



PREFACE

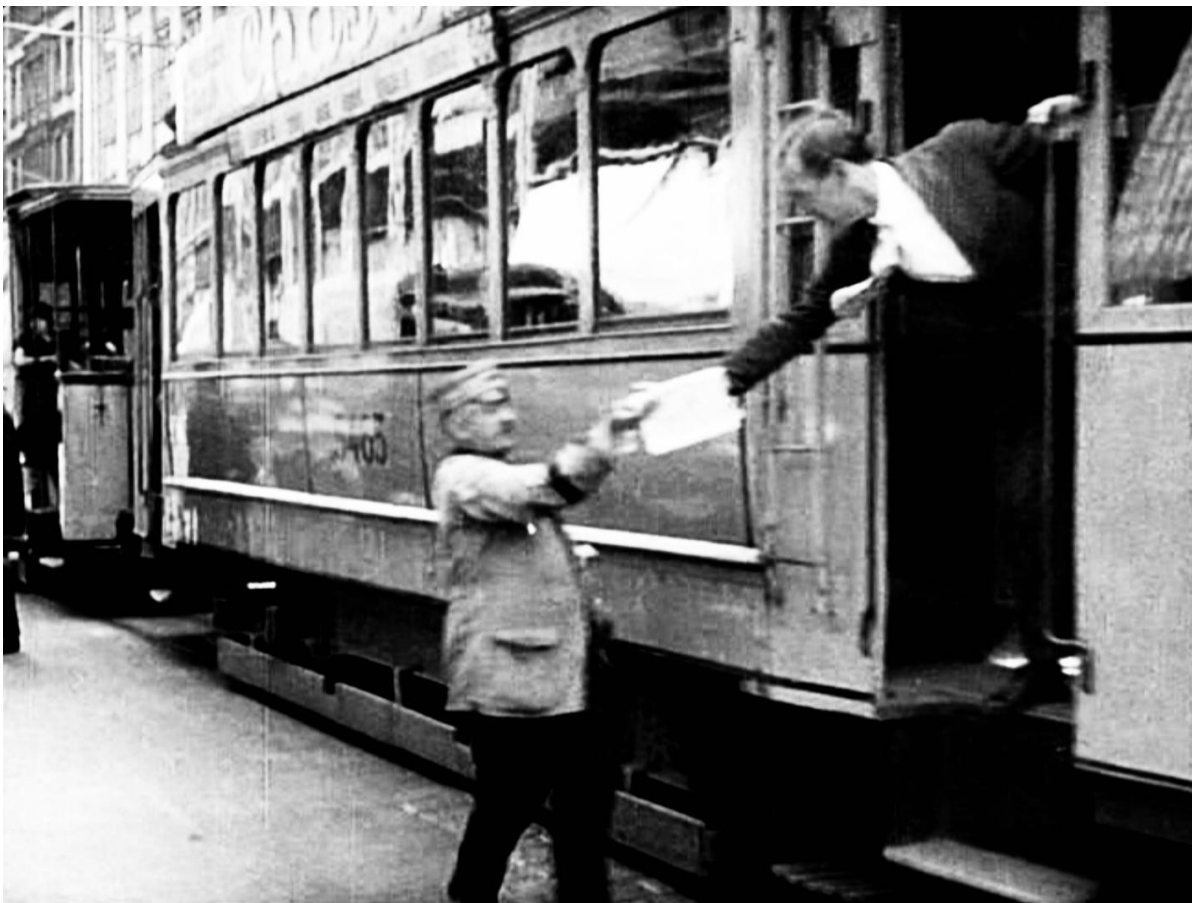
A classic within documentary and avant-garde film history, Walther Ruttmann's experimental silent film *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* was released in 1927, the same year as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. Despite their radical differences in production, style, and ideology, both films address the crisis of urban modernity. Inspired by Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, which premiered in Berlin in 1926, Ruttmann employs modernist montage to evoke the multifaceted totality of a full day in Berlin, Europe's most modern city in the 1920s. Avoiding tourist attractions, the film creates a rhythmic "symphony" from juxtaposed images of traffic, industrial machinery, and anonymous masses, organized in varying tempi across five acts. This dossier highlights the film's affinities with Ruttmann's early abstract cinema and with the photographic aesthetics of the Bauhaus and New Objectivity. It also situates the film within Berlin's modern media culture and underscores its pivotal role in shaping how the 1920s are remembered today.

