of the best-selling and most notorious of the early twentieth century in Germany.

2 Eisner, Haunted Screen, 303.

3 Though this film and others in Pabst’s oeuvre share the impression of observational distance that is ascribed to New Objectivity, his use of Expressionist developed tendencies, especially in lighting, are also prominent. McCarthy, “Surface Sheen,” 226.

The film parallels other films emerging in the style of New Objectivity in that it not only offers hyper-real observations of contemporary settings, but, as Patrice Petro points out in her reading of Pabst’s work, it combines such observations with melodrama, pathos, and an interest in intense psychological portraiture. In doing so these films transcend the style’s apparent absorption with surface.⁶

Pabst’s Tagebuch thereby indicates that, although New Objectivity began as a reaction against Expressionism, a clear rending of the two styles is more difficult than it appears at first glance. Even the later style’s earliest advocate Gustav Hartlaub introduced an exhibition on German New Objectivity in 1925 insisting that it would be a “dangerous mistake” to assume that “[s]imply because evidence is displayed here of artistic endeavors that became recognizable after expressionism, and which, in a certain sense, appear to represent a reaction against the latter, does not mean that a position is being taken against expressionism and the generation of artists adhering to it.”⁷ When we consider the work of Georg Grosz, Otto Dix, Max Beckmann, and the Dada artists who are also associated with this turn toward the caustically objective, we see the prominent subjectivity of the movement materialize as biting social critique. These artists’ depictions of the grotesque and repugnant features of interwar German society often appear to take raw emotion as its content. As Martin Lindner writes, “Auch in den 20er Jahren ist das Verhältnis von ‘Sachlichkeit’ und expressiver Emotionalität keineswegs nur antithetisch zu verstehen. Vielmehr geht es darum, ‘unechte’ Sentimentalität zu unterdrücken, um die wahrhaft ‘elementaren’ Gefühle um so ‘reiner’ wirken zu lassen.”⁸ In his recent account of the difficulty in defining the parameters of New Objectivity, Steve Plumb confirms Lindner’s observation, writing that the style’s observational stance toward contemporary reality was intended to affect viewers on both an outer

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⁵ For instance, the head master catches Thymian’s friend, Erika, putting on lipstick and not only wipes her face with a dirty cleaning rag, but then confiscates the lipstick and sits laughing at it before he applies the color to his own mouth. He presses his lips together and precedes to use the lipstick to write in his calendar: “Erika bestrafen” — punish Erika — with a childish heart scrawled beneath it. Likewise, the apparent sensual pleasure that the head mistress experiences as she pounds the gong sending the girls into their exercises suggests more abuse than it directly reveals.

⁶ Petro, Joyless Streets, xxiii.


⁸ “In the 20s as well the relationship between ‘objectivity’ and expressive emotionality are in no way antithetical. Rather, it was about suppressing ‘inauthentic’ sentimentality in order to allow the truth of ‘elemental’ feelings to work more ‘purely.’” Translation mine. Hartlaub qtd. in Plumb, Neue Sachlichkeit, 38.
objective and inner subjective level. According to Plumb, the artists of New Objectivity often employed allegory and symbolism to do so; thus the frequent depiction of actual objects imbued with great significance that abounded in work from this period.¹⁹

A case in point, Fritz Lang’s allegory-laden *Metropolis* (1927) has been described as equivocating among competing tropes of Expressionism and New Objectivity.¹⁰ Attesting to this oscillation, Schulz-Neudamm’s celebrated poster depiction of the female automaton before a futuristic skyline is often mislabeled as an Expressionist poster despite the fact that it lacks the sense of immediacy and fleeting instability that defined the Expressionist style as a subjective, emotional impression (Fig. 4.2). Instead, the composition takes on the appearance of an impenetrable metal case. Even the beams of light that splinter the air above the skyline, appear static, solid, and tactile. The poster has a finished lustre that Fenneker’s Marmorhaus advertisements or even the woodcut prints of the Brücke never aimed to achieve. The anxiety-induced imaginary depicted in the *Metropolis* ad may indeed be reminiscent of earlier Expressionist angst, but its fantastic cityscape borrows just as much if not more so from the machine aesthetics of Italian Futurism. The blank stare of the automaton seems to answer Marinetti’s invocation of “greedy railway stations that devour smoke-plumed serpents; factories hung on clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke.”¹¹ This celebratory vision of glass, steel, and steam as essential forces of creation and destruction is often manifest in works of New Objectivity.¹² Yet it is not entirely accurate to define the style as an approbation of technology. As Matthias Eberle explains, the artists of New Objectivity “polished their paintings until they indeed resembled industrial products. Yet while they derived precision and brilliance from machinery, they did so [...] in order to defend individual skill and craft against the

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¹⁹ Plumb, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, 56.

¹⁰ In his seminal work on the film Metropolis, for instance, Andreas Huyssen positions the film between Expressionism and New Objectivity, arguing that while the film presses on anxieties toward technology in the hands of social oppressors it simultaneously reveals in its own hyper-technological aesthetic. Huyssen, “The Vamp and the Machine,” 223-4.


growing hegemony of technology.” The threat posed by a technologically dominated culture, which had appeared to implode in the technological warfare of the previous decade, was still ever-present in New Objectivity, but it was also embraced as an energy that could potentially be harnessed by the artist or craftsperson.

In 1927 typographer and writer Paul Renner explained the development of New Objectivity as a response to the postwar period in which many artists found themselves “immersed in an artistic world, which was somehow almost unconnected with real existence.” Instead of using art to retreat from reality into the dream world of the auratic, architects, artists, and craftspeople became interested in working with the materials of everyday life in a direct, audacious manner. Architect Erich Mendelsohn thus implored his audience at the opening of the Schocken department store in Nuremberg in 1928 to take an active role in the exploitation of technology, saying,

> So, to want to disavow our life is self-deception, is miserable and cowardly.\(^{15}\)
> Even wanting to repress developments is self-sacrifice, foolish and pointless.
> Therefore be brave, be smart.
> Grab life by the hair, right there where its best heart beats, in the middle of life, the middle of technology, traffic and trade.
> Accept it just as it is, accept its tasks as it poses them, to you, today to all of us.
> For each challenge demands efficiency, clarity, simplicity.\(^{15}\)

This precision of action takes definite shape in the work of Mendelsohn’s contemporaries in graphic design. For designers this bold embrace of technology meant both a resurgence of interest in “old” objectivity (the scientifically rendered *Sachplakat* of the turn of the century) and renewed attempts to embrace the use of technological media (photography in particular) in creating designs that streamlined communication within mass society. In free-art this trend toward the empirical resulted in representations of contemporary reality, recognizable settings, and in photography, often in the depiction of quotidian objects. In light of this turn it is tempting to categorize New Objectivity as a move away from abstraction and a return to representative work. However, in regard to design in particular, to do so does not account for the influence of Russian Constructivism and the growing interest in pared down formal principles of

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13 Eberle, qtd. in Plumb, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, 47.
14 Renner, qtd. in Aynsley, *German Graphic Design*, 88.
composition that significantly shaped the work of this period. In fact, abstraction became even more prevalent in the most experimental arenas of design.

Thus, without her caveat that it was an attempt to do away with Expressionism, I am inclined to define New Objectivity as Nora M. Alter does, in a broadly conceptual way, as a “focus on nonmediated perception, on the discovery, description, and perceptual account of things as they were.” Film poster art from this period reflects the utopian desire to communicate without the misleading veil of human interference, and thus relies heavily on geometrical precision and, at times, photographic reproductions. As many critics and practitioners pointed out, the impression of immediacy and comprehensibility for which the style strove was inextricably linked to the capabilities of photography and film. Yet, I agree with Eberle’s implication that the role of the craftsperson is too often glossed over in accounts of the movement that focus on the “objective” dimension of the movement’s aesthetic: its scientific approach to art as inspired by the inhuman gaze of the camera lens. Designers and filmmakers were adamant that the camera required the adept hand of a knowledgeable operator to fulfill its functionality.

In this final chapter of my dissertation I will examine a number of artifacts from 1927 to 1933 that represent many of the most ambitious experiments in Weimar film poster art. These were wrought by an embrace of contemporary consumer culture and an aim to deal with material reality more scientifically, in the hope of more predictably shaping the response to advertising imagery. To analyze these advertisements I turn to a different set of contemporary theoreticians from those I have brought to bear in earlier segments. The Verein des Plakatfreundes had disbanded in 1922, and although their writing remained influential well into the 1920s, by the end of the decade new innovations in design were spearheaded primarily by designers associated with the Bauhaus and the Ring Neue Werbegestalter. Thus their writing will play a central role in situating the posters examined in this chapter within their theoretical contexts. It is important to recognize, however, that while these associations developed what we

16 Founded by Walter Gropius in 1919 merging the Weimar Academy of Fine Arts and the Weimar School of Arts and Crafts. Members associated with the Bauhaus included Johannes Itten, Wassily Kandinsky, Joseph Albers, László Moholy-Nagy, Paul Klee, Oskar Schlemmer, Herbert Bayer, Lyonel Feininger, Marcel Breuer, Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe and others. Magdelena Droste’s history of the Bauhaus gives an informative breakdown of the school between its origins in 1919 and closure in 1933. Also See Aynsley, Graphic Design in Germany, and Designing Modern Germany: The more loosely associated Ring, established by Kurt Schwitters in 1928, was joined by Willy Baumeister, Walter Dexel, Cesar Domela, Max Burchartz, Piet Zwart and Jan Tschichold. It also disbanded in 1933 with the rise of National Socialism. See Lupton and Cohen, Letters from the Avant Garde, 52-61.
recognize today as high modernist design, Germany was simultaneously producing a great number of far less aesthetically ambitious films and using increasingly bland illustrative posters to announce them.

The increased production costs caused by the coming of synchronized sound that stymied experimental film also led to less adventurous poster advertisements. Exhibition practices were streamlined by large film conglomerates like UFA that designed posters in house with a style that mirrored Hollywood’s gold-tinted glamour. These were often the antithesis of new trends in design being developed in the Bauhaus. The posters that I am interested in here would have had a much smaller circulation than those that advertised for the typical musical blockbusters exhibiting at the same time. In many ways they were anomalies tied to unique films or exceptional theaters. They could not have matched the popular influence of Expressionist designers on the public perception of film earlier in the decade. However, for its innovations in design, this later period of aesthetic experimentation produced some of the most striking and enduring works of interwar poster art. The influence of film and photography on the way that designers worked within the poster medium and the trends based in New Objectivity formed the basis of much of this work. As we will see, marketing, visual art, and film intertwined to produce a new kind of Sachplakat whose object was the poster itself.

The first section of my chapter examines Walther Ruttmann’s seminal film, Berlin, die Sinfonie der Großstadt (1927), and its premier poster as a product of this cross-pollination. Following Michael Cowan’s recent analysis of Ruttmann’s work as it relates to advertising theory, I will demonstrate how the promotional poster for Berlin engages with the director’s scientific approach toward visual communication. I see a similar tendency toward the empirical in a series of posters created by influential typographer and graphic designer Jan Tschichold for the Phoebus-Palast in Munich from 1926 to 1928. These posters represent the designer’s most direct attempt at employing Bauhaus principles of graphic design in a real-world assignment. In the second section of this chapter, I examine a number of posters from that commission, illustrating the degree to which film and photography inspired the tenets of modernist print design. Though Tschichold strove for a transparent set of design principles, I propose that his posters nonetheless guide the perception of the films that they promote. These posters prompt us to recognize
the inevitable fact that design produces meaning and imparts a subjective viewpoint despite even the most adamant commitment to objectivity.

Tschichold’s emblematic attempt to sever the subjective from design evinces a widespread anxiety toward the potential emotional upswell that poster advertisements could arouse in viewers. I see the same disquietude toward poster effects as a central conflict in Fritz Lang’s masterpiece *M* (1931) of the same period. The film’s use of contemporary criminal proceedings for its story coupled with a camera that assumes an observational distance from the city’s search for a child-murderer, suggests the influence of New Objectivity. Mass media figures strongly in the film’s urban setting, composed to look and feel contemporaneous for its initial viewers. In the third section of my chapter, I examine *M*’s critique of poster sensationalism and show how the promotional materials designed for the film borrow from experiments in the avant-garde to widen the gap between the sensational poster and the objective view promised by Lang’s film. Pulsating through these three sections are the effects of major technological and political changes on the film and advertising industry. Thus, in the final section of my chapter I look more closely at Benjamin’s and Kracauer’s claims that New Objectivity, though containing a critical bite, diverted an active response to the social and political crises that became more dire in the final days of the Republic.

### 4.1 VISUAL EFFICIENCY IN ADVERTISING AND FILM

“Never believe that the straight line is something cold and rigid! You must simply draw it with enough excitement and properly observe its flow. It should be thin, now thick, trembling gently with nervous excitement. When we look upon our cities what do we see but battles of mathematics!”

—Ludwig Meidner

As we have seen, in the early 1920s poster critics were wary of using Expressionist style in commercial art on the grounds that it would mean applying a free artistic style to the surface of a purpose-driven object. There has been a tendency among scholars to explain the appearance of New Objectivity in film and posters in a similar manner: to define it as an aesthetic originating with painters and visionaries.

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17 Meidner, “Instructions for Painting Pictures of the Metropolis,” 217.
that was then co-opted by industry for ornamental use.\textsuperscript{18} Figures such as Walther Ruttmann, directors or artists who worked in the advertising industry, are imagined to have suffered through marketing commissions in order to fund more serious artistic projects.\textsuperscript{19} Such misconceptions assume a bifurcation of high art and commercial culture. In fact, New Objectivity developed from the very interplay between mass culture and fine art. The artists of the avant-garde were attracted to the aggressive methods of marketers and applied them frequently in their work. The famous Dada Manifesto, for instance, uses various sizes of multidirectional type, emphasizing the effect of layout on message. Kurt Schwitters created a brand for his art, “Merz,” and crafted his own adhesive logo to plant in public spaces. Collage and montage artworks drew attention to the combinations of technological media that shaped the modern age. But where the Dada artists were drawn to the overflow of media messages and reveled in their combined nonsensicality, those creative artists who worked in craft strove to streamline the babble into a clear and articulable whole. For these individuals aesthetic value was no longer distinct from use value. Instead its beauty arose from its efficiency at carrying out its appointed task. Inspired by the ability of “new” technologies, film, radio, and photography, to record and reproduce reality, marketing and design had become an object of scientific research with artists, craftspeople, and marketers striving to identify the most empirically reliable means of communicating within mass culture.\textsuperscript{20} A new “objective” poster style reflects this turn toward the empirical.

The unsigned poster for Ruttmann's highly acclaimed \textit{Berlin, die Sinfonie der Großstadt} offers one example of this style (Fig. 4.3). Likely the work of an in-house designer with the film’s production studio, Fox-Europa, the poster uses linear forms to shape the plane

\textbf{FIGURE 4.3} Unattributed Artist, \textit{Berlin, die Sinfonie der Großstadt} (1927). Lithograph, 162 x 92 cm. \url{http://www.filmportal.de/node/51535/material/764607}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{18} Elsaesser, \textit{Weimar Cinema and After}, 45.
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{19} Cowan, \textit{Walther Ruttmann}, 12.
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{20} Ward, \textit{Weimar Surfaces}, 92-3.
\end{flushleft}
into solid, architectural facades. The left of its asymmetrical halves features a collection of small rectangles within a larger one — a geometric approximation of a modern skyscraper endlessly repeating its forms up into a blue sky. The building is topped with the first three letters of the capital city’s name, standing upright on the roof like sentinels. Its patterned predictability provides a stable background for the subtitle of the film, the “Symphony of a Great City,” and stands in contrast to the oblique angles that constitute the right half of the poster.  

There, a lightning-like shard of yellow tips the accompanying architectural structure onto its edge where diagonal lines and tilting diamonds suggest a third dimension. Out of the perceived gap in the center of the plane, three circular forms emerge. In the center of the circle, the title of the production company fills a dark ring, integrating the ‘brand’ into the design. This mark emits two spherical bands of light, waves undulating through the poster’s flat surface. The contrast between forms and colors unite in the poster to create a dramatic effect.

