Taking it to the street: screening the advertising film in the Weimar Republic

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It would be hard to think of a more archetypal scenario of the Weimar ‘street film’ than the opening sequence of Karl Grune’s Die Straße/The Street (1923). Attracted by the protocinematic spectacle of flickering shadows projected onto his ceiling, a hapless middle-class husband flees the drab interior of his bourgeois apartment for the excitement of the city streets, only to encounter a realm full of strangely animated displays: an illuminated line on the pavement guides his feet towards a shop front (figure 1); moving boats in a window display promise the pleasures of exotic travel; and – in the most iconic shot of the film – a giant pair of glasses outside an optometrist’s shop lights up to reveal a pair of eyes, as if the street were looking back.

Scholars of Weimar cinema have long been familiar with the interpretation of such representations by Siegfried Kracauer and Lotte Eisner, who saw in Grune’s mise-en-scene of street-life a ‘demonic’ or irrational view of the city as a realm of uncanny and instinctual forces.¹ Kracauer in particular read such scenes as symptomatic of a deep-seated collective fear of public space among postwar German audiences, which would eventually make them retreat – like the protagonist at the end of the film – into the protected space of the interior, and finally into the arms of a regime that promised to restore order by any means.²

Kracauer’s thesis on the collective psychology linking German Expressionism to Nazism has, by now, received its share of criticism, and it is not my intention to revisit that debate here.³ But I would point out that such animated spectacles had a more tangible referent in the early years of the

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² Kracauer, From Caligari to Hitler, p. 122.
Weimar Republic, namely in the burgeoning field and practice of advertising. By the time Grune made The Street, animated shopwindow displays and electric light advertisements of the kind we see outside the optometrist’s shop were familiar sights within the advertising landscape of cities like Berlin, Frankfurt and Leipzig – a landscape explored four years later in Walter Ruttmann’s Berlin: Symphony of a Great City (1927). They were joined by numerous other forms of moving advertisements, from ambulatory products to vehicles of all sorts. Indeed, even the animated pavement from The Street recalls contemporary advertising technologies. One of the sensations of 1921 in the advertising world was the so-called Atrax, a mobile projector mounted on a ball swivel that could be placed in strategic locations to project advertising images. The promoters of the Atrax touted its ability to project images onto any surface, but the device was famous above all for its pavement projections, by which shop owners attempted to attract passers-by to their shop-windows and into the stores. As one review of the Atrax in the trade journal Die Reklame described it:

However and wherever one decides to set up the Atrax projector and let it do its work, one form of usage has proven by far the most effective at attracting customers: projections onto the pavement directly in front of the store. … The colourful circle of light between the pavement and the shop door has a veritable magnetic effect on passers-by.

Again and again, advertisements emphasized this magnetic, hypnotic quality of the Atrax projections, their ability – in the words of another reviewer that aptly describe the sequence depicted in The Street – to direct passers-by ‘with a truly magical power into the store.

The correspondence between the ‘magnetic’ effects of advertising and the occult themes of German Expressionism is hardly limited to The Street. Even the central film in Kracauer’s genealogy, Robert Wiene’s The Cabinet of Dr Caligari (1919), had a subtext in advertising. Like the proto-cinema of
the opening of *The Street*, the famous phrase ‘Du musst Caligari werden’ ('You must become Caligari'), which writes itself in illuminated letters across the sky and the asylum wall before the psychiatrist’s astounded gaze, has often been read as a reflexive representation of the cinema in its supposed power to hypnotize spectators. But as is well known, the phrase began as part of an advertising campaign when, in the weeks leading up to *Caligari*’s release in February 1919, posters containing the mysterious injunction sprouted up in Berlin’s metro system, on advertising columns and in the pages of the daily press. Within the film, the appearance of the self-writing sentence recalls nothing so much as the animated letters of electric signage. More specifically, it harkens back to the first electric light advertisement of Berlin, a display for Manoli cigarettes erected in 1898 on the roof of a building on Alexanderplatz, on which a circle of lights appeared to spin furiously before giving way to the blinking command ‘Raucht Manoli!’ ('Smoke Manoli!'). Significantly, the famous ‘Manoli wheel’ gave rise to a well-known Berlin expression ‘Du bist manoli’ meaning ‘You must be crazy’. At least one of the initial *Caligari* advertisements from 1919 appeared to imitate the Manoli advertisement by showing the phrase ‘Du musst Caligari werden’ in a simulated circular movement (figure 3), and it would be no surprise if the film’s first viewers also made the connection. As one reviewer described it after seeing the premiere of the film:

Berlin has a new catchphrase: ‘You must become Caligari’. For weeks, this mysterious categorical imperative has been screaming at us from every advertising column and from the pages of the daily papers. The initiated now ask ‘Are you also Caligari?’, just as people used to ask ‘Are you Manoli?’.
Given these associations, it is perhaps little wonder that the same Caligari phrase would go on to form the centrepiece of one of Weimar’s most famous advertising films, Guido Seeber’s *Kipho* (1925), in which the sentence was transformed once again into an advertisement for a major exhibition of the cinema and photography industries: ‘Du musst zur Kipho!’ (‘You must go to the Kipho exhibition!’).9

Such intertwined allusions suggest that the culture of Expressionist film that emerged after World War I was concerned not only with the perennial themes of the *Doppelgänger* and uncanny instincts, but also with the very identity of the cinematic medium in a context defined by proliferating technologies of mobile moving image display. That concern was well founded, for such mobile displays encompassed not only electric signage, automata and Atrax-type slide projectors, but also numerous devices for projecting film itself in the public spaces of the new democracy. As the use of safety film and small-gauge projectors became more common, advertisers could now take film out of the cinema booth to project advertisements directly onto building facades.10 More significantly still, the development of *Tageslichtwand* (daylight screen) technology during the war years set the stage for a host of new inventions designed to take film out of the dark and into the illuminated spaces of urban streets, shop windows and exhibition floors. Perhaps the best known among these devices was the *Filmschrank* (film cabinet), patented in Germany in 1922, which allowed the screening of short films on a loop in commercial and exhibition spaces on a daylight screen (figure 4), but there were also many other experiments in portable projection. These included a wide range of ‘suitcase’ projectors for travelling salesman and industrialists (figure 5); small-gauge devices for shop-windows such as the ‘Capitol’, a looped projector designed by the
best-known advertising film producer of the time, Julius Pinschewer (figure 6); and even advertising film vehicles such as the Reklamemobil (advertising-mobile), which employed a daylight screen and rear-projection system to take films into the city streets (figure 7).  

In what follows, I want to consider the impact of such mobile projection technologies on the culture(s) of moving images during the Weimar years, as well as their ramifications for our understanding of ‘Weimar cinema’ today. As the evocations of advertising technologies in films such as Caligari and The Street suggest, advertising’s moving images were clearly recognized as a form of ‘cinema’, analogous in some respects to conventional theatrical cinema. But advertising projections constituted a different type of cinema, not only on account of their mobility but also in their epistemological underpinnings, which came from a different place and served a different purpose from that of feature films. Within this epistemological framework, I argue, moving images—in both their portable and fixed forms—were understood as a means of directing the traffic of bodies and attention in the newly consumerized arena of the Weimar Republic.

The new portable projectors were, of course, not the first devices to make film projection ‘mobile’. In Germany, Wanderkinos, or itinerant cinemas, had constituted the dominant mode of film distribution at least until the emergence of fixed cinemas around 1907, and much of the population continued to experience moving images in this form throughout the prewar years and beyond. But the new forms of portable advertising projection differed from such itinerant cinemas—which in their heyday often appeared as luxurious ‘rolling palaces’ with closed theatres accommodating up to 700 spectators—on account of their tendency to eliminate the darkened space of the theatre and introduce filmic projection into public spaces of circulation. A better precursor might be found in previous instances of outdoor advertising projections using magic lanterns, albeit the new projection technologies differed on account of their ability to show films in daylight. All of these new technologies were linked, moreover, to the new sphere of advertising and industrial film, which emerged in the 1920s as a major and lucrative industry. Advertising film had certainly existed before the war,
when a handful of production companies (such as that of Pinschewer) had helped to institute the form. But the investments in film propaganda during the war – marked by the founding of companies such as the Deutsche Lichtbildgesellschaft (DLG), the Bild- und Filmamt (BuFA) and Pinschewer’s own Vaterländischer Filmvertrieb (Patriotic Film Company) – bestowed a newfound legitimacy on advertising and propaganda film and helped to spawn a massive growth in the industry after 1918. By 1929, when the advertising industry held its first major international conference in Berlin, there were eighty-six companies producing advertising films in Germany alone. Most screenings of such films still took place in traditional cinemas, and advertising companies such as Deulig, Epoche and Pinschewer’s own Werbefilm GmbH fought fiercely for contracts with major cinemas. But these companies also thought long and hard about how to distribute their films beyond the traditional audience of the cinema, and they were proud of their ability to incorporate the new possibilities of mobile projection. Pinschewer, for example, boasted not only of his monopolies with hundreds of film theatres, but also of his ability to show advertisements in shop windows via the aforementioned Capitol projector (itself named after one of Berlin’s most prominent picture palaces), as well as his distribution in trade fairs and other commercial spaces via film cabinets.