Note: Uncaptioned screenshots are taken from *Berlin. Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*. The dossier includes lobby cards featuring film-related photomontages. It was curated by Tony Kaes.

CREDITS

Full credits in English with hyperlinks to director, cameramen, etc. can be found [here](#). Select ALL CREDITS and VERSIONS.

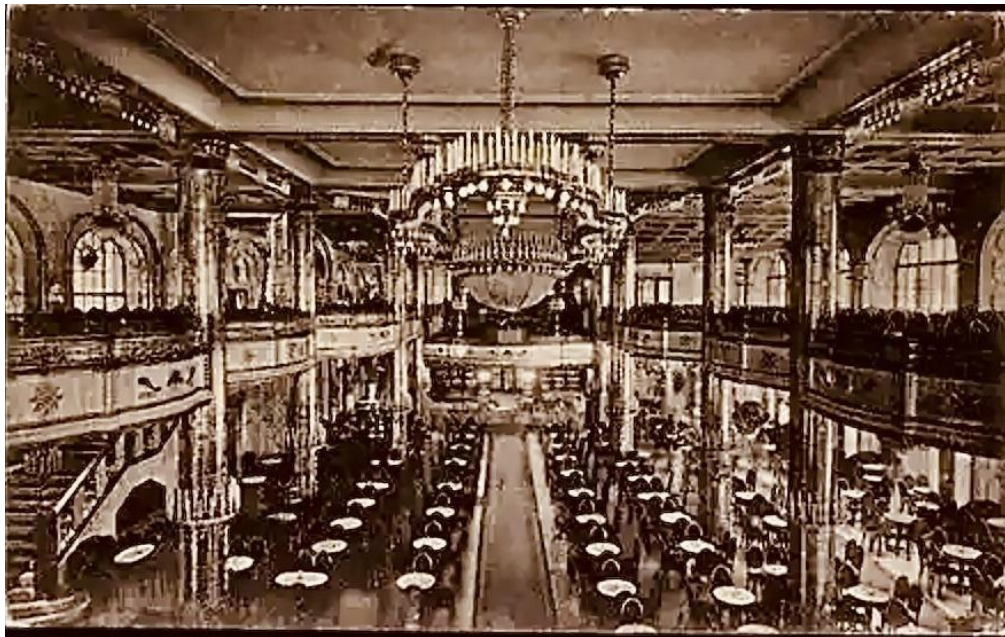
For its film-historical context. consult Hans Helmut Prinzler's *The Chronicle of German Film (1918-1933)* [here](#).



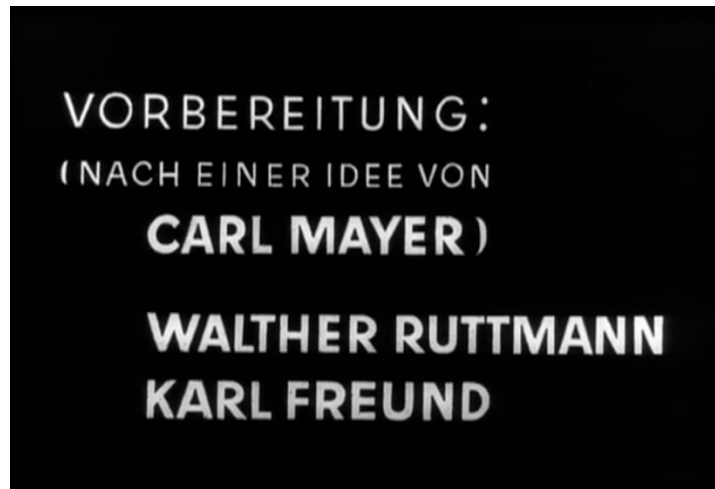
The passenger in the tram, an extra played by the film's director, reaches out for the latest news – an image of an interconnected urban environment that combines mobility, media, and mass transit.