In this geometric rendering of the city, the poster promises a modernist approach to material and representation. The basic repeated forms reflect a return to the most essential rules of composition as championed in the Bauhaus by the artist and teacher Wassily Kandinsky. Students in Kandinsky’s design course were instructed to experiment with productive color contrast using primary blue, red, and yellow, and, as the title of Kandinsky’s famous work attests, they focused on the tensions and harmonies inherent to the arrangement of simplified shapes: points, lines, and planes. The ultimate goal of composition was to create a “concrete pictoriality,” design that included a tactile, substantive dimension relating to an overarching set of principles that governed all of nature.  

Kandinsky writes, “The whole ‘world’ can [. . .] be looked upon as a self-contained cosmic composition which, in turn, is composed of an endless number of independent compositions, always self-contained even when getting smaller and smaller.” The three concentric circles suggest just such a repeating pattern. In doing so they also emulate the guiding principles behind Ruttmann’s filmmaking.

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21 The literal translation of the title would be “Symphony of the Big City” or “Symphony of the Metropolis,” but is most commonly translated as “Berlin, Symphony of a Great City,” as noted above.

22 Kandinsky, Punkt und Linie zu Fläche, 37.

23 Ibid., 37.
A poster artist well before he directed his first film, Ruttmann explains his approach to filmmaking as an engagement with basic tenets of composition as follows:

“. . . through a thousand related possibilities of changes between light and dark, between motionlessness and movement. The formal possibilities are not merely cosmetic, decorative elements of cinematic art. Just as the artistic content in painting is identical with the formal aspects of the work—in such a way that the carriers of the actual spiritual content are to be found in the energies of colors, surfaces, directions of movement, and the like, with the representational aspect playing only a subordinate role—so can the core of the artistic in a work of film-making lie only in the above-mentioned characteristics and possibilities of the cinema.”

Like Kandinsky, Ruttmann privileged abstraction over representation. Accordingly, the documentary-style film Berlin is largely a work interested in exploring medium-specific forms of communication. Berlin combines material filmed throughout the city into a composition of five acts to follow the course of a single, representative day. The masses that appear in the film were captured in their daily routines without their knowledge of being filmed (so boasts one promotional text) and placed beside closeup visions of the mechanical objects that make the city function, such as traffic lights, motor cars, telephone lines, and the spinning wheels of the printing press. Its observational content places the film squarely within the realm of the focus on sobriety and surface culture that has defined New Objectivity. As distant and unemotional as it may seem, however, Ruttmann’s film imposes a structure onto the multifarious elements of urban life by arranging shots according to properties of color, movement, and texture within a rhythmic whole. As Elder summarizes, rhythm in movement and composition not only creates visual interest in Ruttmann’s work, it “allows us to apprehend the unifying force of inner necessity, a force that pervades the artwork and the cosmos alike.”


24 Ruttmann, qtd. in Elder, Harmony and Dissent, 119.

25 Alter notes that the term “documentary” and its category did not exist at this time period, rather Ruttmann’s film would have been called an Absolute-film (denoting aesthetic interests) or a Kulturfilm (denoting cultural interests). Alter, “Berlin, Symphony of a Great City,” 197.

26 Elder, Harmony and Dissent, 161. This position is shared by Kandinsky, Viktor Eggeling, and Hans Richter and originated, according to Elder, in Goethe’s color theory.
the linear architectural forms of the skyline with their yellow circuits to suggest a unifying pulse within the fractured plane.

At the same time, the rings likely had a representative function. The exact replica of radio waves as depicted in Ruttmann’s earlier advertising film, *Spiel der Wellen*, the rings portray the transmission of sound through radio technology (Figure 4.4). The 1925 advertisement for AEG radio equipment, which would have been exhibited along with feature films and news reels at movie theaters, shows bands of light that transport the beat of an African drum out of a remote desert and into a Western living room. The reference to musical transmission implied by the rings in the poster is further supported by the subtitle, the “symphony” composed from the beating heart of the city. As a visual simulation of radio-produced sound, the circular forms relay the artistic ambitions of the film to exploit fully the magic of modern technology.

Radio had been introduced in Berlin only four years before the premier of *Berlin* and, like the medium of film, had seemed to defy traditional logic of time and space. Yet, by 1927 it had become both pervasive and regimented to the extent that it seemed almost banal. With the radio, Otto Alfred Palitzsch would write, “[t]echnology, not unjustly decried as miraculous and gargantuan, lies quiet as a house cat in the parlor.” The ease of listening and broadcasting had improved rapidly in the few years before: though early listening to weak signals was done on headsets, loud speakers were the standard issue by 1928, and much of the early static had been removed from the signal. “In 1931, there were 3.7 million registered radio sets in Germany,” a figure that can be multiplied by 10, according to historian Eric Weitz, to give account of the number of actual listeners. Though these figures attest to the popularity of the radio, Corey Ross’s research on early radio programming reveals that broadcasts were hardly emitters of popular culture. Less controlled by market preferences than film, they very rarely featured the entertainment segments of jazz and popular music that the masses preferred. Instead they broadcast

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27 Ross, “Cinema, Radio, and Mass Culture.”


29 Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 239.

30 Ross, “Cinema, Radio, and Mass Culture,” 35. For further information about the political and social role of radio in Weimar Germany see Peter Jelavich’s analysis on the adaptation an depoliticization of Alfred Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in *Berlin Alexanderplatz: Radio, Film, and the Death of Weimar Culture*. 
news and classical instrumental music specifically chosen to edify listeners.\textsuperscript{31} As Kurt Tucholsky would complain, “Not a word can be spoken on the radio that has not been understood and approved by a host of uncontrollable, irresponsible, and nearly surreptitious bureaucrats and independent reactionaries, average citizens, and obedient little shopkeepers.”\textsuperscript{32} By aligning the film with socially conservative radio programming, the \textit{Berlin} poster may suggest a didactic element in the film, the intention to uplift the masses through a controlled use of technology. However, given the modern style of the graphic design, it seems more likely an emphasis on the mechanization of the senses that radio (and film) entailed.\textsuperscript{33} The ability to transmit and record sound contributed significantly to concerns about the effect of technology on artistic interpretation.\textsuperscript{34} Debates were waged on the gramophone and radio transmitter asking whether or not technology degraded the essential, quasi-spiritual quality of the live performance. In the world of the film and poster, however, such worries are tedious and outdated.

The poster’s off-kilter lilt suggests the playful energy of the city, corresponding to a collection of photo-collage lobby cards that celebrate the urban environment in all its mechanization. Reminiscent of Dada experiments in photo-collage, the lobby cards piece together man-made objects, buildings, devices, and text. They reincorporate bodies of both consumers (the reader of the newspaper) and producers (the dancers and musicians) of popular art and media into bizarre frameworks that employ an irrational use of scale. The backgrounds in both examples included here (Figs. 4.5 and 4.6) are composed of the concrete facade of the skyscraper that fractures the plane into immeasurable rows of windows. The bulging eye in figure 4.5

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figures.png}
\caption{FIGURES 4.5-4.6 Lobby Cards, \textit{Berlin, die Sinfonie der Großstadt} (1927). Extra Materials Edition Filmmuseum DVD, 2011.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{31} Ross, “Cinema, Radio, and Mass Culture,” 35.

\textsuperscript{32} Tucholsky, “Radio Censorship,” 603.

\textsuperscript{33} The film represents an example of the attempt to mechanize music, a source of great debate in Weimar Germany, and which was exacerbated by the influence of New Objectivity and the development of radio technology. See Scheinberg, “Music and the Technological Imagination,” 25-60.

\textsuperscript{34} Stuckenschmidt, “Mechanical Music,” 597-600.
communicates the stress of trying to apprehend the entire image at once, while the tilted clock in the
center of the image suggests that there is little time in which to do it. In Figure 4.6 a central saxophone
shares the scaffolded look of the buildings behind it. In both images there is a suggestion of
overwhelming sound and constant movement. Even amidst this chaos, however, we see a basic rule of
thirds in operation. The material is organized by an overarching mathematical principle, striking a
measure of balance. Though the images suggest palpable disquiet, they also include humor in references
to entertainment (the dramatic pose of the actress, the curtsey of the dancer) and in the odd
juxtapositions of a scuba diver and traffic signal, for instance. These collages reflect the spirit of New
Objectivity with which the film subsumed mass communication, its inherent mayhem as well as its
irreverence toward aura, into the fabric of its aesthetic.

For Ruttmann, as for many others during this period in which the lines of high and popular art had
been significantly blurred, film united the broad populace with their own spirit. He writes,

Film is — thank God! — not simply an artistic affair, but also and above all a human-social affair!
It is the strongest advocate for the spirit that seeks to reunite vital and artistic interests, for that
spirit that today deems jazz more ‘important’ than sonatas, posters more ‘important’ than
paintings. Art, living art, is no longer what we learned it was in school: no longer a flight from the
world into higher spheres, but rather an act of entering into the world and explaining its nature.35

The film poster promises an artistic product with ambitions to employ modern media in order to dig deeply
into the material, contemporary world. This same impetus would become manifest in Ruttmann’s later
experimental Hörfilm, Weekend, a 1930 film that featured sounds from the city recorded on film stock and
edited into an 11 minute compilation without images.36 Like Weekend, Berlin presents a mechanically
produced record of the city that promised to make the most of the wilder, demonic forces inherent to
media. The film would take the tamed radio waves and allow them free-reign to penetrate the surface of
commercial culture, revealing its thriving, surging life. Thus, the poster introduces the viewer to the film’s
endeavor to forge a new “optical music,” as Balázs would term it.37


36 Weekend pieces together sounds recorded on film from around Berlin in order to provide an acoustic impression of the city. Partly
a promotional film meant to showcase the technological applicability of using film to record aural impressions, the “sound film” was

37 Balázs writes: “Montage rhythm can acquire an entirely independent, quasi-musical value of its own that has only a remote and
irrational relation to the content of the film. Images of a landscape, of buildings or other objects with no dramatic content can acquire
in the montage an optical rhythm that is no less expressive than music.” Balázs, Early Film Theory, 129.
In editing the footage for the film, Ruttmann worked with composer Edmund Meisel to produce the rhythmic effects of music with his montage. The film, Ruttmann posited, would thus have a kinesthetic effect on the body of the viewer. Physically experiencing the abstract forms that undergirded the life of the city, the audience would move with the rhythm of the images presented on the screen. Balázs seems to confirm the same principle when describing the effect of montage on the viewer as an impetus to dance: “The point of view of the camera becomes the spectator’s point of view. When it changes, so too does the viewpoint of the spectator. Even if he does not move an inch, he moves inwardly.” As Cowan has recently indicated, this principle, called “Wellenbewegung” by Ruttmann, was drawn directly from advertising theory. When applied to poster art it accounts for the way in which the eye is drawn through the design, inciting viewer “movement” along its compositional lines. In fact the abstract forms with which Ruttmann famously opens his film are reminiscent of the very planes that formed the poster advertisement.

The opening sequence of Berlin begins with a shot of waves as they ripple on the surface of an anonymous body of water. These are replaced by animated bars that spin like the light flickering across the tops of cresting waves. The pace increases while a rectangle and circle rotate in and out of the bottom of a frame, following the swells of symphonic stringed instruments in Meisel’s accompaniment played by a live orchestra in the theater. Suddenly, thin rectangular bars fall from the left and right sides of the frame, one after another, until they are replaced in an instant through a graphic match with two railroad crossing bars that mark the approach of an on-coming train (Figs. 4.7 and 4.8). Sharing the perspective of the train once it overtakes the camera, we view the railroad ties as a

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38 Cowan, Walter Ruttmann, 41.
39 Balázs, Theory of Film, 131. Erica Carter emphasizes this passage on spectatorship in her introduction to Balázs’s theory, relating it to Eisenstein and Pudovkin’s later theories of film, “Introduction,” xxxvii.
40 Cowan, Walther Ruttmann, 42.
41 Known as the Blickbewegungslinien, the narrative progression of the eye through the design was a significant underlying principle of graphic design. Cowan, “Taking it to the Street,” 474.
series of repeating lines that recall the waves from the beginning of the film. The film proceeds with the speed of the locomotive past endless power lines and trees, which flash past us as the camera enters the city. Wheels and axels, connectors and steam introduce us to the power of the industrialized space. As Alter writes, “Ruttmann’s camera aestheticizes the machines, presenting them as kinetic sculptures performing a mechanical ballet.”

The patterns of movement and rhythmic intensity of the film in and out of its five acts compel the viewer to recognize underlying forms in what otherwise seemed a fragmentary and alienating existence. Simultaneously, Ruttmann’s opening sequence, as Cowan rightly notes, provides a pedagogic function in revealing the relationship between the recognizable forms of the city in motion and the undulating shapes that he used in his abstract films. Both relied on principles that the artist saw operating along basic lines of repetition, speed, and variation, as did music and graphic art.

As Cowan rightly points out, even Ruttmann’s purely visual “absolute” films were less counter-culture and more “a part of a broader elaboration of new techniques of spectatorship, where the viewer figures as an embodied object of psychophysical testing rather than as a hermeneutic interpreter.” This theory of spectatorship formed a guiding principle in the execution of effective visual advertisements, for it allowed the ad to compete with an over-abundance of information on the street. As Ruttmann explains,

> Telegraphs, high-speed trains, stenography, photography, high-speed press machines, etc., [...] have brought about a speed in the transmission of intellectual results previously unknown. For the individual, this speed with which information is transmitted results in a state of continuous inundation of material that can no longer be processed by traditional methods.

The poster and film respond to this context by simplifying their forms, which, though they appear as recognizable objects from the physical world, also work on an abstract compositional level. Like waves registering on a richter scale, the underlying rhythm of life becomes palpable in their efficient forms. Ruttmann trusted that the mechanical medium of film would most aptly display the unity between the abstract and the recognizable, helping the spectator to order and comprehend the overwhelming excess

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43 Cowan, Walther Ruttmann, 56.
44 Ibid., 33.
45 Ibid., 47.
of every day reality in Berlin. The poster ad for Berlin attempts to accomplish the same feat with its semblance of urban technologized reality.

Advertising tenets not only informed the structuring principles of Ruttmann’s film, but also made up a great deal of its content. The posters, store windows, and live marketing displays captured by the camera make the film image and advertising design one and the same. As Nora M. Alter argues, this seamless combination of promotional design and cinematic imagery amounts to one of the greatest achievements in terms of the aims of New Objectivity. In the film, people that live and work in the city are active as both consumers and objects to be consumed by the camera; they are an integral part of the mechanical orchestra that resounds throughout the setting — cogs in the machine, to be sure, but in a way that for the most part celebrates their interworking. Thereby, the film indicates how the modern population has “internalized” modernity. As Alter writes, “the totality of Berlin, Symphony of a Great City can thus be seen as an advertisement for modernity, with Berlin emerging at the forefront and film as the superior medium through which to showcase the city’s spectacular splendor.” Despite his early work in posters, Ruttmann eventually came to insist that the possibilities in filmmaking far outstripped those in the still graphic arts. The way that posters and other mass media are featured in the film serves to emphasize the singular capacity of the movie camera to reckon with the tempo of modern life.

While advertisement and promotional display make up a great deal of the imagery in Ruttmann’s film, he shows a preference for shots of moving displays: the mechanical puppet in the shop window or the parade of models on a public runway. In contrast, the flat plane of the poster appears somewhat peripherally. The film therefore follows Ruttmann’s insistence that the medium of the modern age should

46 Alter, “Berlin, Symphony of a Great City,” 211.

47 This is particularly striking in an early sequence in which the camera turns to a collection of mannequins in a shop window. As fashion itself mediates between the modern world and the body, these plastic figures provide a visual bridge between the opening shots of the oncoming train and those of living people. The mannequins symbolize the confluence of organic and technological materials within the urban environment where humanity exists as part of the larger city-machine. Accordingly Kracauer observed: these dummies are not humanized, but “rather human beings are forced into the sphere of the inanimate. They seem molecules in a stream of matter.” Kracauer, From Caligari to Hitler, 186.