In their connection to advertising, such technologies form part of a broader history of moving image cultures that has only recently come into view in film-historical scholarship. Although long marginalized in histories of narrative film, commissioned forms such as advertisements and industrial films – along with educational, management and medical films – are garnering an increasing amount of attention, as entire bodies of long-forgotten moving-image material are rediscovered in the vaults of corporations, in state archives and in private attics. The attention given to such material has not only broadened the scope of film-historical objects, but also provoked a reevaluation of familiar terrains, in particular that of the avant garde, which was deeply imbricated in sponsored filmmaking. In this essay, however, I want to shift the focus from the films themselves to their material apparatuses in order to ask a different question: namely, how does the ‘rediscovery’ of advertising film allow us to rethink our understanding of modern screen culture? This is in part a story of forgotten inventions – of daylight screens and suitcase projectors, of film cabinets and cine-mobiles – and in this respect, my analysis intersects with a growing body of work dedicated to rethinking the sheer variety of historical screen formats. From Anne Friedberg to Erkki Huhtamo to Haidee Wasson, this research has uncovered a long history of ‘expanded’ screen cultures stretching back far beyond the age of new media, beyond the performative experiments of the 1960s, and even beyond the invention of the cinema itself. It has, as Charles Acland has argued, challenged a long-standing assumption of film history (maintained by cinephilic theorists and ideology critics alike) with its suggestion that a ‘secure and stable cinematic apparatus likely never existed’. But beyond an inventory of advertising technologies, what I hope to uncover here is a set of ideas about interactions...


between screens and spectators. While these ideas resonate with the familiar accounts of modern visual culture from thinkers such as Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin, they were, as I will show, also specific to the sphere of advertising and its particular regime of instrumental images.

From the point of view of contemporary screen studies, with its poles of ‘immersion’ and ‘distraction’, large and small-scale screens, or fixity and portability, the ‘screen culture’ of advertising film in the 1920s might appear as something of an enigma. On the one hand, as we have seen, the professionalization of advertising film went hand in hand with the desire to bring filmic advertisements out of the theatres and appeal directly to a distracted audience in movement: to shoppers, exhibition visitors and passers-by on the street. It was no accident that nearly all of the new forms of portable projection, including film cabinets, cine-mobiles and shop-window projectors, were designed to show short films on a loop, thus making possible – as projectors for museum installations still do today – the screening of advertisements for audiences in constant rotation. Indeed, for many observers it appeared as if such portable devices would render the traditional cinema obsolete (at least as a space for the projection of advertising film). Writing in 1921, the engineer and film producer Arthur Lassally described three new means of screening advertising film – projection screens designed for public spaces, film cabinets for commercial spaces and the suitcase cinemas of travelling salesmen – and drew his conclusion in no uncertain terms: ‘Although [the film theatre] was the only form of distribution to develop and spread before the recent invention of the daylight screen, it is inferior in every respect to the three other possibilities’.

At the same time, the cinema did still function as the principal screening venue for advertising films, whose place in the preliminary programme became codified during the early 1920s. More significantly, advertising theorists did continue to praise the cinema precisely on account of its capacity to monopolize spectatorial attention, immobilizing and forcing the audience – as in Plato’s familiar allegory of the cave – to absorb the representation on the screen. Thus the advertising specialist Fritz Pauli argued that the advantage of film advertising over other forms resided precisely in its ability to compel audiences to pay attention:

The film audience has to register the advertisement, whether it wants to or not. One can deliberately oversee the advertisements section of a newspaper; one can more or less avoid the sight of traffic and electric light advertisements; one can take off one’s headphones during radio advertisements or simply turn off the receiver; but it is not easy to close one’s eyes in the film theatre.