Premiere in the Tauentzien Palast (above) – with adjacent large-scale Café
(below)



PRODUCTION



“VORBEREITUNG” (*Preparation*): The unusual term highlights the collaboration that led to the production of *Berlin, die Sinfonie der Großstadt*, following “an idea” of Carl Mayer.

CARL MAYER, Weimar’s best screenwriter, had “the idea” for a Berlin film without artificial studio sets, actors, intertitles, or narrative – just the story of a modern city from early morning to late at night, presented in 5 chapters with different rhythms. He withdrew his name over Ruttmann’s emphasis on abstraction.

KARL FREUND, renowned cinematographer of *Metropolis* and other Weimar classics, is best known for pioneering the “unchained” moving camera. From 1926 to 1929, he headed Fox Europa Film and served as a producer of the Berlin film.

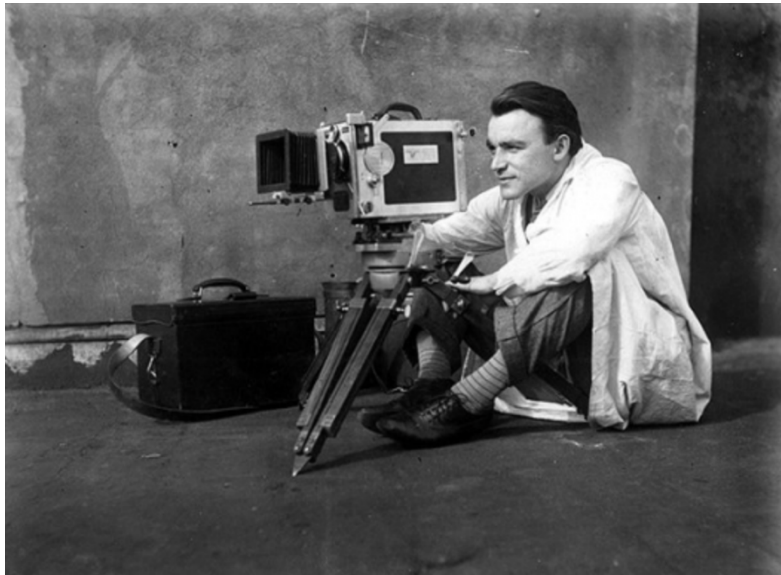
WALTHER RUTTMANN was a known avant-garde artist who animated painted shapes and forms to make abstract films. He was asked by Mayer and Freund to create a film about Berlin that restructures urban life according to musical principles. He inaugurated the international genre of city symphonies.



FOX EUROPA FILM, the European subsidiary of the American Fox Film Corporation, financed and distributed the film as **a Kontingentfilm**, or **quota film**. This meant that it was produced to fulfill the legal requirements of Germany's 1925 Film Law, which mandated that foreign studios release German-made films in exchange for the right to import their own films to Germany. To meet this demand, Fox Film founded Fox Europa in Berlin to produce low-budget, formulaic films solely to fulfill the law's requirements. Karl Freund, an established cameraman and a temporary head of Fox Europa, persuaded the company to give Ruttmann, a known avant-garde filmmaker, the assignment to produce a quota film to fulfill the studio's legal obligation. [TK]

AN DER KAMERA:

**REIMAR KUNTZE
ROBERT BABERSKE
LASZLO SCHÄFFER**



Baberske above and filming from a hideout

(Baberske Archive at the Deutsche Kinemathek Berlin)



Baberske's new portable film camera "Kinamo" from 1927





Edmund Meisel (1894, Vienna – 1930, Berlin) became famous for writing the musical score for Eisenstein's Battleship Potemkin, which premiered in Berlin in 1926. In 1927, he wrote the score to Ruttmann's Berlin, die Sinfonie der Großstadt (1927), performed by an orchestra of 75 musicians, some of whom were placed in the midst of the audience. The full score is lost, but a piano version was found in 1982, which allowed the reconstruction of the full score. It had its much-anticipated premiere at the Berlin Film Festival in 1982 and can also be found on the DVD released by Edition Film. [TK]