49 Ibid., 209.
represent movement. Aiming beyond Kandinsky, Ruttmann argues, “the object of our observation is now temporal development and the physiognomy of a curve caught in continuous transformation, and no longer the static disposition of individual points.” 50 In one telling shot from the film, Ruttmann displays an advertising column filling the frame, its large-scale poster for cigarettes failing to fit the parameters of the shot (Fig. 4.9). A uniformed traffic director proceeds to the side of the column, and handling invisible locks, swings the column open as the film cuts in to reveal a series of electric controls underneath the graphic surface (Fig. 4.10). This shot gives way to a collection of closeup images of switches and electrical boards following one another through muddying dissolves. The poster conceals, the sequence suggests, a dizzying array of mechanical interconnections, which the film is able to articulate. The sequence goes on to imply that this poster and others like it merely contribute to the confusion of the city setting: an overhead angle captures a fight breaking out on a street corner where an advertising column conspicuously serves as backdrop to the scuffle; two women are shown leaning through a window on the side of a postered building, the bold claims of the poster hemming them in on three sides; street advertisements collide via quick editing patterns, before the sequence closes with a graphic spiral spinning in a repair shop window (Figs. 4.11-13).

Significantly, these shots precede a much noted departure from the otherwise documentary-style footage in the film, suggesting their importance for Ruttmann’s overarching project. There, Ruttmann makes his most obvious intervention into the content of the film to display the

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50 qtd. in Cowan, Walter Ruttmann, 48.
overwhelming confusion that issues from the modern printing press. Numerous closeups show the newspaper gliding through its reels and passing through multiple hands before it opens in front of a casual reader, briefly flashing the illustrated advertisements that fill its pages. Lines of text smear from the bottom to the top of the frame in illegible lines until the animated headlines: “Krise, Mord, Börse, Heirat, Geld, Geld, Geld,” progress from the center of the frame outward enlarging before the viewers’ eyes as if they were pressing out of the image.51 The text gives way to a closeup of a set of roller-coaster tracks shot as if we, embodying the camera, were sitting in the front car. The film cuts to a revolving door and then we are placed on the roller-coaster again. From the height of its incline we catch sight of a wall decorated with an enormous illustration of a speeding horse (Fig. 4.14). We nearly collide with the advertisement as we follow the tracks forward and veer to the left (Fig. 4.15). Suddenly a hypnotic spiral like the one from the shop window fills the entire frame (Fig. 4.16). The sequence reproduces the bewildering effect of mass communication on our senses equating it to a constant roller-coaster ride where jumping off means death. Accordingly, shortly thereafter, a ragged woman appears, and in the film’s only point-of-view shot, stares into the moving water under a bridge before she plunges below, presumably drowning in its depths. In this Expressionist moment, Ruttmann suggests that the modern machine does not incorporate everyone with equal success. Ruttmann’s film organizes the dangerous over-swell of impressions to which the posters and newspapers in this depiction contribute.52 Thus, the film carries within it a criticism of print media even where it emulates their titillating effects.

51 The headlines could be translated as: “Crisis, Murder, Stock Exchange, Marriage, Money, Money, Money.”

52 Cowan further argues that Ruttmann bases the visual organization of the film on statistical probabilities, thus following the emphasis on empirical data that epitomized experimentation in New Objectivity. Cowan, Walther Ruttmann, 79.
Accordingly, the fragmentary composition of the right side of the premier poster for Berlin may be read as a reflection of the destructive forces embodied in modern mass media. The radio waves, like print culture in the film, possess the energy to rupture, but, like film, also to connect. Like the photo-montage lobby cards at the front of house, the poster reflects the bountiful energy of technologically produced media to forge new associations and garner new delights. Its success is only possible by way of a significant departure from contemporary illustrative posters. Instead of emulating the fleeting instability of the projected image, the poster seems to revel in its still “posterliness;” it foregrounds the fixed, flattened quality of its medium. The planes of the image seem to have an architectural girth, the primary-colored forms are rich and immovable, a stark contrast to the ephemeral designs of Matejko or Fenneker. Thus, the poster for Berlin suggests the direction of progressive film poster art in the later Weimar period, which formulated its own mode of objectivity via an intentionally formulaic approach to composition. As in Bauhaus architecture, the poster was to employ “the exclusive use of typical fundamental forms and colors that are understandable to everyone.”\textsuperscript{53} They would thereby insist that the cosmic rhythm of the Berlin poster be felt even if its representation of the media-inflected metropolis remained obscure.

\textbf{4.2 JAN TSCHICHOLD AND MUNICH AVANT-GARDE POSTERS}

\textit{The advertising directly generates design, and vice versa. Advertising and designing have formed a union. The advertising design. That all sounds very simple and like everything looking simple, is a very intricate matter.}

\begin{quote}
— Kurt Schwitters\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

In their focus on media-specificity, later Weimar designers in no way rejected the influence of film and photography on poster imagery. Rather, the perceived ability of the camera to produce direct, unmediated images served as the inspiration for experiments in design. Correspondingly the members of the Neue Ring Werbegestalter and Bauhaus affiliates spoke about design using hybrid concepts they coined themselves, such as typophoto, phototext, and poly-cinema, following the belief that mechanical

\textsuperscript{53} Gropius and Schultze-Naumberg, “Who is Right?” 441.

\textsuperscript{54} Schwitters, qtd. in Le Coultre, \textit{Jan Tschichold}, 61.
means of representation had irrevocably altered human perception and that design must fall in line. The influence of designers and artists such as László Moholy-Nagy, El Lissitzky, Hans Richter, Jan Tschichold and the many other avant-gardes who contributed to this discussion is sprawling. The intricacies of their perspectives differ though they generally privileged stream-lined, efficient aesthetics and embraced the use of technological media. Among his contemporaries, Jan Tschichold has remained one of the most influential for twenty-first century designers. He proved most gifted at executing his theoretical work in real-world scenarios and describing the tenets of modern design in lucid terms. He was also an avid supporter of experimental film during the later Weimar period and created an extended collection of advertising posters for the Phoebus-Palast in Munich from 1926-28. In his seminal work, The New Typography of 1928, Tschichold openly states that although he faced considerable impediments during that time frame, (executing designs at a remarkable pace with restricted monetary resources to meet the demands of an arduous exhibition schedule,) the posters he created in the two years working for the Phoebus-Palast provide the only examples of “true film posters.” In this section I will examine a number of those posters in the context of Tschichold’s advocacy for typophoto, a concept of efficient design that I take to be representative of a larger constellation of arguments put forth by artists connected with the Bauhaus, Russian Constructivism, and, in the Netherlands, De Stijl. I do not mean to overgeneralize with this focus, but instead would like to consider these posters, as Tschichold did, as models embodying the highest ideals in modernist film poster design.

“It is really astonishing to me that the film companies have up to now made so little use of photography in their posters,” writes Tschichold. In actuality, as we have seen, many of the earliest feature film posters did include small-scale lithographic reproductions of photographs; it was, however,

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55 See Moholy-Nagy, “Painting, Photography, Film,” especially pgs 27-9; and the group text Gefesselter Blick, edited by Heinz and Bodo Rasch and published to accompany a new advertising exhibit by artists El Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, Piet Zwart, Kurt Schwitters, Tschichold, Otto Baumberger, John Heartfield, Hans Richter, and others.


57 With his work in the Munich association for experimental film called the Volksverband für Filmkunst, Tschichold advocated for avant-garde film experiments that were highly self-reflexive in nature. He expected film poster ads to evoke this interest in the moving image and thus criticizes Ludwig Hohlwein with the remark that “his posters for movies are not evocative of film at all.” Le Coultre, “The Posters of the Avantgarde.” 65-7.


59 Ibid., 185.
generally agreed that such images did not read well from great distances. By the late 1920s photographic printing could be completed on a larger scale, allowing for renewed experimentation, yet the interpretive touch of the artist was still viewed as a necessary element of good pictorial design.\textsuperscript{60} Tschichold refuted such notions, insisting,

> The 'hand' of the artist is simply superfluous, its purpose a pernicious waste of the public's time. When we realize that for the poster that must be read quickly on a hoarding, only the simplest and clearest forms can be right, we have to avoid strictly everything that is individual and unclear, because too strongly artistic. The need for the most objective, indeed the intensely factual, design is shown by the appalling quantity of inscriptions and posters in modern cities. If a poster or inscription is not crystal clear, it is useless.\textsuperscript{61}

The first step to crafting a more objective, non-artistic poster, according to Tschichold, is to include an image whenever possible. The objective illustration is “incomparably more meaningful than any poster consisting only of words.”\textsuperscript{62} Illustration cuts out the need for interpretation through the conceptual apparatus of language and presents the thing as directly as possible. For Tschichold, photography is the obvious medium with which to produce such illustrations, but where type is necessary it too must strive to emulate the “purity” of the photograph’s appearance. Tschichold writes, “We today have recognized photography as an essential typographic tool of the present. We find its addition to the means of typographic expression an enrichment, and see in photography exactly the factor that distinguishes our typography from everything that went before.”\textsuperscript{63} The reluctance to use photography in poster design Tschichold calls a product of “blind enmity,” “hostile prejudice,” or simply “lack of imagination.”\textsuperscript{64} As Tschichold implies, such hesitancy proves particularly misguided when executing an advertisement for film, an object whose very product is the compilation of photographic imagery.

Tschichold’s poster for the Georg Jacoby film \textit{Die Frau ohne Namen} (1927) constitutes good film poster design according to the designer’s modernist concepts (Fig. 4.17). With mathematical precision,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{60} In \textit{The New Typography}, Tschichold remarks that further advances are necessary before it becomes practical to fully exploit the photograph in posters. He writes: “up till now, to my knowledge, only a few firms in Berlin can produce posters in 84 x 120 cm format by rotary printing,” and costs for screen exposures were still quite high. Ibid., 182.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 181.
\item \textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 181.
\item \textsuperscript{63} Tschichold, \textit{The New Typography}, 92.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Tschichold, \textit{The New Typography}, 182.
\end{itemize}
the poster features a series of red lines and black and red type plus five photolithographic prints arranged in a method that drives the eye around the composition in a zig-zag pattern. All of these design elements appear to originate in two distinct vanishing points on the right-hand side of the poster, following the rules of linear perspective. The first of these two points at the top right of the poster emits a series of four lines broadening toward the upper left-hand corner of the poster to form a triangular shape in which the title appears in letters of increasing size, giving the impression of depth along a flat plane. From the same pinpoint to the bottom left of the poster, a second set of lines extends outward in four points that correspond to the expanding edges of four photographic images: a portrait of a geisha, a pale hand outstretched against the darkness beside a plume of smoke, a Western woman collapsing in the arms of three hairless men in tunics tied at the waist, and finally the steam engine, number 342, in a red, circular frame. Breaking from the otherwise careful orchestration of these images, is the figure of the lead actress, Elga Brink, gazing flirtatiously out from under her pointed hat. The star portrait operates as the so-called “Blickfang,” playfully casting the attention of the viewer along the line of the hat and back to the beginning of the zigzag composition. The train outstrips Brink in compositional significance, however. The only object that appears at the apex of the poster’s two points, its trail of iron cars recedes into the second vanishing point toward the bottom of the composition, undergirding the structure of the design. The contextual information about the location of the exhibition and the directorial billing on the bottom of the page further support the linear perspective by issuing from this lower point. The red trapezoid below it would be filled with additional exhibition information. One copy of the poster, for instance, advertises that each screening of the film will be accompanied by Swiss composer Arthur Honegger’s Pacific 231 (1923), a score that famously emulated the increasing intensity of a train gathering speed on its track.

Tschichold’s masterful composition explicitly employs classical design concepts to allude to cinematic projection and the flow of photographic images that create the filmic illusion within the theater. Guiding the eye through the series of rectangular images, the poster emulates the wash of photographic stills emanating from a distant projector. In light of this engagement with the technological basis of the art form, it is no mistake that Tschichold chose the steam engine as the most central image of his design for Die Frau Ohne Namen. Like the train that legendarily frightened viewers at the screening of the Lumière brothers’ 1895 short L’arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat, the speeding train was a common conceit in cinematic depictions of modern technology and seemed inherently linked to cinematic illusion. Alongside its historical and cultural references, the train also lends itself well to linear perspective, a fact that made it a felicitous subject for early film experiments and ripe for inclusion in this design. Here, Tschichold’s web of red lines make plain the use of two-point perspective, the centuries-old method of creating depth within a two-dimensional plane. Thus, the poster illustrates the link between illusion-making in graphic and film art, embodying the transition from old to new media and unveiling their shared principles of composition.

The positioning of the photographic images in the poster relates directly to their importance for the content of the poster and, ostensibly, to the plot-line of this “Weltreisefilm.” However, as many of the commissions for the Phoebus-Palast had to be executed without photographic prints because of time and economic constraints, a number of Tschichold’s posters could not rely on the photograph to suggest the content of the film. Still, these type-posters followed the logic of the typophoto in that the various elements of such posters followed a reasonable sequence that aimed at emphasizing important material. “Every part of a text relates to every other part by a definite, logical relationship of emphasis and value, predetermined by content. It is up to the typographer to express this relationship clearly and visibly, through type sizes and weight, arrangement of lines, use of colour, photography, etc.”65 For instance his poster for the film Entfesselte Elemente (The Winning of Barbara Worth, Henry King, 1926) is typical of his typographic posters (Fig. 4.18). Type was always sans serif, reflecting Tschichold’s staunch rejection of ornamentation. The black, white, and red color scheme so typical of modernist design Tschichold explains as a method of “increasing optical intensity” and creating depth within the poster plane. White

constructed a middle plane, according to Tschichold, red (or yellow) a foremost plane, and black receded into the background. Like the Russian Constructivists who influenced Tschichold’s work, Tschichold designs his posters with an architectural element, seeming to construct visual spaces through which the gaze would travel. Thus although the image appears static, it invites the viewer to do the moving. The act of looking becomes a kinetic experience not unlike the one Ruttmann imagined for viewers of his rhythmic optical compositions.

Also like Ruttmann, Tschichold maintained that contemporary reading practices demanded succinct expressions using abstract forms. “Modern man has to absorb every day a mass of printed matter which, whether he has asked for it or not, is delivered through his letter-box or confronts him everywhere out of doors. [...] As a rule we no longer read quietly line by line, but glance quickly over the whole, and only if our interest is awakened do we study it in detail.” All unnecessary elements had to be culled from the poster to increase the speed of apprehension. At the same time, the design had to avoid the boring constraints of tradition and instead follow an inwardly determined organization of material. Thus, as was his advocated practice, in Entfesselte Elemente, Tschichold avoids traditional symmetrical layouts of type-posters which rarely achieved the designers intended spacing. Instead he aligns the text on the left at varying distances from the margin. The type creates an upright, stable appearance enlivened by the balance between white and colored spaces. In contrast to the open white space, the title of the film is as solid and impressive as a brick wall, while the red block above it seems to bleed downward. More detailed exhibition information does not crowd the composition, but is set off in logically organized cubes. A black square underneath guides the interested


68 Frederic J. Schwartz analyzes the manifestation of this theorization of visual printed space in Benjamin’s *One Way Street*, influenced, he argues, by the typographical theories of Moholy-Nagy and Tschichold. He maps the new typography vs. art onto Benjamin’s contrasting notions of distraction and aura. Schwartz, “The Eye of the Expert,” 411.

eye to this supplemental note. In this example, we see evidence of Tschichold’s commitment to functionality, to “give a pure and direct expression to the contents of whatever is printed; just as in the works of technology and nature.” The sizing and spacing in this poster submits the most basic announcement: there is a new movie at the Phoebus Palace and, according to the title, it is has something to do with “unleashing the elements.” As in the vast majority of Tschichold’s type film posters, the poster’s “message” relies heavily on the implications made in the title of the film. Here, the notion of unchecked forces alluded to by the title makes for an intriguing contrast to the consistency and stability of the poster, but the design gives us very little to go on in regard to the content of the film, a western shot in California featuring a love triangle between a cowboy, an irrigation engineer, and a rancher’s daughter.