Pauli’s description, repeated in numerous discussions of advertising film from the time, suggests that the black box of the cinema remained an ideal space for advertising film in the minds of contemporary experts, despite the new enthusiasm for portable projectors. By forcing audiences to attend to the advertising spectacle, the film theatre seemed to guarantee the.
These theorists did recognize one potential downside to the dispositival arrangement of the cinema: namely the danger that advertisements would have a reverse effect if they failed to entertain the spectators forced to watch them. See, for example, Kurtzig, ‘Werbefilm und Volkswirtschaft’, p. 418. It was for this reason that the vast majority of advertising films already employed humour in the 1920s.


The institutionalization of advertising science in universities (alongside the need for advertising archives) was a frequent topic for discussion in the trade literature of the time. See, for example, ‘Das betriebswissenschaftliche Institut an der Handelshochschule Mannheim’ (‘The Scientific Management Institute at the Commercial College of Mannheim’), Die Reklame, no. 115 (1919), pp. 173–74; H. M. Behr, ‘Ein neues Werbewissenschaftliches Institut an der Universität Köln’ (‘A new Institute of Advertising Science at the University of Cologne’), Das Plakat, vol. 11, December 1920, p. 607; ‘Das Mannheimer betriebswissenschaftliche Institut’ (‘The Mannheim Institute of Scientific Management’), Seidels Reklame, vol. 6, no. 9/10 (1921), p. 153; Rudolf Seyfert, ‘Die Werbelehre und ihre Stellung im akademischen Unterricht’ (‘The study of advertising and its place in academic teaching’), Die Reklame, no. 153 (1922), pp. 450–51.

The relation to Le Bon was already established in one of the first articles on advertising psychology by the Heidelberg economics professor Max Picard, ‘Zur Psychologie der Reklame’ (‘On the psychology of advertising’), Zeitschrift für Handelswissenschaft und Handelspraxis (1913), p. 43.

See Ross, ‘Mass politics and the techniques of leadership’.

See, for example, Karl Fleischhack, ‘Kunst und Suggestion’ (‘Art and suggestion’), Das Plakat, vol. 11, no. 470

advertisement’s success. This is exactly where the power of cinema lay for practitioners such as Pinschewer, who repeatedly touted the efficacy of film advertisements shown in the ‘dark room’ of the conventional film theatre (figure 8).

What, then, should we make of this seemingly contradictory set of screen parameters? How was filmic advertising understood simultaneously as a form appropriate for the immersive black box of the cinema and for the portable screens of the street and the shop floor? How could advertising screens be praised at once for their total hold on spectatorial attention and for their versatility and ability to go anywhere? Is this simply a case of differing theories of the advertising film, or is there an underlying epistemology of advertising film linking the two moments? The answer to these questions can only become clear if we look beyond traditional ideas about the cinema and reinsert advertising film within the larger context of advertising theory and practice as it was emerging in early 1920s. That is, in order to understand the screen culture of advertising films as it was emerging after World War I, we need to approach these films and their screens not only as forms of cinema, but also as forms of advertising – forms linked to other advertising media and embedded within the visual culture of advertising that took shape in the 1920s.

In the wake of the Great War, that culture was in the midst of a thoroughgoing professionalization. Bolstered by the newfound prominence of propaganda during the war, the science of advertising emerged from its status as a minor branch of psychotechnics to become an independent field of research – a development marked by the consolidation of professional groups such as the Verein Deutscher Reklamefachleute (Association of Advertising Experts), the proliferation of trade journals such as Die Reklame, Seidels Reklame and Industrielle Psychotechnik, and the founding of research institutes such as the Institute for Economic Psychology at the Trade University in Berlin in 1920. Such research infrastructure, along with new university curricula in places like Berlin, Cologne and Mannheim, helped to codify and legitimate the new experimental science of advertising psychology, at the centre of which lay the doctrine of mass suggestion. Although the latter had its roots in the nineteenth-century writings of Gustav Le Bon and others, it had gained a newfound prominence during the war, when techniques of suggestion came to play a crucial role in efforts to mobilize public opinion on the home front through propaganda. After the war, advertisers sought to put this newfound power of suggestion to use in product advertising, public relations and politics. In the dominant model of advertising psychology – the one espoused, for example, by the director of the Institute for Economic Psychology, Walther Moede – the ‘action’ of a good advertisement was analogous to that of a good hypnotist. It should, first of all, monopolize the consumer’s attention as much as possible, effectively shutting out competing stimuli; secondly, it should implant suggestions firmly in the consumer’s memory; in order – thirdly and in analogy to contemporary theories of post-hypnotic suggestion – to provoke acts of
consumption long after the advertising image, text or trademark had disappeared from the field of vision. As another writer for the journal *Seidels Reklame* aptly described it, advertising exerted a ‘momentary suggestion … whose hypnotic power, however, continues to function long afterwards’.