“I decided to compose a serious soundtrack whose goal was to capture the spirit of the times while keeping it grounded in everyday life. This project has become my favorite and most challenging work to date. The film's musical structure, as well as Walther Ruttmann's invaluable cooperation, made the process much easier. I now present to you our morning, noon, and evening as you experience them. You and your surroundings are my inspiration. If you recognize your daily experiences in my rendition and your nerves resonate with the rhythm of my music, then I will have accomplished my goal.”

Quoted in the Program notes for the first screening of the film with the original music in 1982 when Meisel's piano score was found.

EDMUND MEISEL

Musical Guidelines for Berlin, the Symphony of the Metropolis

First published as Musikalische Richtlinien zu „Berlin, die Sinfonie der Großstadt“ in *Lichtbildbühne* No. 235 (October 1927) p. 27

The film *“Berlin, the Symphony of a Great City”* has come into being in close collaboration between director and composer. A unity of film and music corresponding to the material was striven for. Just as the director Walther Ruttmann, I too have applied a form deviating from the customary, employing new means. It is completely incorrect to deny this film the attribute “feature film,” as has understandably happened on the part of the authorities, for it is more dramatic and of more comprehensive tension than any feature film, since an entire city — an entire epoch — acts in it.

My task was to reproduce the truthfulness and contemporaneity of this subject, and for the achievement of this goal I made use of various technical instruments. The score, written for an orchestra of 75 men, comprises essentially the following parts:

From a wave-like, periodic primal form there arises in mechanical rhythm the leitmotif *Berlin*, which expands as embodiment of the panorama into a brass chorale — quarter-tone chords of the sleeping city — workers’ march — machine rhythms — schoolchildren’s march — office rhythms — traffic rhythms — counterpoint of Potsdamer Platz — midday chorale of the great city — traffic fugue — contrapuntal confusion of voices — sports rhythm — signal music of the light advertisements — dance rhythm — intensification of all metropolitan noises in contrapuntal development of all principal themes toward the final cadence: Berlin.

With the completion of the score, however, in a modern composition only the prelude to the composer’s most important work, the rehearsal, is given. The main conditions of this essential necessity depend for the flourishing or failure of the entire work upon the goodwill and artistic sense of responsibility of the respective theatre director. I feel obliged to emphasize that Ludwig Klöpfer, the director of the Berlin premiere theatre, has, in a manner worthy of thanks and setting aside all commercial principles of economy, through the most

My most intense wish is that the performance of my composition may everywhere take place under such conditions. I am convinced that no one in the audience will fail to appreciate the scope and the necessity of the artistic preparations which, in this case — in which a modern symphony with distributed orchestra and quarter-tone music, employing novel sonic effects, is brought to performance — are of particular importance.

[illegible]

Meisel's piano accompaniment (excerpt from Act V)

EDMUND MEISEL

Foreword to Meisel's published piano score, quoted [here](#)

To the conductors!

I have written the only possible soundtrack for this abstract film *Berlin, die Sinfonie der Großstadt*: a rhythmic composition that gives the film its continuous acoustic tempo.

Accordingly, I ask that this music be understood first and foremost as rhythmic—not as strong sounds, but as color; i.e., where *mezzoforte* would otherwise be used, use only *pianissimo*, and where *forte* would otherwise be used, use only *piano* in terms of volume—without, however, compromising the necessary intensity of the tone.

Actual *forte* climaxes may only occur with the climax of the image; any lyrical portamento is to be avoided—only rhythm, rhythm! From this follows a necessary appeal

To the theater directors!

Give your conductors the opportunity, through reinforcement of the orchestra and several rehearsals, to achieve the novel interaction of film and music in this modern work, which represents the most serious artistic achievement.

The smaller the ensemble, the more vigorously one should insist on primitivism—i.e., only the piano notes printed in large type, the clear thematic line, and no counterpoint, should be performed.