In his recent work on Tschichold’s film posters, Martijn F. Le Coultre argues that Tschichold’s designs were basically interchangeable, that the design itself had no relationship to the content of the film. Similarly, in comparing Tschichold’s Frau ohne Namen with Russian film posters, Victor Margolin maintains that Tschichold’s interest in composition far outweighs any desire to shape the interpretation of a given film. Margolin concludes that Russian film posters, though similar in style to Tschichold’s German Constructivism, more often provide an ideological lens to viewers. Tschichold’s own arguments regarding successful poster art seem to confirm the designer’s lack of interest in shaping the message of a film. As he describes it, the choice of photographs has much less to do with representing the plot or character of the film than creating a dynamic layout. For instance, the productive effect of the photo-poster for Tschichold originates within the compositional friction between the photograph and the design,

The suggestive power that gives photo-posters the advantage over so many other kinds of poster lies in the extraordinary contrast of the richly nuanced ‘plastic’ grey of photographs with areas of colour (or indeed pure white) which only the use of photography can give. Such a richly varied means of expression demands, contrary to usual opinion, at least as much imaginative ability as painting and drawing. In any case, a very highly developed feeling for harmony and proportion is needed, when posters or other printed advertising matter are being designed using these contemporary methods.

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70 Ibid., 67.
72 Margolin, “Constructivism and the Modern Poster,” 32.
For Tschichold, the photograph alters the dimensions of the poster plane. Its life-like indications of depth create a suggestive distance from the framing mechanism of the poster design. A hand-drawn illustration could never achieve the same effect for Tschichold as “People believe a photograph — a drawing not entirely.”74 Here we see evidence of Tschichold’s idealistic trust of the camera to reveal the underlying precepts of reality that are obscure to the human eye. Mohly-Nagy more directly explains the perceived advantage of photography over other kinds of illustrations and its inherent link with New Objectivity when he explains that through the photograph “everyone will be compelled to see that which is optically true, is explicable in its own terms, is objective, before he can arrive at any possible subjective position.”75 Therefore even the distortions that can be caused by camera placement, such as distance and angle, which theorists like Arnheim marked as the artistic principles of film, are, for Moholy-Nagy and Tschichold, merely the proper scientific employment of the camera based in the observer’s commitment to revealing the “conceptual image of the thing.”76 The conceptual image appears in a way that the eye may not normally receive it, but is based on a truth more empirical than a human being can apprehend alone. Tschichold’s film posters, by inviting the viewer to notice the contrast between the two-dimensional graphic plane and the perfect three-dimensional aspect of the photograph, highlight the objective clarity of the technological image.

When we turn to examples of Tschichold’s film posters, however, this productive contrast between dimensions creates a curious effect. In the poster for the German and Swedish production Die Lady ohne Schleier (Hans engelska fru, Gustav Molander, 1927) the layout does very little to intervene with the implications of the photograph and its descriptive title (Fig. 4.19). The flat logic of the composition allows...

74 Ibidl, 159.

75 Moholy-Nagy, Painting, Photography, Film, 28.

76 Ibid, 28.
them to speak for themselves. However, the modernist frame deflates the realism of the photographic image, making it appear stagey and overwrought. In effect, a very conventional photograph becomes as intriguing as one using radical perspective or double exposure. Thus, the poster achieves the same self-reflexivity that is so palpable in the design for *Die Frau ohne Namen*, debunking the cinematic illusion. In examples where Tschichold uses only a portion of a promotional still, often zeroing in on particular actors or actresses, the irony in this contrast is even more pronounced. For example, the poster for a film adaptation of Carl Sternheim’s *Die Hose* (Hans Behrendt, 1927) featuring a mustachioed Werner Krauss crafts a humorous caricature of the state secretary in Sternheim’s social satire (Fig. 4.20). The design for *Die Hose was originally executed to serve as a promotional poster for Das Meer, Insel der Leidenschaft* (Peter Paul Felner, 1927), a romance represented in the circle by an ocean landscape. Le Coultre’s and Margolin’s suggestion that these designs were unrelated to the narratives of the films they promoted thus appears to be partially warranted. However, we should not underestimate the effect of Tschichold’s decisions ultimately to reject a particular design for the use of one film and reserve it for another.

For instance, the key-hole framing of Krauss’s suspicious sideward glance suggests a kind of peek at something indiscrete that the title also supports (referring as it does to an undergarment). In fact the placement of the title, at an oblique angle that spatially gestures toward what would be Krauss’s lap, helps cultivate a ribald humor. The design does not outline the intricacies of the plot, (whose undergarments are revealed and to whom remains obscure), and yet the drollery of the film is communicated. The title does not simply supplement the content of the photograph, but encourages the audience to reflect on what the framing composition conceals. In contrast, Tschichold’s *Die Lady ohne Schleier* presents a much more conventional depiction of a whole setting that directly represents the object of the title: the bare-shouldered Lil Dagover. Imagine for a moment that Lil Dagover’s head were...


77 Tschichold also planned a design for a Buster Keaton film that was later used for Asta Nielsen’s *Laster der Menschheit* (Rudolf Meinert, 1927). Le Coultre, “The Posters of the Avantgarde,” 41.
placed in the key hole shot with the title announced underneath in the manner of Die Hose. The suggestion becomes less mannered, more playful and flirtatious. As it stands Dagover and her suitor are separated from one another by a divisive corner in the back of the shot. The varying wall decorations enclose each of them in a separate architectural plane. The resulting blocky quality of both the photo and the frame lend a sort of chasteness to the interaction despite the revealing content announced by the title. The effects of Tschichold’s design decisions have definite implications for the way the photographs and titles read, whether or not these effects were intentional.

Still, because Tschichold’s posters are far more explicit in their presentation of medium than plot or story line, they do not show much if any diversification across genres. Rather than affecting the interpretation of an individual film, as I have proposed that other posters may indeed have done, Tschichold’s posters served mainly to reframe the audience’s expectations for the medium as a whole. His sober framework betrays the non-realistic aspect of the photographic film still, emphasizing the technological apparatus behind the cinematic illusion. Under theater director Michael Demmel, Tschichold’s posters were part and parcel of an elaborate film program meant to evoke trends in the modern arts. Film screenings at the Phoebus-Palast included not only the standard news reels and light entertainment pre-shows, but orchestral music by, for example, Alexander Lázsló or Franz Liszt. Though modernist work was often conceived in terms of its medium-specific properties and aimed at execution in “conformity with its own laws and its own distinctive character,” each contributed to the experience of the others and aimed at forming a harmonious whole. In other words, the exhibitions proposed to adapt the ideal of the Gesamtkunstwerk once more by drawing multimedia experiments together into a singular experience much the way that the Marmorhaus had done in Berlin in the early 1920s. However, the Phoebus-Palast, eclipsing every other theater in Germany by its size and capacity when it opened, required a fresh aesthetic. With the help of Tschichold’s modernist designs, the theater quickly gained a reputation as a institute for the fine arts.

78 Le Coultre, Jan Tschichold, 41.
79 Moholy-Nagy, 17.
80 Le Coultre, ??
The economic turmoil that affected the film industry throughout Germany in the late 1920s also disrupted Tschichold’s work for the Pheobus-Palast. The theater was taken over by the conglomerate Emelka in late 1927; Tschichold left in early 1928. His successor Carl Otto Müller emulated his style, but could never match the cool constitution of Tschichold’s designs. Tschichold seems to be aiming a criticism at these approximations when he writes, “Unfortunately many people have thought the essence of the New Typography consists merely in the use of bold rules, circles, and triangles. If these are merely substituted for the old ornaments, nothing is improved.”\(^8^1\) Indeed, Tschichold’s strict rejection of ornamentation was far more complete than that of a good number of his contemporaries. As Le Coultre reports, particularly in Munich where illustrative posters had always maintained a hold in the public sphere, Tschichold’s experiments were somewhat severe.\(^8^2\) Thus, even though he played an active role in planning and executing public poster exhibits and competitions, reports on these events often elided his own poster contributions in favor of more painterly designs.\(^8^3\)

Nonetheless, influential modernist experiments in applied art that shared Tschichold’s insistence on the value of the practical efficiency likewise strove to apply a more technological, scientific process in their execution. Along with Moholy-Nagy, these artists insisted that “painterly methods of representation suggestive merely of past times and past ideologies shall disappear and their place be taken by mechanical means of representation and their as yet unpredictable possibilities of extension.”\(^8^4\) With this approach craftspeople envisioned a technologically crafted world in which each object represented the fullest exploitation of its medium-specific potential. All objects of production became art under this logic, but this new art surrendered its auratic, other-worldly connection. As Hannes Meyer would approvingly write in 1927, “The standardized cultural product is the hit tune.”\(^8^5\) The fruits of this labor were

\(^8^1\) Tschichold, 70.
\(^8^2\) Le Coultre, 61.
\(^8^3\) Ibid., 61.
\(^8^4\) Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, 15.
\(^8^5\) Meyer, “The New World,” 448.
meant to be comprehensible to everyone, dissolving stratification between social and aesthetic spheres.\textsuperscript{86} However, despite this ideological undercurrent, Tschichold’s lofty goals divided his work from the popular and at times the \textit{New Typography} reasserts divisions between high art and entertainment. For instance, Tschichold tellingly cites Fernand Léger in his assessment that the poster should have a soothing effect on the masses and “be therefore thought of not as jazz but as orchestral music.”\textsuperscript{87} Given this conviction, Tschichold unsurprisingly clashed with H. K. Frenzel, the editor of \textit{Gebrauchsgraphik} who defended the popular content of his magazine insisting that “with me you can have jazz and you can have waltz. The point is, the playing has to be good.”\textsuperscript{88} Frenzel’s statement reminds us again that despite the enduring legacy of Tschichold’s modernism, Weimar design was extremely varied. In the constant race for novelty, multiple styles could and did garner interest from critics, professionals, and consumers.

Like the film posters themselves, Tschichold’s principles of design seem to hold within themselves several paradoxes: they strive toward ideals that elevate the work above popular art, but at the same time reject the notion of high art on principle. The work they inspire is medium-specific, stressing the posterliness of the poster in contrast to the plasticity of the photograph, and yet it is based on translating a photographic approach into type, layout, and print design. As much of the material treated in this chapter suggests, this period emphasized another intermedial juxtaposition by frequently using musical analogies to explain the aesthetics of visual design and postulate the intricacy of its reception. In the essay that introduces the premier edition of \textit{Das Plakat}, Hans Sachs described the poster as an assault on the ears, a town crier that the magician poster artist Jules Chéret pinned to the wall to scream incessantly at passersby.\textsuperscript{89} His conviction that a good poster imposed itself on the viewer like sound waves upon the ear persisted throughout the Weimar period. Ruttmann, as we have seen, adapted this idea when he crafted optical compositions that emulated the musical properties of a symphony. Like

\textsuperscript{86} Thus, Tschichold and Schwitters took on Utopian experiments such as new phonetic alphabets that could be utilized universally. Developing a universal language was not only a proposed possibility of film, which according to Vachel Lyndsay and Balázs worked on universal levels of communication, but also the proposed task of advertising material. See Berner, Ulrich, “Esperanto und Reklame,” 109-110.

\textsuperscript{87} Léger qtd. in Tschichold, \textit{The New Typography}, 191.

\textsuperscript{88} Frenzel, qtd. in Le Coultere, “The Posters of the Avantgarde,” 71.

\textsuperscript{89} Sachs, “Zum Geleit,” 1.
music, the moving image progressed through time, building an overall impression through rhythmical structures and variations. Similarly, it was thought that the still poster could achieve musical harmony by scientifically orchestrating its various parts into a pleasing whole. It could even induce its own kinetic, temporal dimension by guiding the eye through its elements. In this task, Tschichold took inspiration from the French artist Robert Delaunay citing his notes on the use of color in posters:

> We must therefore stop using colours by chance or intuition, in order to make something ‘pretty’ or ‘beautiful.’ We must be scientific and make them vibrate in harmony like music. And we must start from the beginning to make posters not a corruption of the eyes but an invitation or a source of information. Posters must be treated as such. No more trying to make them more or less seductive representations of objects, but have the aim of making them put us under their spell by their vibrating impressions of great or lesser intensity.\(^{90}\)

As Delaunay’s description proves, the musical conceit was rhetorically effective in that tone, harmony, and rhythm seemed to affect a person’s inner psychology much as the constituent aspects of a visual display were thought to do. Furthermore, music communicated with the listener on a level of intuition rather than of interpretive distance, a notion dating back to Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. On the other hand, like design, it was governed at least in part by mathematical laws. As Delaunay’s statement implies, music seemed to unite both the magical aspect of image reception (the ‘spell’ under which the image could put the viewer) and the interest in a sober, mechanical contribution to modern aesthetics associated with New Objectivity. The analogy also reasserts the potentially hypnotic effect of visual advertisement, an increasingly recognized necessity of mass culture. Posters could not be ignored. Though cities attempted to impose restrictions on posting, they could not be blocked out or removed. Poster had become a fixed, if distracting reality of the city scape that, like technology, could in the best instances be managed by professionals but never erased. The very intensity with which creative advertisers sought to exert control over poster design suggests the widespread discomfort with the poster’s potency. The questions continued to reverberate through discourse on design: Just how much power was exerted by mass media? Who generated that power? Was it the masses or the medium itself?

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\(^{90}\) Delaunay, qtd. in Tschichold, *Die Neue Typographie*, 191.
“Warte, Warte nur ein Weilchen,  
Bald kommt der schwarze Mann zu dir,  
Mit dem kleinen Hackebeilchen,  
Macht er Schabefleisch aus dir.”

Fritz Lang’s first sound film *M* (1931) famously features this popular rhyme in its opening sequence as a group of children recite it in a game of elimination — when the song stops one of the children is pushed out of the circle. The popular verse was well-known at the time of the film’s release and referred to a run of serial murders that ignited public interest in the months leading up to the film premier. It has since been identified as an emblem of the Weimar obsession with sexual murder, a suggestion of the means through which popular culture creates its own demons, and an indicator of the extent to which music harbored suggestive powers. A mother yells at the children from a distant balcony, to “stop singing that awful song!” She realizes, according to Gunning, that with their game the children “in their innocence call up this figure who destroys them.” Thus, the film introduces the urban masses as modern subjects whose pursuit of pleasure perpetuates the darkness of the song’s content. Like the children with their chant, the city in *M* seizes the story of a child murderer and propagates the terror it excites via modern media.

Taking full advantage of that media, *M* also provides one of the most vivid examples of a sound film rendered in the spirit of New Objectivity. Its promotional material foregrounds its engagement with the style by including statements from legal counsel and police officials that explicitly tie the film to the controversial proceedings against the serial killer, Fritz Haarmann, who faced sentencing around the time the film was released. Scholars have cited these materials to suggest the film’s claims to contemporaneity, but the aesthetic of the material has yet to be fully examined. In this section of my chapter, I will look more closely at *M* and the marketing materials executed to promote its German premier. As we will see they deploy trends in modern design to emphasize the film’s objective stance.

91 “Just you wait a little while, the black man will soon come to you, with his little carving knife, he’ll make mincemeat out of you.” Translation mine. Opening verse, Fritz Lang, *M*, 1931.


93 Gunning writes that the children “have a bond with the schwarze Mann, as they do with all monsters,” and that Beckert is in many respects a childlike figure himself. Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang*, 172-3.
toward its story. These materials simultaneously suggest the ambition of the film to incorporate interesting visuals alongside a sound track without diminishing the potency of photography; for, with the coming of sound, many critics feared that the potential for film art had been lost. As I will show, the film employs the caustic perspective of New Objectivity to bring aural and visual mass media under interrogation. Already in the opening credits, the film announces the poster as a central subject of discernment.

“Nero-Film zeigt . . .” reads the credit image that opens M. Behind the sans serif title of the production company the bust of the Roman emperor rises through the black background like a stony relief (Fig. 4.21). The production company was always announced in the opening credits, as per convention, but rarely in exactly the same manner. Here, the announcement uses the logo as it appeared on all the poster materials that circulated for Nero’s films. Stylistically adapting an emblem of art historical mastery (the Roman bust) to reflect modern aesthetics — the elongated neck and shortened facial features are reminiscent of Marc Chagall’s floating figures — the maker’s mark evokes the thousands of graphic prints that bore it while carrying with it the reputation of the production company. Artistically more ambitious though somewhat smaller than UFA, Nero-Film created some of the most critically acclaimed films of the later Weimar period under the direction of producer Seymour Nebenzahl. The capitalized, straight, and unadorned type in the credit portends a modern production simultaneously recalling the geometric exactitude of a chiseled Roman alphabet. Elements of visual design that carried implications of a leaning toward the emblematic thus introduce the film.