Despite such fantasies of suggestive control, however, advertisers were well aware that the conditions for successful hypnosis could hardly be taken for granted. Advertisements — whether in the form of posters, newspaper inserts or electric signage — had to function within an increasingly crowded public sphere, vying for consumer attention amidst thousands of other advertising representations. Given these practical parameters of public life, advertisers could no longer count on the immobilized, immersive spectator of traditional hypnotic scenarios. Indeed, perhaps the only motif of advertising theory as ubiquitous as that of suggestion was what Moede, in the lecture cited above, dubbed *das Prinzip des flüchtigen Blickes* (the principle of the fleeting glance), which stipulated that advertisers could only reckon with microseconds of consumer attention in a visual economy defined by increasingly distracted gazes, wandering amidst a flood of visual representations.

This familiar conception of urban spectatorship — which would soon become a central preoccupation for critical thinkers like Benjamin — was of course endemic to the experience of modernity generally, and it hardly began in the 1920s. But it was catalyzed in a very particular way at the onset of the Weimar Republic by the emergence of what became known as *Verkehrsreklame* (traffic advertising) (figure 9). Motivated by the economic hardships of the Versailles Treaty, but also by the recent mobilization of public institutions for war propaganda, the Social Democratic government that emerged from the revolutionary battles of 1919 opened up such public institutions as the railway system, the postal...
network, trams and other traffic networks to private advertising. As a result, advertising images – once confined to the street-corner advertising column – were turning up everywhere: at railway stations and in train carriages, on the roofs of tramways and in the interiors of subway stations, at street crossings and along traffic routes, on postal delivery vehicles, mailboxes, tram tickets, stamps and anywhere else a bit of surface space could be found. While Kracauer would later decry the ‘flood’ of photographic images inundating readers of Germany’s illustrated dailies and magazines, advertising trade literature, in the wake of the new regulations, was already describing a ‘flood of advertising’ (Reklamehochflut) at the beginning of the decade. Indeed, to these observers, it seemed as if every public surface had now become fair game for advertising images, from the walls and windows of trains to the exterior of ships, from the fences of construction sites to the pavement of urban streets, from the paper of tramway tickets to the surfaces of rivers and the sky above. In the utopia of advertising trade literature, the future city would be a space in which all surfaces high and low, vertical and horizontal, would be covered with advertising messages (figure 10). This is the context in which Weimar’s ‘surface culture’ – which Janet Ward rightly linked to advertising practices – first emerged, and it was precisely within this context that an invention such as the Atrax, with its ability to transform any surface into an advertising screen, became thinkable.
Such a transformation in the visual culture of advertising implied a new concept of spectatorship, for the paradigmatic spectator was now understood above all as mobile spectator and advertising agencies sought to attract such mobile gazes at the nodal points of circulating traffic. In the words of the writer Paul Zech: ‘The primary goal of all advertising is to address people in those places where they congregate or are washed up by the currents of traffic in the greatest numbers’.41 Above all, advertisers could no longer count on a contemplative gaze but had to reckon with a ‘fleeting glance’, which they had to capture in the blink of an eye. As one writer for the journal Das Plakat wrote in 1920, ‘It has become a commonplace to demand of the advertising poster that it be identifiable and comprehensible in a single glance for people driving by in an automobile’.42

This model of the ‘fleeting glance’ was, in turn, bound up with the transformation of aesthetics and graphic design in advertising. Employing the split-second windows of tachistoscopes, psychologists such as Moede tested every possible aspect of advertising layout and design, from image placement and colour combination to text size and font.43 As a result, advertisers increasingly called for simplified images, marked by clearly defined fields of colour and, above all, by the strategic use of high contrast to increase the effect on the attention and maximize rapid legibility. Explicitly eschewing the traditional value of disinterested aesthetic contemplation, these theorists – along with a panoply of advertising artists such as Wilhelm Deffke, Jupp Wiertz, Peter Behrens and, most notably, Lucien Bernhard – sought to forge an entire new field of ‘useful advertising design known variously as Nutzkunst (useful art),44 Gebrauchskunst (applied art) or Gebrauchsgraphik (applied graphic design),45 and intended precisely for those images that would function within the new economy of fleeting glances and mobile attention (figure 11).