Sergei Eisenstein on his collaboration with Edmund Meisel, composer for *Potemkin* in 1926

My first work in the sound-film was . . . in 1926. And in connection with (again!) *Potemkin*.

Potemkin—at least in its foreign circulation—had a special score written for it. The composer was Edmund Meisel, who wrote music for other silent films, both before and after his work on *Potemkin*. But there was nothing particularly extraordinary in this fact—for the history of silent films is sprinkled with such special scores. Music had even been used within the *filming* of certain films—for example, Ludwig Berger had filmed *Ein Walzertraum* to the music of Strauss.

Less usual, perhaps, was the way the *Potemkin* score was composed. It was written very much as we work today on a sound-track. Or rather, as we *should always work*, with creative friendship and friendly creative collaboration between composer and director.

With Meisel this took place in spite of the short time for composition that he was given, and the brevity of my visit to Berlin in 1926 for this purpose. He agreed at once to forego the purely illustrative function common to musical accompaniments at that time (and not only at that time!) and stress certain “effects,” particularly in the “music of machines” in the last reel.

This was my only categorical demand: not only to reject customary melodiousness for this sequence of “Meeting the Squadron,” relying entirely on a rhythmic beating of percussion, but also to give substance to this demand by establishing in the music as well as in the film at the decisive place a “throwing over” into a “new quality” in the *sound structure*.

So it was *Potemkin* at this point that stylistically broke away from the limits of the “silent film with musical illustrations” into a new sphere—into *sound-film*, where true models of this art-form live in a unity of fused musical and visual images,*

* As we see, our “Statement,” appearing two years later [see page 257], posing in this way the question of the audio-visual image, was based on a few proved experiments.

composing the work with a united audio-visual image. It is exactly owing to these elements, anticipating the potentialities of an inner substance for composition in the sound-film, that the sequence of "Meeting the Squadron" (which along with the "Odessa steps" had such "crushing" effect abroad) deserves a leading place in the anthology of cinema.

It is especially interesting for me that the general construction of *Potemkin* (a leap into a new quality) maintained in the music everything that pierced the pathetic construction—the condition of a qualitative leap which we have seen in *Potemkin* was inseparable from the organism of the theme.

Here the "silent" *Potemkin* teaches the sound-film a lesson, emphasizing again and again the position that for an organic work a single law of construction must penetrate it decisively in all its "significances," and in order to be not "off-stage," but stand as an organic part of the film, the music must also be governed, not only by the same images and themes, but as well by the same basic laws and principles of construction that govern the work as a whole.

Excerpt from Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. by Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), 177–78. This text was written in 1939.

FILM SCRIPT

Anon., "Berlin in the Film Script," in: *Der Film*, Berlin, No. 10, 1 June 1927

The manuscript for *Berlin: A Film Symphony* is certainly the most original. This film turns its back on all "literature." It could not, of course, take the usual literary form.

Instead, it was based on something more akin to a musical score. The goal was to create a kind of outline in which not only the events, but also the movement-related elements were precisely specified. Temporal intentions, such as tempo and direction of movement, were specified. Visual characters were also established. This would allow for changes during the work.

Ruttman chose the form of a card index. This resulted in countless small cards on which various ideas were written. Initially, each card contained a description of the action (e.g., "three workers from front left to back right"), followed by a pictorial representation. The cards also included a description of the mood (e.g., "morning mood" or "shot against the light") and an indication of the length of the scene.

This card index system was advantageous because subsequent ideas could be easily classified.

MARKETING

Announcement in *Kinematograph* (August 24, 1927)



BERLIN, DIE SINFONIE DER GROSSSTADT has been completed
and will be released soon!

The original poster





TRANSLATION:

The Symphony of the Big City (Berlin)

A shocking document, a brilliant symphonic vision of a big city.

A film that breaks completely new ground. There is no plot, there are no actors playing, there are no sets, and no costumes. Out of the 100,000 people in the film, only about five knew they were being filmed while going about their daily lives. This symphonic film was shown for weeks to sold-out audiences in Berlin and Paris. Over four million people saw it and were thrilled.