Suddenly the bust is replaced by a flat graphic depiction of an outstretched palm (Fig. 4.22). Extending upward from the bottom right of the screen, the hand reveals the glowing inscription, “M,”

94 Arnheim stated under no uncertain terms: “The introduction of sound film must be considered as the imposition of a technical novelty that did not lie on the path the best film artists were pursuing. They were engaged in working out an explicit and pure style of film, using its restrictions to transform the peep show into an art. The introduction of sound film smashed many of the forms that the film artists were using in favor of the inartistic demand for the greatest possible ‘naturalism.'” Arnheim, Film as Art, 154. See also: Hagener, Moving Forward, Looking Back, 19-22.

underneath its slightly curling fingers. The sharp angles and diagonal positioning stand in contrast to the balanced symmetry of the logo that preceded it. The canted background indicates speed while the abstracting angularities make the hand appear as if it had conversely been crystalized in time. For six long seconds the palm remains on the screen undulating slightly with the movement of the film strip through the projector, until the film cuts to a square composition announcing the directorial billing: A Fritz Lang Film, in lettering reminiscent of the earlier title (Fig. 4.23). The sturdy block of text fades into fathomless black before it resounds with the convocational tones of a gong. The film announces its application of both visual text and sound, and only after the vibration fades to silence, does the story open with the children’s song penetrating the darkness. Their game has begun.

Like the many posters that served as transitional objects leading patrons form the street into the decorated theater, this opening sequence guides the audience into the film. As Gunning writes, the opening announces, “We are in the liminal space that introduces nearly every film, the credits which serve, to use Gerard Genette’s term, as a paratext, the boundary between the text and the world surrounding it, and which acknowledge that the fictional world we are about to see was made, produced by a number of people whose names now appear before us.” This opening, however, is unique in that it seems to emphasize its role as paratext by directly evoking poster aesthetic. The jagged depiction of the upraised hand emulates graphic art, straddling that line between Expressionism and New Objectivity which characterized many of

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the ambitious film projects of the era, such as Lang’s own *Metropolis* in the previous decade. The use of the actual stamp that would have been used on posters for crediting the studio and the square, planar arrangement of “A Fritz Lang Film” supports the evocation of poster aesthetic. Thus the credit announces its own paratextual significance well before the film will reveal the importance of the emblazoned palm for the narrative arch of the story. Here it is representative of Lang’s conscientious engagement with mass media in both image and sound in this film.96

Often audiences look directly past such opening credits, as they have become a conventional aspect of the film text. However, the striking imagery of this particular sequence has attracted some scholarly attention.97 Gunning opens his study of Lang’s film with a reading of the upraised hand as an emblem of Lang’s artistry, a mark of his directorial authority. The anecdote that Lang supposedly included shots of his own hands in the film supports Gunning’s reading. However, the hand also suggests the turmoil of the social context in which the film was introduced. According to Gunning the hand, “displays itself, a hand raised, in a gesture of supplication or surrender. It recalls the convulsed and deformed hands of German Expressionist paintings and graphics; its gesture speaks of suffering, as if the letter inscribed on it were a wound, an insignia branded on the palm like an archaic punishment.”98 Presented in this way, the title retains the self-indicting, paranoia-inducing tenor of the film’s working title: “Mörder unter uns,” *Murderers Among Us.* According to Kaes, the title may have been modified to avoid alluding to political killings carried out by members of the National Socialist party in the months leading up to the premier.99 The new title as announced here maintains an enigmatic distance from its audience, inviting them to ponder its significance. As in the spirit of Epic Theater, Kaes points out, the film turned viewers “into private eyes, looking for clues and registering contradictions between word and image.”100 However,

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96 Scholarly analyses of the hand by Koepnick and Gunning provide varying illustrations of the graphic — in Gunning’s the hand appears to reach from right to left instead of left to right and to feature a darkened “M” rather than the light-infused white M as it appears in the DVD release from Criterion Collection. *This image was used as a poster advertisement for the Paramount release of M.*


99 Kaes, 16-17.

100 Kaes, 24.
the upraised hand here poses far more questions than it answers. Whose hand is this? Does the M mark it as the hand of the murderer, the victim, the accuser?

By submitting such inquiries, the raised hand operates somewhat like a cinematic closeup as described by Arnheim. As he explains, opening a sequence with the enlarged depiction of a single object was a key method of crafting suspense: “a gradual revelation starting from the detail is much more exciting, seizes the spectator’s interest much more than if the whole scene were given at once.”

As a keystone for the development of the film that it precedes, the graphic hand offers more than a promotional calling card; it becomes the very genesis of the narrative that follows. Thus, Lutz Koepnick’s description of the hand as “charged with the power to impart life to inanimate matter, to tear down the old and manufacture startling structures from scratch” appears particularly apt. The graphic hand gives way to a film that dwells repeatedly on closeups of hands and the objects that they hold (Figs. 4.24-27). The fatherly detective Lohmann’s hands are featured as he flips through investigative reports. The gloved hand of the crime boss is pictured closing over a map of the city as he plans a criminal-run surveillance of its streets and alleyways. The pudgy digits of the murderer, Beckert, brilliantly played by Peter Lorre are shown peeling the flesh from an orange before a potential victim. Finally, when Beckert is singled out by a blind balloon seller, the hand of a fellow citizen is produced on the screen marking his palm in white chalk with the letter: M, the same mark that he will transfer to Beckert’s shoulder, identifying the killer to his pursuers.

Kaes has suggested that Lang’s use of closeups in the film follows Béla Balázs’s understanding of the device as an opportunity for audiences to “read gestures and facial and body movements as means

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101 Arnheim, *Film as Art*, 80.

of unlocking a character’s inner secrets and rediscovering the human face in all its expressiveness.”  

Lang’s penetrating depiction of the single appendage likewise corresponded to the film’s overall interest in “reportage and realistic detail” that aligned it with the films of New Objectivity. As Misch Orend wrote in 1928, with New Objectivity “the deadest, most useless thing is capable of suddenly emanating this great force lying within it, of making it palpable while remaining nonetheless the dead and useless thing that it was. Here any given stone or a scarecrow can have the same relation to universal being as a human being or an animal.” Each hand, like each minute trace left behind in a crime scene may uncover the whole mystifying riddle tormenting the city. By singling out the individual object for observation, the closeup elevates that object, treats it, according to Balázs, with “an element of tenderness.”

We can see how this attitude owes something to the perception of photographic realism as advocated for by Tschichold and his contemporaries. This focused gaze toward a physical object suggests the singularly empirical reflection of the camera lens. Correspondingly, in his Theory of Film, Kracauer would advocate for an understanding of the basis of film art in the origins of the photograph as a scientific tool. He explains that: “In its preoccupation with the small the cinema is comparable to science. Like science, it breaks down material phenomena into tiny particles, thereby sensitizing us to the tremendous energies accumulated in the microscopic configurations of matter.” Part of what makes the close-up so astounding, in Kracauer’s reading, is its sheer size, the gross enlargement of elements that cannot be perceived by the naked eye. Again the writing of Fernand Léger comes into play when Kracauer insists that “only film is equipped to sensitize us, by way of big closeups, to the possibilities that lie dormant in a hat, a chair, a hand, and a foot.” In making these miniature worlds discernible, however, the scientific quality of the film imagery gives way to magical revelation. As Balázs writes, “the

103 Kaes, M, 19.
104 Ibid., 36.
105 Orend, “Magical Realism,” 494.
106 Balázs, Early Film Theory, 39.
107 “Is it really surprising that a medium so greatly indebted to nineteenth-century concern for science should show characteristics inherent in the scientific approach?” Kracauer, Theory of Film, 50.
108 Ibid., 50.
109 Ibid., 45.
magnifying glass of the film camera will show you your shadow on the wall, something you live with without noticing it.”

Like a potion labeled, “Drink Me,” the film alters our sense of scale, allowing us a concentrated look at a world that exists undiscovered alongside our own.

This quasi-mystical interest in the objects of every day life had a commercial equivalent in the poster. The very object poster that materialized in the turn-of-the-century Plakatbewegung provided the first conventional means of applying attention to the little acknowledged products of consumer culture. Their bold color blocks quivered with life relishing their wares with the pronounced “element of tenderness” also prevalent in the closeup. These posters encouraged viewers to imbue commercial material with cosmic significance, suggesting an inner life that could be aligned with any number of desirable associations: craftsmanship, quality, humility, or — more subconsciously: belonging, freedom, power.

New Objectivity, by contrast, often used the same tactics to forge a negative association with the image. The style showed how an object could just as easily serve as an insignia of fear, shame, and suspicion. In this manner, the poster image opening Lang’s film takes an object that remains a constant in the periphery of everyone’s day, the hand, and imbues it with simultaneous assertions of guilt and accusation.

The image of this imprinted palm was repeated endlessly on other promotional materials for the film, the Film-Kurier illustrated edition that preceded the premier, the invitation to that gala event, as well as in the poster advertisement that decorated street corners. Imposed in a chalky outline over a photographic reproduction of the kangaroo court composed of criminals and citizens that try Beckert in their underground chamber, the ghostly palm asserts the dominion of the graphic reality over the world of the film (Fig. 4.28).

In the Film-Kurier the red M brands the crowd assembled behind its jagged peaks, but the hand itself suggests the influence of an authoring presence. Repeated on the inside of the

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110 Balázs, Early Film Theory, 38.

111 The Film-Kurier is also at Deutsche Kinemathek Schriftgut Archiv, Berlin.
booklet, the hand is reproduced in white under the announcement: “A Fritz Lang Film der Nero” as if it is asserting Lang’s control over the figures that are barely visible underneath (Fig. 4.29). Above, another shot of the hand is covered with montage elements from the film and a photograph of Beckert’s victim. The director, these images suggest, has the power to reveal “die lebendigste Aufklärung über die Gefahren so gerarteter Verbrechen” and also to conceal and control them.\footnote{112}

The emphasis on directorial billing that the hand provides is reinforced by the hand’s allusion to photographic experiments being carried out by the avant-garde. These images often featured the artist’s own hand, highlighting the role of the creator and craftsman behind the work, as does Moholy-Nagy’s photogram from 1926 (Fig. 4.30). The piece, created by laying objects (a paintbrush, wired objects suggestive of musical bars, and the photographer’s palm) onto a sheet of photographic paper while exposing it to light, suggests the aesthetic potential of using photographic processes.\footnote{113} These implications were a significant testament to the artistic aims of the film, particularly in light of its use of sound. Though the booklet effuses, “Tatsachen werden gezeigt durch den Tonfilm, das sinnfälligste Ausdrucksmedium unserer Zeit,” many believed that the realism inherent in sound threatened the artistic value of the cinema.\footnote{114} Arnheim tirelessly defamed sound as the “victory of Waxmuseum ideals over creative art.”\footnote{115} Balázs too called the coming of sound a catastrophe for film art, but more moderately predicted that despite the set-back it entailed, sound would

\footnote{112} “the most life-like explanation of the events surrounding such crimes.” Translation mine. “Der Film zeigt,” see figure 4.29.


\footnote{114} “Facts are presented through the sound film, the most direct expressive medium of our time.” Translation mine. “Der Film zeigt,” see figure 4.29. See also Koepnick, “3 June 1929,” 197-201.

\footnote{115} Arnheim, \textit{Film as Art}, 154.
eventually be made as expressive as film. With its omnipotent hands, the *Film-Kurier* suggests the film’s relationship with the high modernist applications of the photograph, contradicting such concerns about the coming of sound and reasserting film’s singular ability to craft a realistic depiction of the events surrounding the manhunt. By alluding to Moholy-Nagy, the imagery maintains the modern assessment that functional indexicality fulfills the task inherent in the medium of the cinema, while the hand forcibly inscribes the image with the presence of the craftsperson behind the camera. By foregrounding the relationship of the film to other medium-specific experiments in high art, the promotional materials thus insisted on the aesthetic value of Lang’s film.

The hand also accrues symbolic meaning from other sources as well, having figured quite frequently in posters intertwined with avant-garde experimentation. For instance, John Heartfield’s famous poster from May 1928 in support of the communist party entitled “5 Finger hat die Hand” calls its viewer to action by embodying the power of the working class in each of its stalwart, clutching fingers (Fig. 4.31). As Jochen Becker has suggested, “hands” were indicative of autonomous action as well as indicators of personality and physiognomy as individual as that of the face. The new science of finger-printing, also featured in Lang’s film, reinforced the notion of the hand’s psychological importance. An enlarged version of a fingerprint is shown projected on the wall of a darkened room, a magnifying glass glides over a set of fingerprint records. In the film, fingerprint records are mapped for traces that would lead to the identity of the murderer but, tellingly, the record shown is incomplete (Fig. 4.33). The criminal who produced it

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118 Kaes points to these instances as evidence of the film’s engagement with contemporary surveillance technology. Kaes, *M*, 48.
“Vier-Finger-Ernst,” is missing a digit, suggesting the inability to compose a complete personality profile through even the most sophisticated forensic methods. Lang’s film thereby emphasizes the holes in such empirical portraiture, but affirms the emblematic meaning of the hand that made it the subject of photographic and painterly works throughout the 1920s. The striking poster designed by an anonymous artist for *M* also employs this symbolism.

The poster provides an imposing example of the hyper-real imagery in painterly New Objectivity and the resurgence of *Sachplakat* aesthetic (Fig. 4.32). Where the hand opening Lang’s film is graphic, flattened and architectural, this one is grotesquely organic. The wrinkled pads of the flesh appear to be on the verge of molting, rotting off the strained tendons of the hand. The hand emulates the portraiture of Otto Dix, who reached the height of his socio-critical work by painting “heads, penetratingly and convincingly, flesh in action with inflated muscles.” In its masterful contrast of dark and light, the poster reinterprets the color-blocking of Bernhard’s aesthetic. The telling lines of the palm are intensified to catch the eye of the hurried viewer. Meanwhile, the artist simulates a kind of high-key lighting effect on the right side of the palm so that this heavy shading does not cause it to recede into the background of the poster. Its outline is exact, prominent, and forceful. The red letter is perfectly centered, a contrast in composition to the natural flex of the hand caught mid-gesture and lends the momentary framing here an uncanny inevitability. Message and image are seamlessly interwoven. As in a closeup: “Isolated from the rest of the body and greatly enlarged, the hands we know will change into unknown organisms quivering with a life of their own.”

Perhaps then, the most striking aspect of this illustration is the angle and shape of the hand itself. From the leading position of the thumb knuckle to the slight curvature of the middle and ring

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119 Einstein, “Otto Dix,” 491. Dix’s *Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden* (1926) provides an example of Dix’s biting realism, also incidentally featuring very expressive hands as well, that has been singled out as a key image of New Objectivity in painting.

fingertips, the gesture corresponds exactly to the muscular strain of turning one’s own hand over. The artist gives us an image of a palm revealed to its owner. Similarly, through the omniscient camera that fluidly traverses divisions between murderer, victim, detective, and witness, the film uses these hands to emphasize a play with our own subjectivity. *M*, as all film does, according to Balázs, “shows you what your hand is doing, though normally you take no notice when it strokes someone or hits out at them.”

As we take position behind the camera, the hands in front become our own.

All of these hand images blend together to blur the lines between the assumed properties of each medium. The indexical reality of the photograph is troubled by the allusion to the artistic photogram, the graphic image of the poster over-asserts its realism to the point of mutilation. Conversely, the graphic image from the introductory titles of Lang’s film, shows a poster-hand with the inorganic quality of the machine. Seeming at once Expressionist and New Objectivist, the hand, according to Koepnick “strikes the viewer as an artificial limb taking on the uncanny function of the living, or conversely, as a human extremity charged with the strength of a robotic apparatus.”

The fluctuation between media suggest the blending of organic and inorganic material that constituted the self-conception of industrialized Germany. In this respect the hand carries forward allusions to the broken body of the veteran that Kaes traced through the *Hands of Orlac*, and Rotwang’s mechanical hand in *Metropolis*. These motifs underline a widespread anxiety about technological forces that threatened to supersede human intervention or control.

