

Weimar Film Posters 1918-1920

An Online Exhibition

In a pivotal scene from *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920), the film's protagonist—a psychiatrist obsessed with the charlatan Caligari's ability to compel people to murder through hypnosis—emerges from his office to see the message “Du musst Caligari werden” (“You must become Caligari”) writing itself across the night sky in animated letters. In a film all about hypnosis, this is an unnerving episode, since it shows the psychiatrist succumbing to the very hypnotic power he seeks to wield on others. But it's also arguably the film's most self-conscious sequence, since the animated words that spellbind the psychiatrist directly echo advertising posters for *Caligari*, which the film's audiences had almost certainly already



Figures 1-2

Left: Poster for *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1919) by Otto Arpke and Erich Ludwig Stahl

Right: Poster for *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, artist unidentified

seen. As is well known, during the lead-up to the film's premier in February 1920, posters with the same enigmatic message shown in striking layouts appeared in subways, advertising columns, and print publications. (Figures 1-2) Commissioned by the Decla Film Society to create a stir around the upcoming film, the posters effectively told the film's would-be audience members that *they* would become Caligari—a message that must have been enticingly enigmatic for someone who had yet to even understand the reference.

But whatever these posters might tell us about the use of the sentence in the film, they also suggest something about the state of *film advertising* in the immediate postwar years.

Though film posters had long existed, the period following WWI witnessed something like a first “golden age” of film poster design in Germany. Today, that age is associated most closely with the expressionist posters of Josef Fenneker, which have survived in abundant numbers and still help to define the look and feel of film culture during the turbulent years of the early Weimar Republic.¹ But there were also numerous other graphic artists who turned to film posters during this historical window, including Otto Arpke and Erich Ludwig Stahl (who designed several *Caligari* posters), Robert L. Leonard, Viktor Arnaud, Lutz Ehrenberger, Hans Rudi Erdt, Wolfgang Kirchbach, Jupp Wiertz, Martin Jacoby-Boy, Ludwig Kainer, Paul Scheuerich, and the Viennese designer Theo Matejko.²

How to explain this sudden prominence of film posters? At first glance, what stands out about these images is how artistic they tended to be, often showing clear influences from well-known art movements and artists like Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, Gustav Klimt or Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. One way to explain that artistic quality—as art critic Walter Schubert pointed out already in a programmatic 1920 article on film posters for the magazine *Das Plakat*—was that the film poster was undergoing a similar process of “elevation” to the one recently undergone by cinema itself. Just as cinema had gained respectability as it moved from fairground booths to urban centers in the 1910s, so the film poster was now acquiring “a new look” in those postwar years, as well-known professional artists and designers turned their attention to film (a process that Schubert hoped would generate a genuine “German” style of film poster).³

Another hypothesis—also suggested repeatedly in Schubert’s 1920 article—is that the posters of these postwar years were becoming more “cinematic.” This was, after all, the same period in which debates about cinema’s medial specificity took off among art critics and the avant-garde, and almost everyone agreed that cinema’s specificity resided in visual movement. In that context, it is indeed striking to observe the sheer dynamism of many of these poster designs. The *Caligari* posters, for instance, seem to share the film’s effort to animate the words “Du musst Caligari werden.” While the film achieves this through stop motion, the poster by Arpke and Stahl does it virtually by depicting the letters staggered, as if caught in frenetic movement, their jagged font recalling the angular shapes of the main figure’s grasping bony fingers. In another poster featuring the same sentence, the words

appear to spin in a vortex reminiscent of various representations of hypnosis—and of all the spirals that Siegfried Kracauer first identified as ubiquitous to Weimar cinema.