BERLIN

DIE SINFONIE DER GROSSTADT

FOX

EIN FILM VON
WALTHER RUTTMANN
SINFONISCHE MUSIK
VON EDMUND MEISEL

TAUENZIELEN-PALAST
LUDWIG KLOPPER
6, 8, 10 UHR

Ein Werk wurde geschaffen, das mit allem bricht, was der Film bisher gezeigt. Es spielen keine Schauspieler und doch handeln Hunderttausende. Es gibt keine Spielhandlung und es erschließen sich doch ungeahnte Dramen des Lebens. Es gibt keine Kulissen und keine Agnostik und man schaut doch in der wilden Flucht des hundertpfertigen Panoramas die unzähligen Gesichter der Millionenstadt. Paläste, Häuserschluchten,

rasende Eisenbahnen, donnernde Maschinen, das Flammenmeer der Großstadtnächte — Schulkinder, Arbeitermassen, brausender Verkehr, Naturseligkeiten, Großstadtschlump, das Luxushotel und die Brandweindestille. ... Der mächtige Rhythmus der Arbeit, der rauschende Hymnus des Vergnügens, der Verzweiflungsschrei des Elends und das Donnern der steinernen Straßen — alles wurde vereinigt zur Sinfonie d. Großstadt.

Film und Musik synchronisiert durch E. H. Blum-Musik-Chromatone

Translation of the above text (left and right)

A work was created that breaks with everything the film has shown so far.

There are no actors, yet it features hundreds of thousands of them.

There is no story, yet it reveals countless dramas of life.

There are no sets, yet the film is set in many locations.

There is no scenery, yet countless faces are seen.

The city of millions can be seen in the wild sweep of panoramic city views.

There are palaces, canyons of houses, and speeding trains, thundering machines and dazzling big-city nights.

Schoolchildren and masses of workers.

There is roaring traffic, natural bliss, and the big-city swamps, luxury hotels, and brandy distilleries.

The mighty rhythm of work.

A roaring hymn of pleasure and a desperate cry of misery, and the thunder of stone streets. All of this is united in the symphony of the big city.

BERLIN

DIE SINFONIE DER
GROSSTADT

EIN **FILM** VON
WALTHER RUTTMANN

NACH EINER IDEE VON
CARL MAYER

SINFONISCHE MUSIK VON
EDMUND MEISEL

B. Z. am Mittag

„... ein großes Kunstwerk ... ein selten herrlicher Abend. Viel Beifall mitten im Film und am Schluß.“

Berliner Tageblatt

„Das Haus rast Beifall ... dieses Lichtbildwerk ... ist eine Revolution.“

Neue Berliner 12-Uhr Zeitung

„... das großartige Gemälde einer Zeitepoche ... einzigartig ... ein Zeitdokument.“

Vossische Zeitung

„... dieses großartige Werk, das nach langer Zeit wieder erlaubt, auf einen deutschen Film stolz zu sein.“

Tägliche Rundschau

„... die sensationellste Leistung der deutschen Filmkunst ...“

Berliner Börsen-Courier

„... dieser herrliche Film, ein repräsentatives Meisterwerk.“

Film-Kurier

„... das grundsätzlich wichtigste Filmereignis seit vielen Jahren.“

Lichtbildbühne

„... dieses vollendete filmische Meisterwerk.“



ZWEITE WOCHE VERLÄNGERT
IM

TAUENTZIAN-PALAST

BERLIN

DIE SINFONIE DER GROßSTADT
EIN FILM VON
WALTHER RUTTMANN
NACH EINER IDEE VON CARL MAYER
SINFONISCHE MUSIK VON EDMUND MEISEL

**DER
FILM FÜR SIE!**

B. Z. AM MITTAG
 "...EIN GROSSES KUNSTWERK... EIN SELTEN HERDLICHER ABEND.
 VIEL BEIFALL MITTEN IM FILM UND AM SCHLUSS."

BERLINER TAGEBLATT
 "DAS HAUS RAST BEIFALL... DIES LICHTBILDWERK...
 IST EINE REVOLUTION."