The poster, in fact, operates as its own modern prosthetic device in Lang’s film, standing in for pre-industrial forms of communication and market exchange. In the absence of personal human interaction, the poster emerges to create a false sense of community. We see the poster supplementing

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121 Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, 38.

122 Dada and futurist artists often explored their interest in the technologization of society by blending machine and organic matter in their work. For more on these Avant-Garde automatons, see Gaughan, “The Prosthetic Body,” 137-55; Brio, *The Dada Cyborg*, 206-39.


community formation, for instance, as a crowd gathers around the announcement of the latest murder posted on a wall of public advertisements on the street (Fig. 4.34). As Kaes argues, the wall of advertisements equates entertainment with the news of the murder: “Reading about the child murderer on the police poster gives the crowd a curious rush; they cannot get enough.”

Though the image shows us the crowd gathered together, united in their interest in the poster, in fact, the sound track reveals that they are arguing, straining against one another to get a closer look. What appears as unified mass of people, is a divided, suspicious mob. Kaes tracks the increasing hysteria through the rest of the sequence, ultimately arguing that the film begins to question, in fact, whether or not the press and technologically produced publicity have had a hand in creating the monster. As Kaes maintains, “Lang probes the status and function of visual communication in a modern urban environment which is dominated by an insatiable hunger for news and information.”

In this depiction of mass society, the poster figures prominently as a disseminator of information but also of fear and suspicion. It even, according to Kaes, conjures memories of the Great War — as in one shot where a father walks his daughter past the posters for Westfront 1918, Pabst’s film of the previous year. Of course, the famous shot of Beckert’s shadow cast against a poster asking “who is the murderer?” provides the most explicit suggestion of the poster’s tragic ineptitude (Fig. 4.35). Though the poster stands watch while Beckert approaches his victim, it cannot see him or reveal his presence to the city. It cannot even reveal the killer to us as the audience; for we never see his face in this opening sequence. Instead the poster only triggers our own apprehension for the young girl we know is playing innocently before the advertising column. Our anticipation of the murder, too, is kindled.

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125 Kaes, M, 39.
126 Ibid., 36.
127 Ibid., 41.
Lang’s evocation of mass communication extends from the visual to the aural field as well. A poster image opens Lang’s film, but the gong that follows replicates the sound that introduced news reports in radio programs during that time. Over the course of the film both sound and image must be monitored to track down Beckert, and as others have suggested, sound and image sometimes give conflicting representations of scenes in the film. The crowd as depicted before the poster, for instance, may seem a cohesive group, but Kaes points out that the soundtrack reveals their bickering and jockeying for position in front of the poster. Others have suggested that Lang’s film stages a competition between the revelatory and communicative properties of sound and image. In Todd Herzog’s analysis of the film the competing investigations of the criminal ring and the police force map onto surveillance through sound and sight. Ultimately the criminal ring is successful because they rely on aural rather than visual clues to nab Beckert — thus a blind man identifies him by his compulsive whistling.

However, neither sight nor sound are left unscathed in this portrait of modern life. The tension that Lang creates between sound and image as posed in the shot of the crowd before the poster attests to the likely gaps in information perpetuated by mass media and intensifies divisions among the assembled group. Like the children playing their game of singing and pointing to the one who’s out, the crowd demands both to see and hear the grim report.

One reviewer who praised the sound engineering in the film nonetheless took the censor and the script writer Thea von Harbou to task for the film’s crude content. He remarked: “Das Kinderlied von ‘Haarmann, he’ll soon come with his carving knife and make mince meat out of you’ is certainly crude vulgarity, if nothing more. Where was the censor if no one was around during production to question Ms. von Harbou about it?” The children’s song demonstrates how sound serves the masses’ hunger for sensation, a desire that is fueled and perhaps

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130 Ibid., 301.
131 “The children’s song ‘Haarmann, he’ll soon come with his carving knife and make mince meat out of you’ is certainly crude vulgarity, if nothing more. Where was the censor if no one was around during production to question Ms. von Harbou about it?” Translation mine. “M,” Deutsche Filmzeitung München, 9.
even engendered by the visual advertisement. The poster in this film is not a source of pure entertainment or enlightenment, but a divisive force, which generates chaos and suspicion in the city.

4.4 THE PHOTOGRAPH WITHOUT CAPTION

Das Lichtspiel wird, endlich, zur Waffe im Kulturkampf.
— Hans Feld, on Lang’s M

M provoked a divisive response at the time of its release. The technical aspects of the film, cinematography and sound, were received largely with enthusiasm, but the heavy allusions to the grisly murders still saturating headlines garnered a number of negative reviews. Though the film appears to criticize the propagation of paranoia through modern media (posters, the press, and radio), many viewers remarked that the film pandered to the same appetite for agitation that enraptured the crowds on-screen. “Eine skrupellose Spekulation auf die grössten Instinkte des Publikums,” the film exploited contemporary events for entertainment purposes. The competition between the criminal gang and the police force to apprehend Beckert was said to have glorified the organized crime rings operating in Berlin. As one reviewer asked, “Welche Achtzehnjährigen werden nicht begeistert sein von solchen Gestalten der Unterwelt, die als edle Helden geschildert werden?” The day after M’s premier there was a public debate over the use of the death penalty, a contentious issue with which reviewers saw the film in conversation. However, while one responder despaired over Lorre’s sympathetic portrayal of a palsied criminal enslaved to his own horrific urges, Goebbels’s diary of May 21 exclaimed, “Fantastic! Against humanitarian sentimentality. For the death penalty. Well made. Lang will be our director one day.”


135 “What eighteen-year-old wouldn’t be enthused about such figures of the underworld, portrayed as the noble heroes of the story?” Translation mine. Fock, “Kunst oder Hintertreppe?” 780.

136 Kaes, M, 73.

137 Demming, “Der Gral,” n.p.; Goebbels qtd. in Kaes, M, 73.
ideological leaning of the film appears to have been based largely on the preconceived ideas of respective viewers. Laying a plethora of evidence relating to a complex social issue before the camera, the film provides its fodder in a New Objective manner with the audience compelled to act as jury. However, as the enigmatic marking “M” in the advertisements emphasized, who was to be accused remained unclear.\(^{138}\)

Commended by the Nazi propaganda minister on its release only to be banned and ridiculed by the party later, \(M\)’s slippery politics correspond to criticism made against New Objectivity more broadly. Benjamin argued that although the style’s convergence on everyday reality wielded a revolutionary energy in the hands of Dada artists, destroying divisions between art and popular culture, such work ultimately elevated the ugly aspects of modern life to the point that viewers became inured to their impact.\(^{139}\) As he writes,

Still lifes put together from tickets, spools of cotton, cigarette butts, that were linked with painted elements. The whole thing was put in a frame. And thereby the public was shown: look, your picture frame ruptures time; the tiniest authentic fragment of daily life says more than painting. Just as the bloody fingerprint of a murderer on the page of a book says more than the text. [ . . . ] But now follow the path of photography further. What do you see? It becomes ever more nuance, ever more modern, and the result is that it can no longer depict a tenement block or a refuse heap without transfiguring it. It goes without saying that photography is unable to say anything about a power station or a cable factory other than this: what a beautiful world! [. . . New Objectivity] has succeeded in transforming even abject poverty, by recording it in a fashionably perfected manner into an object of enjoyment.\(^{140}\)

The raw depictions of previously invisible detritus of life had become so ubiquitous that they no longer elicited any response in the viewer. Still worse, the photograph beautified the tragedy and violence of life, making it consumable along with tobacco and champagne. “What a beautiful world,” as Benjamin mentions, was a direct reference to the title of a collection of photographs by Albert Renger-Patzsch published in 1928 that featured mundane objects from nature and material life photographed in extreme detail. Benjamin’s objection that the photographs related nothing but aesthetic pleasure has been

\(^{138}\) See Sarah Hall on the public debate that \(M\) roused and the way it was used as a part of the advertising strategy in the Film-Kurier. Hall, “11 May 1931,” 228-9.

\(^{139}\) The contentious reactions to images and objects reappropriated into art and ‘sacred’ art spaces continues to inspire social and critical response. See Mitchell, What Do Pictures Want?, 125-44.

\(^{140}\) Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” 229-30. Benjamin writes that in New Objective literature the text goes even further and makes the “struggle against poverty an object of consumption.” Ibid., 232.
challenged, but his analysis of the greater problem of New Objectivity remains significant for its demands that such imagery take responsibility for its political reception.\textsuperscript{141}

Kracauer leveled a similar criticism against Walther Ruttmann's \textit{Berlin}. Though he recognized the film as “the only attempt [among filmmakers] to break away from the common production fare,” the lack of a clear political message left the experiment socially mute:

Instead of penetrating its enormous object in a way that would betray a true understanding of its social, economic, and political structure, and instead of observing it with human concern or even tackling it from a particular vantage point in order to resolutely take it apart, Ruttmann leaves the thousands of details unconnected, one next to the other, inserting at most some arbitrarily conceived transitions that are meaningless.\textsuperscript{142}

Though he recognized the formal elements of montage that were used to connect the scenes of \textit{Berlin}, Kracauer argued that they did not clearly define the actual structures undergirding the system.

Ruttmann’s faithful dedication to the aesthetic properties of the image, in this estimation, were profoundly misplaced. A number of critics have taken issue with Kracauer’s position by pointing out the economic disparities that \textit{Berlin} displays, suggesting that these do portend a critical edge. However, even the famous suicide scene, a moment of rare contrivance in the middle of the documentary montage, could be read as a response to the aesthetic oppression of the city in need of the cinema’s organizing principles rather than a criticism of economic and social disparity. As Alter implies, it could also represent an attempt to illustrate the inevitable decline of lingering “bombast and passion of expressionism,” which she sees embodied in the suicidal jumper.\textsuperscript{143} Like the evidence brought forward in Lang’s \textit{M}, Ruttmann’s mute images could be read variously.

The problem that Benjamin and Kracauer identify with New Objectivity seems, like the style itself, to be a reflection of photography’s perceived authenticity. While New Objectivity no longer questioned the artistry of the photographer, it also demanded him or her to perform as a mechanical device. It supported the notion that only adopting the sober view of the lens could a photographer, or indeed any artist working in the photographic age, hope to remain relevant. In fact, Benjamin also encourages this medium-specific

\textsuperscript{141} See Magilow, \textit{The Photography of Crisis}, especially 63-91.

\textsuperscript{142} Kracauer, “Film 1928,” 318.

\textsuperscript{143} Alter, \textit{Berlin, Symphony of a Great City}, 211.
use of the camera in his “Little History of Photography,” criticizing those staging and mechanical tricks that photographers sometimes employed to make the photograph emulate a painting. He preferred Eugène Atget’s documentary photographs of the bare streets of Paris or, better yet, August Sander’s socio-archival portraits of the working class. The photograph’s fidelity to discernible reality was its recognizable strength, and yet it was far too easily misapprehended by the viewer. Benjamin therefore argued for the necessity of a caption:

The camera is getting smaller and smaller, ever readier to capture fleeting and secret images whose shock effect paralyzes the associative mechanisms in the beholder. This is where inscription must come into play, which includes the photography of the literarization of the conditions of life, and without which all photographic construction must remain arrested in the approximate. It is no accident that Atget’s photographs have been likened to those of a crime scene. But isn’t every square inch of our cities a crime scene? Every passer-by a culprit? Isn’t it the task of the photographer—descendant of the augurs and haruspices—to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures? ‘The illiteracy of the future,’ someone has said, ‘will be ignorance not of reading and writing, but of photography.’ But shouldn’t a photographer who cannot read his own pictures be no less accounted an illiterate? Won’t inscription become the most important part of the photograph?  

Both pervasive and potent, the photographic image as Benjamin describes it here has the power to incite the critical mind to action, but fails to suggest in which direction that action should move. The image remains illegible to its viewer. Benjamin recognizes what would become increasingly clear in the course of the twentieth century, that photographs with their uncanny ability to “bear away our faith,” as Andre Bazin described it, would easily hoodwink the viewer.  

To guard against misdirection, the mechanically produced image required mediation on the part of the photographer. This intervention could come in the form of a literary counterpart which would make the photograph comprehensible once more. And yet Benjamin’s proposition comes to us in the form of a repeated question and follows his statement that “the lessons inherent in the authenticity of the photograph [. . . ] cannot be forever circumvented by a commentary whose cliches merely establish verbal associations in the viewer.”  

Benjamin seems to be intuiting that the literary cannot quite compete with influence of the photograph image. To be effective,

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145 Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” 162.
perhaps the caption must be as enthralling, as direct and immediate in imparting its message as the photograph appears to be.

The poster, acting as intermediary between audience and maker, was the closest actual approximation to an effective “caption” for film art. Tschichold’s posters appear to follow this logic, providing not a literary but a visual caption to the photographic images representing film. Though they lacked an overt ideological message, the posters accomplish a great deal merely by presenting the photographic film stills in such a way that the work of the photographer’s hand comes to the forefront. Laying bare the aim of the film to create an illusion, to entertain its viewer with humor, to offer a world that is only an imaginary approximation of one’s own, the poster reveals the fantastic in the indexical image. Moreover, Tschichold’s designs openly assert the aim inherent to all film posters, to introduce the film as both an artwork (of greater or lesser value) and a product of exchange on the open market. The poster, by its very nature, cannot conceal its economic status. In this respect, the interpretive potential of all film posters becomes apparent. The film poster harbored an opportunity for the artwork to admit its own restrictions even as it asserted the work’s greatest ambitions. The ideal film poster could operate as the caption for the New Objective film, highlighting the flexibility of photographic images to represent alternate realities and to serve multiple political and social convictions. It is only when the poster takes on the semblance of truth itself that it obscures its material reality in a foggy aura of authenticity, much the way that Benjamin argued Jugendstil had done leading up to the first World War.¹⁴⁷

Benjamin’s criticism of New Objectivity reflects on some of the same issues of media communication that Lang’s film both employs to build suspense and places under a discerning gaze. Even if voiced in less sophisticated terms than in Benjamin’s analysis, the press reviews of M suggest similar misgivings. No matter how detailed its evidence, according to many viewers, the film did not sufficiently guide viewers to a particular response. And yet it was precisely the revelation of such ambiguity that formed the basis of the film’s critique. Although a detailed and vigorous scientific search of the city eventually produces the murderer, the investigation cannot contain Lorre’s desperate pleas for compassion before the court of criminals. Nor can the results of the search return the lost children to their

¹⁴⁷ Benjamin, Arcades, 557.
mothers who, fairly or unfairly, bear their own burden of guilt, as the final shot of the film emphasizes. The film troubles the notion that either mechanical record of sight or sound reliably represents reality in all of its complexities. As a part of this critique of mass media, Lang’s representation of the role of the poster in society differs markedly from that which we saw articulated in Paul Leni’s *Das Wachfigurenkabinett* where poster aesthetic offered a release for pent up anxiety by encouraging the imagination to play within the ambiguous space between representation and reality. Nonetheless, both films starting from different vantage points ask the audience to question their role as consumers and producers of mass entertainment.

Benjamin saw no such critical potential in the aesthetic turns of either New Objectivity or Expressionism. In his view, both were iterations on the same attempt by the bourgeoisie to aestheticize and anesthetize the war experience. He writes,

> Expressionism is the mimicry of revolutionary gesture without any revolutionary foundation. In Germany it was overcome only through a change of fashion, not as the result of criticism. This is why all its perversions have managed to survive in a different form in the New Objectivity, which succeeded it. Both movements base their solidarity on their efforts to come to terms with the experience of the war from the standpoint of the bourgeoisie. Expressionism attempts this in the name of humanity; subsequently this was done in the name of objectivity. The works of the latest German writers are milestones on a road from which a left or a right turn can be taken at any moment.  

Each having become the status quo in its own time, both Expressionism and New Objectivity merely deflected attention from political reality, which they either retreated from in the former or only ostensibly engaged in the latter. His juxtaposition of both movements in this essay reveals an ongoing criticism of consumer culture, whereby the aestheticized reality allowed its public to believe it was enlightened and revolutionary, when in fact it merely maintained a stratified, exploitative social structure. Following these trends, design for Benjamin remained “the sensation of the newest and most modern” which covered the “eternal return of the same.” Advertised became “the ruse by which the dream forces itself on industry.”