Within this context, it was perfectly logical that advertising film should be given the epithet ‘living poster’, for such film not only migrated into the

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Fig. 11. Lucien Bernhardt advertising poster for Manoli cigarettes (1915).


public spaces traditionally reserved for posters, but also developed many of its formal qualities in analogy to contemporary graphic art. By the 1920s, product advertisements overwhelmingly consisted of drawn animation, and employed stylistic and graphic features adapted from the print traditions. This included the most widespread form of advertising film, caricature animation, but also the well-known practice of silhouette animation and the use of avant-garde design by filmmakers such as Walter Ruttmann (who had earned money as a designer of advertising posters before the war). Just how strong this association between advertising film and the tradition of advertising posters was can be gathered from one of the first texts written on advertising film by Pinschewer, in 1914. Boasting that he had never set foot in a cinema before the age of twenty-six, Pinschewer described the criteria for a successful advertising film as follows: ‘a clear and comprehensible message conveyed in the shortest time possible combined with a captivating and interesting content’. Such a combination, he continued, was perfectly analogous to the criteria for a good poster:

Just as the merit of a good poster lies in its conciseness, the quality of an advertising film should be judged according to whether it drags on or is kept short. If the film means to capture spectators’ attention and not bore them, it must convey the essential message to them in the shortest possible time. … The more concise an advertising film is, the more effectively it can reach its goal.

Advertising film thus had as much in common with posters and other advertising forms as it did with other film forms, and it is no coincidence that promoters of other new advertising technologies such as the Atrax used language similar to Pinschewer’s in their descriptions of proper advertising practices. As one brochure for the Atrax put it: ‘Choosing the right colours and drawing is as important for the Atrax as it is for the poster. With the Atrax, no less than with its paper counterpart, experience demands that texts be as concise and rapidly legible as possible. Such ‘rapid legibility’, as we have seen, was at the heart of the new advertising design. But legibility was not the only criterion of a good advertisement; it also sought to ‘direct’ the traffic of consumer attention. Central to most accounts of advertising layout were the twin notions of the Blickfang (the eyecatcher) and the Blickbewegungs linien (the lines of eye movement). The first concept was taken, once again, from the science of hypnosis, in which the Blickfang designated any object that could be used to attract and concentrate the subject’s attention (the classic example being the hypnotist’s watch). In advertising discourse, it came to designate any aspect of the advertisement serving to ‘catch’ the spectator’s wandering gaze. Blickbewegungs linien designated the use of either explicit or implicit lines to guide the spectator’s attention towards the pertinent image, text or trademark. A good example of this can be seen in a newspaper insert for Osram lightbulbs discussed by Moede in the article cited above, in which the minimalism and high contrast ‘catch’ the reader’s gaze as it wanders through the dense print of the newspaper, while the lines radiating out from
It is important that advertisements include stopping points for the attention that can act as an eyecatcher. But in addition to catching the eye, the advertiser should also introduce lines of eye movement that compel the wandering eye to move in the desired direction.

If such descriptions of stopping the eye and steering its movements seem to echo the language of traffic regulation, this is hardly a coincidence: advertising layouts were indeed understood as traffic signals, regulating the trajectories of visual attention in motion. Thus the psychologist Theodor König described the ‘movement’ of a good advertisement, in which ‘a representation of the product serves as an eyecatcher, from which lines of eye movement then lead to an image of the product’s use, its advantages or its distinguishing features’.

In employing such elements, the advertising image came to be understood as a kind of mobile hypnotic traffic signal, one that could both capture and direct the new flows of mobilized attention in the public spaces of mass democratic society. As an article on postal advertising described it, with no sense of contradiction, a good advertisement functioned to ‘hypnotize the people rushing by’. It is against the background of this conception of visual culture – one marked by the desire for a total monopoly

Fig. 12. Advertisement for Osram lightbulbs, from Walther Moede, ‘Psychologie der Reklame’ (1920).
over visual attention, but also by an awareness of the increasing fleetingness, mobility and division of visual attention – that we must understand the screen culture of advertising film in its oscillation between film theatre and portable projection. On the one hand, advertising film, like other forms of advertising, assumed a new spectator in motion. Indeed, the very movement of filmic spectacles projected in public spaces was often seen as an ideal means of capturing mobile attention. Arthur Lassally explained:

Poster artists and designers of newspaper advertisements already use movement to strengthen the effects of their advertisements, be it through ‘animated lines’ or through the direct representation of movement, in as much as this is possible in a still image. Shop-window decorators also make use of animated objects as eyecatchers. Compared to these humble beginnings, the introduction of cinematographic images into advertising technologies opens up vast new realms of possibility.\(^{53}\)

Introduced into public spaces, the movement of filmic images was thus understood as a means of capturing and steering the attention of spectators in motion.\(^{54}\) On the other hand, conventional cinema was seen as an ideal space for advertising precisely because of its ability to stop that mobilized attention, monopolizing it in the darkened space of the theatre. Thus Pinschewer himself – certainly no stranger to the new technologies of portability – envisaged the particular advantage of advertising in the film theatre as ‘const[ing] in the fact that the spectator sitting in the darkened room of the cinema cannot avoid seeing the film’.\(^{55}\) But here, too, the trope of the theatre as a space for monopolizing spectatorial attention might have had less to do with traditional notions of the cinema as a hypnotic space – for example in the discourse on cinema and crime of the German cinema reform movement – than it did with thinking about advertising and the struggle for attention in the age of consumer traffic. For that very same trope also found expression in discussions of advertising in railway carriages, waiting rooms and other spaces in which mobile audiences were temporarily immobilized. The art critic Paul Fechter suggested in an article on railway advertisements from 1922:

Advertising finds a propitious field in the train carriage: for here it can act upon objects forced to remain still. I can go around the advertising column in the street, but I have no choice but to perceive the poster in my train compartment whether I want to or not.\(^{56}\)

If such ideas seem to echo those about advertising film in the cinema, and vice versa, this is because both presupposed – as did advertising psychology generally – a world of consumers–spectators in constant circulation, along with a corresponding desire to place advertisements at nodal points of consumer traffic where attention was temporarily immobilized and focused. Within this context, it is hardly surprising that Pinschewer boasted of his contracts not only with major urban cinemas, but also with the ‘on-board cinemas of the Hamburg–America Line’.\(^{57}\) Whether discussing


\(^{54}\) This notion would come to the fore in studies such as Fritz Pauli’s Rhythmus und Resonanz als ökonomisches Prinzip in der Reklame (Rhythm and Resonance as Economical Principals in Advertising) (1928), in which Pauli argued that the rhythmical movement of electric signage and filmstrips could potentially order and control the movements of consumption no less efficiently than a Fordist factory. On Pauli’s study, see Cowan, ‘Advertising, rhythm and the filmic avant-garde’.


\(^{56}\) Paul Fechter, ‘Plakatabstimmung’ (‘The appropriate use of posters’), in Die Eisenbahnreklame, p. 14.

\(^{57}\) Advertisement for Pinschewer-Film, Die Reklame, vol. 19, 1 September 1926, p. 814. Pinschewer also emphasized the link between advertising film and traffic in the very first article he wrote on the subject, which began with the sentence: ‘We live not only under the sign of traffic, but also under the sign of the unwinding filmstrip’. Julius Pinschewer, ‘Filmreklame’, Saadela Reklame, vol. 1, no. 8 (1913), p. 243.
advertisements in cinemas, trains or cruise ships, theorists understood that moments of sedentary spectatorship could not replace the need to take advertisements out onto the street, where their success would depend entirely on their ability to appeal to the fleeting glances of a public in movement.