NEUE BERLINER 12UHR ZEITUNG
 "...DAS GROSSARTIGE GEMALDE EINER ZEITEPOCHE...
 EINZIGARTIG... EIN ZEITDOKUMENT."

VOSSISCHE ZEITUNG
 "...DIESES GROSSARTIGE WERK, DAS NACH LANGER ZEIT
 WIEDER ERLAUBT AUF EINEN DEUTSCHEN FILM STOLZ ZU SEIN."

TÄGLICHE RUNDSCHAU
 "...DIE SENSATIONELLSTE LEISTUNG DER
 DEUTSCHEN FILMKUNST..."

BERLINER BORSEN-COURIER
 "...DIESER HERRLICHE FILM, EIN REPRESENTATIVES
 MEISTERWERK..."

FILM-KURIER
 "...DAS GRUNDSÄTZLICH WICHTIGSTE FILHEREIGNIS
 SEIT VIELEN JAHREN"

LICHTBILDBUHNE
 "...DIESES VOLLENDETE FILMISCHE MEISTERWERK."

VERTRIEBEN VON DER UFA

Advertisement with quotes from major Berlin newspapers and
 leading film journals



This poster for Ruttmann's "Berlin: Symphony of a Big City" was designed by the Stenberg brothers in the constructivist style. The film opened in Moscow on February 23, 1928.



This poster was created by Charles Venabert for the film's French premiere on May 14, 1928. Notice that the French title "Symphonie d'une Grande Ville" leaves out the word "Berlin."

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE RESTORATION

1982

In February 1982, a restoration by the Deutsche Kinemathek, the Bundesarchiv/Filmarchiv, and ZDF/Arte was presented at the Berlin Film Festival. The restoration followed the discovery of Meisel's piano score in 1980. The screening was celebrated as a "second premiere" after 55 years at the Berlin Film Festival.

On June 11, 1982, during his visit to Berlin, U.S. President Ronald Reagan received a copy of the film as a gift from the German government to the US.



"The president will receive a cinematic rarity from the Senate: the Governing Mayor will present him with a copy of the 1927 German silent film 'Berlin: Symphony of a Great City.]' This silent film classic by director Walter Ruttmann showcases the vibrant life of Berlin through documentary-style snapshots. Until now, only one copy of the film existed in the Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek. An additional copy was produced specifically for Reagan." (*Tagesspiegel*, June 10, 1982)

2007

In 2007, a fully reconstructed original score by Edmund Meisel premiered at Berlin's Friedrichstadtpalast, accompanied by a live orchestra from the Rundfunk Sinfonieorchester Berlin.

2008

The first two-disc DVD edition of *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* was released by Edition Filmmuseum and edited by Stefan Drössler from the Munich Filmmuseum. This edition includes Ruttmann's *Melodie der Welt* (1929) and his other early avant-garde films. The edition won the Il Cinema Ritrovato award for Best Special Features on DVD in 2009. In 2020, the fourteenth DVD edition was released by Edition Filmmuseum.

2025

A new digital restoration by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York opened Silent Film Week in MoMA's Sculpture Garden on July 30, 2025.



HOME VIEWING

DVD

We recommend the 14th edition (2020) of Edition Filmmuseum No. 39, edited by Stefan Droessler. (The first edition was published in 2008!) This edition features a reconstruction of Edmund Meisel's original orchestral score. The two-disc set also includes Ruttmann's first sound film, *Melodie der Welt* (1929), and all of his abstract films and advertising shorts. It is Region 0 and can thus be played in the U.S. Click [here](#) for more information on the Edition Filmmuseum website. It is also available on Amazon.

BLU-RAY

For Blu-ray, click [here](#): "Flicker Alley and Blackhawk Films are proud to release this classic of documentary cinema in a high-definition Blu-ray edition for the first time ever." This version features a new composition by Timothy Brock, not the original score by Edmund Meisel.

STREAMING

The Flicker Alley version is currently available on Amazon Prime and Kanopy.