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149 Benjamin describes this phenomenon in regards to Jugendstil but implies its application to all manifestations of fashion that distract from political reality. Benjamin, Arcades, 546.

150 Benjamin, Arcades, 171.
Despite the ambitions of the Bauhaus, the film poster did indeed appear to be paving a path into a dream world in the final years of the Republic. Under increasing social and political constraints film and advertisement looked to Hollywood for models of escapism.\(^{151}\)

Increasingly, German movie-going in the 1930s became characterized by Ufa’s many musical comedies and light features that highlighted sound and brought audiences access to the jazz and popular music performances that radio programming only rarely provided. On the one hand, these musical feature films shared the tendency to disrupt narrative flow and realism in much the same way that their American counterparts did. On the other, they produced a kind of gilded realism that situated movie-going squarely in the realm of entertainment.\(^{152}\)

Correspondingly, the prominent sound film aesthetic in film posters was based on illustrative drawings of photographic likenesses, reproduced in color with warm, sunlit tones. Matejko’s poster for the 1932 musical sound film *Quick* (Robert Siodmack) provides an accurate representation of what was becoming the standard film poster style, a Hollywood “look” that is still recognizable as such to this day (Fig. 4.36). As we can see, though bearing traces of his emphasis on movement, Matejko’s illustrative style here lacks its earlier spontaneity. The style trades the magical-quality of Fenneker’s ghostly chiaroscuro for a star-glorifying emulation of high-key lighting. Set in saturated colors, the image of the star became a paramount feature of the poster field once more. (In Matejko’s poster the male star Hans Albers is pictured not once — but twice!)

As the political situation in Germany worsened, these images became more tacit in their engagement with controversial content. Astoundingly, even the vampy Marlene Dietrich as star of Joseph von Sternberg’s *Der Blaue Engel* (1930) was depicted as an apple-cheeked bride in a Berlin

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\(^{151}\) Koepnick, “3 June 1929,” 200.

\(^{152}\) See Kapczynski on Lillian Harvey musical numbers and her dance numbers as a mode of disruption, “Still Motion: Dance and Stasis in the Weimar Operetta Film,” 293-310.
advertisement for the film (Fig. 4.37). Other promotional materials more closely corresponded to the film, but none of them embodied its bawdy energy.\(^{153}\) Thus, even in the increasingly rare instances in which films did include controversial material, posters consistently downplayed those aspects.

Where the film industry began to shy away from overtly political content and Benjamin and Kracauer ever more fervently demanded political activism from aesthetics, the ostensibly left-leaning Bauhaus theoreticians staunchly resisted the assumption that design must support any political viewpoint. Instead, they argued that design, as pure functionality, was beyond rhetoric, nationality, or any social affiliation. This position, however, implied a utopian belief that design would level society and class distinctions.

As Moholy-Nagy wrote, “Constructivism is neither proletariat or capitalist. Constructivism is primordial, without class and without ancestor. It expresses the pure form of nature, the direct colour, the spatial element not distorted by utilitarian motifs. / The new world of the proletariat needs Constructivism; it needs fundamentals that are without deceit. Only the natural element accessible to all eyes is revolutionary.”\(^{154}\) The influence of Russian Constructivism on Bauhaus aesthetic intensified this revolutionary tenor. As a result, the school closed under pressure from the National Socialists in 1933. Many of the teachers and artists associated with the school emigrated, others adapted their styles to the new regime and continued to work under National Socialism. Tschichold was arrested and imprisoned for six weeks soon after the Nazi party took over. After his release he quickly left the country for Switzerland. There seems to have been little ambivalence among the Nazis as to the political affiliation of avant-garde style. The Nazi objection to the abstraction that had flourished during the Weimar Republic culminated in defamatory exhibits of abstract

\(^{153}\) In fact, the American versions of film posters now often outstripped those created in Germany in their sexual forwardness. There is more work to be done to compare posters in an international context. The German context of poster advertisement is specific to its own history of graphic design and particular interest in defending or troubling the boundaries of high and low art.

\(^{154}\) Moholy-Nagy, qtd. in Aynsely, *Graphic Design in Germany*, 99.
art that began in 1933 and the infamous traveling “Entartete Kunst” exhibit organized under Adolf Ziegler in 1937. In light of this stifling climate, Ruttman’s continued work in the film industry after 1933 has led to critical ambivalence toward his formalist aesthetics, which were adapted to suit multiple political leanings.

From Switzerland, Tschichold came to share Benjamin and Kracauer’s criticism of the mute politics of the New Objectivity and to reject his own earlier statements in The New Typography. He began to consider the rationalization of design as a precursor to Nazi efforts toward social and political homogenization. His most strident attack on the earlier design principles was published in 1946. Here he states that the New Typography’s “intolerant attitude certainly corresponds in particular to the German inclination to the absolute; its military will-to-order and its claim to sole power correspond to those fearful components of German-ness which unleashed Hitler’s rule and the Second World War.”

With slightly less zeal he maintained that the style had significant communicative downfalls; for instance that the rigidity and formulaic approach to typography and design did not dictate the meaning of the text with clarity as he had earlier argued. In his desire to identify universal principles of modern design, he admits to ignoring some basic communicative needs, among them, according to Tschichold, a reliance on convention: forms that had already achieved the aimed-for transparency through years of tradition and wear.

Such well-worn transparency was perhaps easier to achieve in book printing, the realm in which Tschichold worked after his exile. Poster art, arguably the most frequent subject of his earlier writing on the New Typography, did not lend itself so well to the designer’s turn-about on traditional design. In fact, Tschichold had already admitted in the twenties that his own style became stilted when it was allowed to embody too rigid a set of precepts in poster designs. He recognized that the poster form demanded novelty in order to capture the attention of viewers and to stand out among its neighbors. Thus, pure transparency had to be married to another element — either to the spectacular, the curious, the humorous, or otherwise engaging. The poster had to evoke a world in constant flux. Admittedly this

155 Tschichold qtd. in Kinross, “Introduction,” xxxviii.
156 Kinross, “Introduction,” xxxviii.
157 Aynsley, Graphic Design in Germany, 175.
demand meant that the visual advertisement easily became a propagator if not a slave to the cult of novelty, and yet during the Weimar Republic the poster remained an inherently unwieldy art form that, as we have seen, often resisted attachment to a single ideology or indeed single a style.
CONCLUSION

The User as Producer

5.1 Process

I held my breath when I unfolded Robert L. Leonard’s poster for *Sumurun* and saw the bright pink and yellow outlines of Lubitsch and Pola Negri hopping off the yellowed page. Like all film posters from the Weimar Republic, it had been printed on thin, cheap paper composed mostly of mechanical woodpulp, and now its flaky creases were turning to dust between my fingers. The poster was not intended for long-term collection, not expected to be mined for insights nearly 100 years after it had rolled off of its lithographic stone. Discomfited, I lay the broken paper out to its full size, beginning to question the ethics of my research. Was it fair to ask this piece of ephemera to speak for an industry, an art form, a culture when it so clearly wanted quietly to decompose? I was suddenly faced with the reality that asking the poster to speak in the present meant an inevitable amount of deterioration, not only of its very materiality but its intended impermanence. Poster collectors and designers had heralded the poster as an integral part of modern life with the potential to change the way that the masses communicated and related to their environment, but few may have guessed that the poster would or should be resurrected after four generations and asked to give an account of itself. Poster critics may have wanted the poster to engage with timeless elements that guided high art, but they nonetheless recognized the medium as one meant to exist only for a short time, to follow the trends of its era and then to be replaced or plastered over by tomorrow’s new graphic visions. Of course, for someone who has always delighted in overlooked relics, (I confess that as a child I once stole a loose cobblestone from a street because I loved to imagine all the people that had passed over it) this reality only makes the poster all the more compelling.

Also, I realize that to create something inevitably means a certain amount of destruction. I merely want to avoid being the elderly woman in Borja, Spain who ruined that Martinez fresco of Christ with her heartfelt attempt to “restore” it. After my encounter with the *Sumurun* poster, I felt relief working with digital
reproductions again. They are comparatively indestructible and therefore safe and tame in comparison to a paper original. Whether crouched over the peeling original or enlarging digital scans, I validated my efforts with my strong hunch that there was something there amid the rubble that would hold meaning and significance for the present and possibly for the future. I felt affirmed by Benjamin’s call for a kind of historical montage in which the task of the historian is “to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moments the crystal of the total event.”¹ I do not know that there is a complete, unifying gemstone to be unearthed in the film poster images of the Weimar Republic; they remain fragments and are somehow better understood that way, but the material that I had the opportunity to consider while working through this project has achieved a certain amount of insight for me that I hope will contribute to further investigation into media specificity and mass communication.

5.2 Findings

I set out on this investigation asking how media interacted with and borrowed from one another to make meaning. I saw that posters flaunted their use of block-style printing, but evoked the movement of a projected film strip with a painterly flair. Films included poster-like elements abstract and figurative in order to invigorate basic principles of two-dimensional composition with the magic of animation. In short, both employed those elements of their medium that were most specific and exciting, but rarely missed an opportunity to play with the effects more characteristic in others. Superseding any inherent meaning, their aesthetics of intermedial friction created a sense of energy and suspense. The fluid boundaries between media allowed for more possible combinations and effects. In turn, the multi-media displays that constituted movie-going encouraged audiences to stay attuned to variations. Counting the experience from the moment in which the viewer’s interest is piqued on the street corner by the colorful poster ad, the pleasure of cinematic spectatorship appears to have been consistently structured around watching shifts between varied media: still, graphic, photographic, moving image — as well as live cabaret, orchestral performances, and advertising “Trickfilme,” or animated films.

¹ Benjamin, Arcades, 461.
On the other hand, the intermedial dissonance on which I focused my study — between poster and film — did seem to suggest certain themes and intensify certain conflicts more than others. I came to the project aware of the long history of relating film images and photography to life and death. Still, I was surprised to see how often film and film posters engaged with pressing existential questions: how to live in an era that seemed to be saturated with reminders of death, how to understand the relationship between past and the present when political and social turmoil generated a context in constant flux. Still and moving imagery were explored independently, but also together as a means of both scientific and aesthetic experimentation to ask: what was it that fueled the difference in animate and inanimate? Could it teach the present about the past? Could it reveal the space between life and death, consciousness and unconscious? One sees Kaes’s readings of post-war trauma in Weimar film affirmed in film and poster art. More generally, film and posters of this period illustrate much broader questions regarding the mythical quality of image-making as argued vividly by film theorist Andre Bazin and explored more recently by visual culture historian W. J. T. Mitchell. Through images, they assert, we not only are given opportunities to see our living selves, but to view crystalized moments of the past and thereby contend with the permanence of death. Every generation must work through these fundamental questions of living; however, the technological advances in film, photography, and lithographic printing all offered enhanced possibilities for pursuing these questions anew at a period of time in which death was a pervasive presence for the majority of the population.

A pressing concern voiced repeatedly in the discourse surrounding the development of film and poster art throughout the Weimar Republic was of the need to develop a new form of communication that was more efficient and reliable and, most importantly, faster than those forms that had existed before. Resolutely, critics of both fields referenced speed as the dominating characteristic of modern life, one to which posters and art would have to correspond, and one that the cinema seemed uniquely to represent. Like Fenneker’s iconic tilt-a-whirl, the increased pace of modern life was recognized as both potentially pleasurable and potentially dangerous.\(^2\) Lutz Koepnick’s recent definition of slow modernism provides an important counterpoint to such pervading descriptors of technologized experience, unearthing an

aesthetic of speed in modernism that does more than progress linearly through space, but suggests a simultaneity of sensory experiences that expanded the sense of a fixed present. Film and poster art connect to these more nuanced representations of speeding modernity. The ceaseless flow of images in the movie theater, like a ride in a race car, could send adrenaline pumping through the veins of its audience; the successful modern poster aimed not stop the frenetic pace of modern life, but to punctuate it with moments of clarity. However, as I have demonstrated, though critics often talked about them as advancing the speed of modern life, posters and the cinema offered a platform through which to consider the effects of this rapid pace with more critical awareness. Contemporary critics of early cinema and graphic design seem to have overlooked elements of these objects that suggest duration, contemplation, and delay. Their rhetoric of speed is, I think, an extension of the pervasive concern with the sense of perpetual “crises” during this period. In this respect, their commentary is not unrelated to the poster art of Theo Matejko and others who focused on depicting the emblematic moment of catastrophe in their work. Their discourse contributed to the notion that Weimar existed at a moment of unprecedented upheaval.

Correspondingly, while examining the role of Expressionism and New Objectivity in film poster art, I was frequently reminded of Benjamin’s assertion about Jugendstil, that it was the “last attempted sortie of an art besieged in an ivory tower by technology.” Jugendstil, he argues, had tried to overcome the chilly reproducibility of technology with artistic ornament. It applied flowers and vines, bodies and colors to objects in the faith that the auratic properties of the ornament would penetrate and overcome the consumerist, glass and steel structures that undergirded them. Something of the same last-ditch effort at preserving the aura remains in Expressionism. Despite having an escape hatch in its tongue-in-cheek cynicism, the style continued to ask that its products mediate between spirit and matter to preserve the possibility for aura even if its manifestations had do be transformed into consumable objects.

Where Expressionism represented a graphic attempt at penetrating the veil of material reality, New Objectivity used a photographic approach toward a similar end, using a technological rather than spiritual lens in the hope, nonetheless, of revealing metaphysical truth within the physical world. The

3 Koepnick, On Slowness, 15-52.
4 Benjamin, “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” 38.
sense that these styles arose out of a desperation toward regaining the metaphysical value of art is pervasive. Kracauer’s axiomatic statement that “the turn to photography is the *go-for-broke game* of history,” indicates a corresponding perception of the era’s existential despair. Both Benjamin’s and Kracauer’s statements embody the sense that during the upheaval of the Weimar Republic, both graphic art and photography reacted to a feeling of crisis whereby the authentic, spiritual property of art was threatened. Both perceived the desire to preserve the authority of art work, to view aesthetic quality as the expression of unimpeachable truth. Art could then be imagined as a balm to heal social ills, edify viewers, and potentially lead to more social stability. Artists, craftspeople, and consumers would use whatever means necessary to reinvigorate such a notion of art — thus the play with varied styles, with multiple configurations of media, all aimed at constructing a way in which art could maintain its power in a mass, technologized society. High or low, still or moving, graphic or photographic, designers and artists experimented with whatever aesthetic categories were available to make sense of a reality that had been transformed by technological warfare and which was continually undergoing devastating setbacks due to inflation and political upheaval.

The preoccupation with redefining the role of art in mass society alludes to an underlying fear regarding the power of the very masses that these media addressed. I see this evinced most clearly in the material representing Ernst Lubitsch and the lead female actresses with whom he worked. The posters for Lubitsch’s films convey advertisers’ apparent interest in attracting female viewers with their film posters, and the iconic female film stars at their centers are an example of the way in which the “New Woman” exerted her influence on the popular sphere. As others have pointed out, the image of the New Woman represented an exaggeration compared to the experience of most women in Weimar Germany. The girlish, sexually forward, and unnervingly self-seeking attributes assigned to them were still largely inflected by male fantasy. Correspondingly, many of the images of women in posters and film represent attempts to contain their powerful personas. Nonetheless, film posters can be seen as a response (both positive and negative) to the real breakthrough in female autonomy achieved in this period. In every poster lining an advertising column there existed an affirmation of the power of the diverse masses, male

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5 Kracauer, “Photography,” 61.
and female, whom they addressed. As David Welch has written, “whenever public opinion is deemed important, there we shall find an attempt to influence it.”6 Seeing themselves reflected in the aesthetic products of the age, (the film, the movie poster), the masses saw direct evidence of their own influence. The very fear that posters and film could exert mass mind control on this important sociological group suggests the newly gained power of the masses over the destiny of the country.