The cinema’s advantage for advertising resided precisely in its ability to immobilize, *temporarily*, the movement of bodies in order to concentrate attention on the product and trademark. Even here the advertisement’s goal was to set those bodies into motion again, guiding them towards acts of productive consumption. Such a coexistence of immobility and movement is visible in *The Street*, where the flickering shadows coming through the window – not unlike contemporary silhouette advertisements – capture the protagonist’s attention as he lies immobilized on the sofa (figure 13). But the effect of the images is to set the husband into movement, propelling him out onto the street where the animated lines on the pavement then guide him straight to the shop window. A similar interplay of stasis and movement was visible in many advertising films, for example in Peter Eng’s humorous advertisement for the Viennese International Trade Fair, *Die Entdeckung Wiens am Nordpol/The Discovery of Vienna at the North Pole* (1923). We watch as a community of ‘Laplanders’ at the northernmost reaches of Europe sits mesmerized in a ‘polar cinema’ before a filmic advertisement for the Viennese Trade Fair. But the specific effect of the advertising image, and particularly the trademark *WIM* (Wiener Internationale Messe) that appears in animated form on the screen, is to set the group’s leader into movement. Reappearing like a constellation in the night sky, the trademark guides him on his journey to the fair, at which he buys a boatload of products for the village (figure 14). Such a setting-into-motion is exactly the effect that the film itself sought to produce; beginning in 1925, it was distributed, among other means, via a set of ‘advertising automobiles’ commissioned by the
fair’s organizers to tour central Europe. Alongside animated dioramas of the fairgrounds, the vehicles projected Eng’s film on a daylight screen at the back (figure 15). Hence the organizers sought to position European spectators similarly to the ‘Laplanders’ in the film, attracting their attention through moving images and motivating them to undertake the journey to Vienna. With its animated trademark, *The Discovery of Vienna at the North Pole* demonstrates the double valence of the advertising screen as both *Blickfang* and *Blickbewegung*: its ability to capture consumer attention and to guide that attention along the desired routes. It is this kind of ‘cinema’ that the protagonist of Grune’s film also encounters, one in which the cinema interacts with the city itself to guide the traffic of consumption within the new consumerist spaces of the Weimar Republic. Kracauer argued that, *The Street* paints a dark portrait of this new world of mobile attention and hypnotic spectacles, behind which—as anyone who has seen the film knows—lurks a shadowy underworld of conspiracy and crime. But perhaps the anxious gaze that the film casts at the street and its advertising spectacles stems less from any deep-seated authoritarian tendencies than it does from the defensive posturing of an art film—one faced, in 1923, with an entirely new class of cinematic representations, themselves backed by a new industry of advertising that had risen from the ashes of wartime propaganda to propose new techniques of governance in the commercial spheres of the new democracy. What Grune’s film condemns, then, is not so much the chaos of urban modernity per se as the power of the Atrax—its claim to replace traditional contemplation with a new paradigm of instrumental images designed to regulate the movements of spectators in motion.
That model obviously did not come out of the blue in 1918. Rather, it wove together several elements already familiar from the prewar years: the discourse on mass psychology, ideas about design already present in the applied arts, and questions of planning and circulation long integral to urban thinking. But with the arrival of the first mass democracy in Germany, these elements were combined into a new paradigm of moving images that accompanied the emergence of a series of technologies for projecting advertisements within the spaces of commercial circulation. While many of these projection devices had short lifespans, they nonetheless resonate with our experience of advertising today. This is most obvious in the case of the countless advertising screens — fixed screens at various hubs of circulation as well as the mobile descendants of the advertising vehicles — that populate urban and commercial spaces, but also with the pop-up windows and other strategically placed advertisements that are designed to attract the wandering attention of internet users. One can draw a distinction between the Fordist model of circulation operating between the wars and the techniques of control and mobile surveillance at work today, when advertising screens have begun to ‘look back’ at spectators via hidden biometrical cameras designed to classify individual consumers according to ethnicity, gender or age. More optimistically, one might distinguish the top-down ‘stimulus-response’ models of interwar advertising psychology from the advertising strategies of contemporary convergence culture, in which advertisers are increasingly attuned to the need to ‘collaborate’ with more active and ‘participatory’ communities if they wish to maintain brand loyalty. But it would be a mistake to overemphasize either of these distinctions. Advertising in the digital age — whether conceived as part of a surveillance network or as a hallmark of increasing spectatorial agency — still involves the fundamental drive to influence the movements of consumption (now through the identification of target audiences and the personalization of advertising for individuals) in a sphere not entirely under the control of marketing professionals. In this sense, our own advertising displays can still be understood as descendants of the visual culture that emerged in the early twentieth century, when moveable screens strove to achieve maximum flexibility in order to catch mobile gazes and guide the traffic of attention beyond the temple of the cinema.

Conversely, the new emphasis on mobility in the digital age allows us to rethink its long and varied history. The presence of mobile screens in the 1920s has long passed under the radar of Weimar film studies, focused as that has been on feature films and questions of representation. But as my discussions of Caligari, The Street and Ruttmann’s Berlin suggest, even mainstream cinema was ‘aware’ of the presence of a competing moving image culture, one in which the film theatre itself functioned less as a temple of aesthetic contemplation than as a hub of economic circulation: a space for capturing the flows of mobile attention and channelling them towards commercial ends.