As I have demonstrated, film posters courted a diverse audience base with compositions that invited many different levels of interpretation. They employed sensationalism, the cultural cache of art history, and impressed viewers with content that drew at once from the most serious social issues and the most trivial interpersonal relationships. They incited a feeling of momentousness, of chaos that could rouse the interests of viewers across a wide political spectrum, but sometimes inserted moments of stasis and delay into hectic city life. Film from this period used similar devices, oscillating between various media and divergent ideological camps. In Kracauer’s estimation it was this very ambivalence that robbed the film of its revolutionary content. He writes that “the films made for the lower classes are even more bourgeois than those aimed at the finer audiences, precisely because they hint at subversive points of view without exploring them. Instead they smuggle in a respectable way of thinking.”7 Accordingly, film from this period formed a habit of denigrating certain lifestyles (of abundant luxury or promiscuity for instance) but indulging its audiences with in-depth depictions of the very attributes of that life that it proposed (ostensibly) to censure. Where this duplicity was not woven into the fabric of the film, the audience would supply it themselves. Thus, Kracauer gives the example of Eisenstein’s Battleship Potemkin (1925), which was heralded as a work of aesthetic innovation, its form garnering so much attention that the accompanying political message of the film failed to make an impact. “Society is much too powerful for it to tolerate any movies except those with which it is comfortable. Film must reflect society whether it wants to or not.”8 One can sense Kracauer’s frustration that film did not, in fact, come close to exerting the influence that the medium was attributed by optimistic theorists. Instead, film

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6 Welche, The Third Reich, 6.
8 Ibid., 292.
seemed merely to reflect the imaginary of the masses as it already existed. Nonetheless, to be represented, to be shown a canvas on which to project one’s own desires and wishes can be a moment of revolution, if an incomplete one. And, especially given the many hands that go into the making of a film, it is understandable that a wide variety of standpoints, opinions, and viewpoints would get smuggled in to the picture along the way. Similarly, a poster would carry associations, intended or not, that leverage multiple readings of the films and of the culture that they represent.

Recognizing film and poster art as inviting a combination of readings helps us to understand the media’s failure to live up to its expectations — both for good and ill. Balázs maintained that “the art of film seems to hold out the promise of redemption from the curse of Babel,” Tschichold that in “striving for purity of form” design had “set itself the aim of rebuilding our life and forms of expression” toward the ultimate goal: “Unity of Life!”⁹ For such theorists, film and poster art held the potential to liberate society by reaching diverse audiences with clarity and force. In their purest forms, neither demanded traditional literacy nor even dealt in abstract concepts, but instead promised to reveal fundamental truths on an inner level of utmost lucidity. The rise of National Socialism and the coming of World War Two dismantled these utopian promises. The backlash of this failure manifested in the intensification of earlier anxieties about mass hypnotism. Though not expressed in these terms, the negative association with which we now imbue the term “propaganda” perpetuates the dystopian alternative to Balázs’s and Tschichold’s idealism. It suggests the enduring suspicion that mass media contains a transformative, mind-altering power. Welch, however, rightly points out the fallacy of this kind of thinking. Regarding the eventual rise of National Socialism, he explains,

To over-emphasize the importance of propaganda would be to diminish the failure of the Weimar system to solve prevailing economic and social problems and of political opponents of the NSDAP to provide viable alternatives. If, as seems likely, many Germans reluctantly voted for the Nazi Party because there seemed to be little credible alternative, then that is not necessarily the outcome of propaganda alone, but the failure of the Weimar system.¹⁰

Propaganda, political or commercial, can only reaffirm and reinforce existing attitudes. It also rarely presents outright lies, but blends truth with its own interpretive fiction. It can operate in a variety of styles,

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historical or modern, and through myriad media, traditional or novel. The historical study of film and poster art reveals a tendency to imbue these media either with the power to reveal unequivocal unifying truths or imagine them as objects used by fascist dictators to mobilize the masses. The reality, in fact, exists somewhere in the middle. Whether a poster or a film contributes to the manipulation or enlightenment of its audience seems to depend as much on the mindset of the receiver as it does on the content and form of the art work itself.

5.3 Value

When I return to the criticism and commentary of the poster industry in Weimar Germany, I cannot help but hear the concerns of our own technological revolution as an echo of earlier anxieties. The digital age (like the earlier industrialized one) impresses unprecedented, harmful distractions on the members of present-day society, social networks (like posters) build a false sense of connectivity in communities, society cannot keep pace with the era’s technological developments, and, if they (media) are not already exerting a kind of mind control on us, we are soon to be at the mercy of those who control our personal electronic devices. Such statements are familiar to all of us in the Western world, and, like those made against film and poster advertisements in the previous century, are a symptom of technological change and the energy accompanying the sociological shifts that they bring about or intensify. The boldest experiments in Weimar poster and film embraced such energies. But those experiments could only arise out of the diversity of material that technological advances engendered. Weimar history shows us that such rupture within media-forms produces an opportunity to imagine utopian promises and to take warning from dystopian imaginaries. As I see it, the history of Weimar mass media in film and poster art reasserts the role of the artist and designer as well as consumer in determining the direction that these imaginaries take.

Benjamin’s assertion that advertising was “the ruse upon which the dream forced itself upon industry” suggests that poster art, or indeed any art with a commercial agenda, constructs a phantasmagoria of wish-images through which capitalism subjugates its citizens — or, better said, through which its citizens allow themselves to be subjugated. Accordingly, for Benjamin the task of
material historiography was to emphasize “the moments of waking from this collective dream.” The dialectical image — in which a vision of the past rises momentarily within the present — could momentarily rouse the dreamer from his or her sleep. In Benjamin’s conception of cultural criticism, the aim is to dispel the soporific haze engendered by commercial art by presenting these images once more. One hundred years later, the dream world has become just as constitutive of reality as the material world in which we live. In fact, the phantasmagoria is a playground where alternative realities can be forged. Thus, today’s design theorists Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby advocate for the most extreme types of imaginative design. Their recent book Speculate Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming asks its readers to push the limits of conceivable reality. Such fantastic design practices, they write, give us the opportunity to contemplate and discuss the trajectory of technological and sociological advance, to ask each other what types of futures we want and which we would like to avoid. Rather than demanding that art (commercial or otherwise) represent reality, with this approach we allow fiction to give us the creative edge to move into a better type of future. I see something of the same energy in Erich Mendelsohn’s address to the public gathered at the opening of the Schocken Deparment store in 1928. He charged them

Don’t let yourselves be rushed; master time.
Don’t let yourselves be fooled; you are the masters.
Be creators, architects, shape your time.
Those are your duties, out with your responsibility, be leaders.¹²

Mendelsohn’s insistence that his audience take an active role in shaping the standards of communication, the means of production, and the products of their age is the perhaps the most significant lesson to take from Weimar film poster history.

Traditionally, film spectatorship has been theorized as a passive affair in which the viewer receives a visual and/or aural stimulus and it acts upon them in a way that they have little control to shape or define. However, Nicholas Rombes remarks in his book on the transition from analog to digital that movie-going has always been more interactive than film theorists and some producers have argued.

¹¹ Pensky, Method and Time, 182.
¹² Erich Mendelsohn, “Why This Architecture?” 453.
“Films,” he writes, “— like reality — have their own gaps, fissures, breakdowns and ambiguities that allow for a far wider spectrum of freedom of interpretation and meaning.” Correspondingly, my examination of Weimar film posters suggests that from its earliest days as mass entertainment film offered its audience various means of interaction through an extensive multi-media paratextual apparatus, including not only posters, but promotional film stills, post cards, and keepsakes. The very shape of film spectatorship, as with all successful commercial products, was guided by audience interests and demands. Film posters often foregrounded the viewer’s active role in crafting the imaginary that was only suggested by the image.

Innovations of the digital age have confirmed that contemporary viewers are far more interested in active viewership than film theorists have traditionally argued. Laura Mulvey’s recognition that the spectator’s newfound ability to pause a film at will results in a reassertion of the fabric of the media, its central paradox in containing still and moving attributes, is provocative, but it is only one examination of a very simple interaction with “new” media. Digital technology offers the user (no longer merely a reader or viewer) a vast array of opportunities to shape, create, and curate the media with which he or she comes in contact. This makes for a much more diverse experience than we can easily conceptualize, but rather than seeing this as a loss of some imaginary whole that was early cinema, my research compels me to see movie-going as an experience that to varying degrees has always been dependent on diverse consumer practices. Tellingly, many of the most socially revolutionary web products developed in the last ten years have been those that allow users to determine the content themselves: Google, Facebook, and Twitter, as well as blogging platforms like Wordpress. With such innovations it becomes increasingly possible to achieve Benjamin’s demand of the ideal author “as producer” — whose aim is not only to assert one’s own “political tendency” through the art work (a necessity for Benjamin) but to reveal the author’s own creative process, teaching readers to become a producer of art in their own right. Thus, today we can talk about the blogger or Instagram- or Youtube-user as producer — or at least as “prosumer,” following Georg Ritzer, Paul Dean and Nathan Jurgenson’s revitalization of Alvin Toffler’s


14 Benjamin, “*The Author as Producer*,” 777.
term, which denotes consumers who are intricately involved in the customization and production process of commercial products.\textsuperscript{15}

Of course, with this revolutionary change certain dangers simultaneously arise. The most serious of these resonate, once more, with criticisms of film and advertising in the Weimar Republic and fall under two categories: the danger of mass manipulation and the suspected denigration of quality. The cover story for this month’s edition of \textit{Der Spiegel}, for instance, questions whether globalization and digitilization are tools through which Google, Facebook, and Apple will set up a new “Weltregierung.”\textsuperscript{16} The article uses hyperbole, most likely, to garner interest and perhaps to preserve its readership despite encroaching online news venues.\textsuperscript{17} Yet, the concern hits a nerve. One need not look far for evidence of manipulation in the internet: The highly controversial research study carried out by Facebook which altered users’ news feeds in order to ascertain if their moods could be transformed positively or negatively by the content they received was a reminder of the power of many online tools over our perception. Google’s practice of personalizing search results based on the users past employment of the tool helps individuals to find information relevant to their interests, but also has the potential to conceal information from users. Eli Pariser, author of \textit{The Filter Bubble}, explains the logic and the danger of personalization this way: “if you never read articles about sports, why should a newspaper put a football story on your front page? But apply the same logic to, say, stories about foreign policy, and a problem starts to emerge. Some things, like homelessness or genocide, aren’t highly clickable but are highly important.”\textsuperscript{18} The controversy over personalized filters suggests not only that digital tools have the potential to manipulate our perception, but that they give us greater range to manipulate ourselves.

As alarming as these examples are, they are greatly remedied when the user is made aware that such practices are a part of the models employed by Facebook and Google. As Parser and others have


\textsuperscript{17} See cyber-optimist Jeff Jarvis’s acerbic response: “Translated: THE WORLD GOVERNMENT How Silicon Valley Controls our Future,” at medium.com.

\textsuperscript{18} Pariser, “The Filter Bubble, Author Q & A with Eli Pariser,” \url{http://www.amazon.com/The-Filter-Bubble-Personalized-Changing-ebook/dp/B004IYJE6A/ref=pd_rhf_ee_p_img_7}. 

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suggested it may not be enough to alert the user to these practices in legal terms and conditions clauses. The design of these tools should also reflect the practice. Initially the Facebook “newsfeed,” adopted to compete with Twitter’s model, gives the impression that user-generated content from friends is listed chronologically. In reality, Facebook routinely advances or hides some user-generated content to encourage users to pay for promotional status. Similarly, what has consistently appeared as an objective list of related search items under a google search, with promotional links marked differently thereby reinforcing the suggestion of objectivity, is actually content that has been generated through the site’s algorithms. The technological nature of the programs that make these tools function, like the camera placed before the object, may obscure the fact that these tools are being developed and shaped by human beings. They no more create an objective representation of reality than a photograph can be expected to give a reliable, immediately understandable depiction of the natural world. We have to alter our perception of the way that these tools work so that we can make more informed decisions about how we use them.

The other concern that individuals frequently bring to bear on the new digital reality regards a fear of a disintegration of quality in digital objects. This fear is weirdly paradoxical to the nature of digital reproduction and its ability endlessly to reproduce objects without any deterioration of the original form. It seems an intensification of Benjamin’s early insight that the technologically produced medium trades a unique existence for a mass existence. Carried to an extreme in the digital age, this reproductive process would mean the loss of diversity, and, because we define quality based on the presence of innovation and, in many ways, exceptionality, this lack of diversity would amount to a lack of quality. Accordingly, programmer Jaron Lanier, for instance, has argued that the collective voice that emerges from the internet has degraded the value of individual expression and intellectual achievement. Lanier explains,

It is increasingly disheartening to write about any topic in depth these days, because people will only read what the first link from a search engine directs them to, and that will typically be the collective expression of the Wikipedia. Or, if the issue is contentious, people will congregate into partisan online bubbles in which their views are reinforced. I don’t think a collective voice can be effective for many topics, such as history—and neither can a partisan mob. Collectives have a

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power to distort history in a way that damages minority viewpoints and calcifies the art of interpretation. Only the quirkiness of considered individual expression can cut through the nonsense of the mob—and that is the reason intellectual activity is important.20

Lanier’s criticism of the collective knowledge base that forms the body of most search-engine results is only one iteration of this fear of the leveling of innovation. Rombes writes that his own book on *Cinema in the Digital Age* is “haunted” by the anxiety that digital imagery may amount to a more homogenized aesthetic field. He asks: “Does the mass reproduction of the same images threaten to exterminate diversity, in the same way that the mass reproduction of a single virus might threaten to exterminate the diversity of life on earth?”21 With the ability of images to endlessly duplicate and disseminate so quickly, do they remove moments of chance? and set up new standards for a world-wide, “perfected” imagery that leave out room for human variation?

As these commentaries indicate, new digital technologies are forcing us to consider once more what it means to live in mass society. The fear of the manipulated mob and the threat of the virus seem all too indicative of the same issues that incited critics, artists, and craftspeople in the era of the illustrated press, the filmstrip, and the lithograph. The example that Weimar provides does not afford us any easy answers to these questions. However, at their most diverse and innovative, Weimar film and film poster art could help audiences to envision their own role in creating the new industrial world. According to Rombes, digital films today carry many of the same reminders by including overt references to human authorship and introducing moments of chance and mistake into the perfectible digital illusion. These self-reflexive moments coincide with new technologies that afford viewers the opportunity to interact with media in an ever-increasing variety of ways. With these tools we can come to recognize our own hand in shaping the digital world and avoid reinvigorating criminal geniuses and evil masterminds that remove the quotidian element involved in the crafting of our new imaginary. In this respect I would momentarily recall Kracauer’s influential if problematic suggestion that the films of the Weimar era represented a “longing for tyrants” as a piquant warning for the digital age. Rather than seeing the digital dreamworld as a disorienting fantasy orchestrated by tyrannical business models or oppressive governments, we can more


productively envision them as dreamscapes in which a variety of people, ourselves included, are deeply involved in the building.

As I have demonstrated, film posters and promotional materials reasserted the artistic, creative, human-driven production of film, in part, by relativizing the new technology in relationship to the media that preceded it. Today, we see the same tendency in the way that “realism” is achieved through digital technology — not with a depiction of life as seen through the naked eye, but as an image made realistic with markers of photography (via the lens flare) or video recording (with its visual noise). Much the way that Expressionist films may have emulated the look of painterly abstraction, new technology adopts the look of old in order to help us perceive it. As Benjamin intuited in his examination of Jugendstil, experimentation in aesthetics and design provided a means of helping society relate to technology and the mass existence that it engendered. Looking back at the Weimar example of technological innovation and social application, I hope, will help us to relativize our own struggles and encourage us to expand our active role in the digital world. Benjamin writes,

There has never been an epoch that did not feel itself to be ‘modern’ in the sense of eccentric, and did not believe itself to be standing directly before an abyss. The desperately clear consciousness of being in the middle of a crisis is something chronic to humanity. Every age unavoidably seems to itself a new age.

In each of these new ages, we are given opportunities to move forward and to fall back. Instead of lamenting the mass of changes that have arisen with the digital age, we may be better off dispelling the notion of crisis and asserting the importance of creativity. Looking at past experiments in Weimar film poster art can encourage us to be aware and active in shaping the way that digital tools are developed. Perhaps then we will be able to resist reacting to our changing environment only in fear and desperation, and instead can cultivate a spirit of curiosity, ingenuity, and play to take full advantage of the possibilities that technology offers us.

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