This dynamism was hardly unique to the advertising for *Caligari*, and many film posters



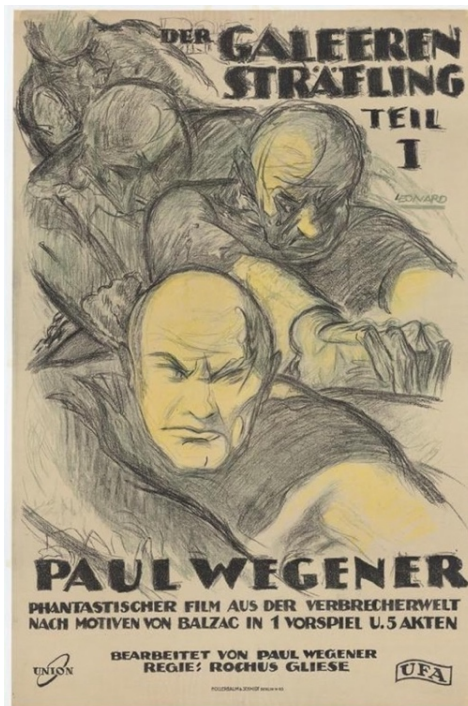
Figures 3-4

Left: Poster for *Totentanz / Dance of Death* (1919) by Josef Fenneker

Right: Poster for *Das Frauenhaus von Brescia* (1919) by Josef Fenneker

of this period feature similarly dynamic displays. Some seem to pulsate with vital energies. Fenneker's posters, for instance—partly under the influence of expressionist painters like Kirchner—use angular compositions with frenetic fonts and lines, combined with striking combinations of light and dark, to suggest a world of surging forces, often with occult undertones. (Figures 3-4) That dynamism prompted Walter Schubert, in the above-mentioned article, to write that Fenneker's work displayed a "surging and tumultuous cinematic style" ("brausenden, brandenden Kinostil").⁴ Other film posters contain compositions that seem to set our own gaze into motion, sometimes challenging the poster's tableau-style frame. For instance, a poster by Theo Matejko for the Austrian release of *Opium* (1919) depicts an intoxicating mist emerging from an urn at the bottom left, which carries our gaze—along with several female figures clearly inspired by Klimt—towards the top right corner of the frame in a weightless, billowing motion. (Figure 5) Another poster by the graphic artist Robert L. Leonard for the Paul Wegener production, *Der Galeerensträfling* (*The Galley Slave*, 1919) leads our eye diagonally from the bottom right to the top left, passing along a row of convicts outlined in frenetic pencil lines and suggesting the arduous motion

of repetitive rowing. (Figure 6) Fenneker himself also resorted to this kind of composition. In his poster for the film *Alkohol* (1919), for instance, a coiling snake leads our gaze

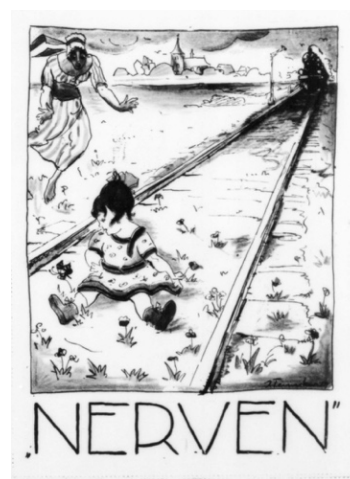


Figures 5-6

Left: Poster for *Opium* (1919) by Theo Matejko

Right: Poster for *Der Galeerensträfling* by Robert Leonard.

diagonally along the body of the central female figure, and in a poster for *Nerven* (1919)—which survives only in black & white reproductions from film magazines—diagonal train tracks pulls the spectator's attention from a vulnerable child at the bottom left to a menacing train at the top right traveling towards us like the Lumière locomotive. (Figures 7-8) Such



Figures 7-8

Left: Poster for *Alkohol* (1919) by Josef Fenneker

Right: Poster for *Nerven* (1919) by Josef Fenneker

dynamic, diagonal designs seem to anticipate the dynamic typophoto layouts later proposed by László Moholy-Nagy in his graphic design instruction at the Bauhaus, and like Moholy-

Nagy's work, they speak to an era that seemed to exist under the aegis of cinema's cultural force. (Figure 10)

But as much as the dynamism of these posters might testify to their intermedial relation to cinema, it's also worth remembering that these were first and foremost works of



Figures 5-6

Left: Poster for *Rausch* (1919) by Robert Leonard

Right: Model for a typophoto advertising poster by László Moholy-Nagy (1925)

advertising or—as Schubert's article called it—"Gebrauchsgraphik" (applied graphic design). That helps to explain a few factors at work here. First, film posters resulted from commissions, and despite some obvious references to contemporary art, they were intended less as unique or lasting artworks than as reproducible images (based on lithographic printing), designed for ephemeral use in multiple contexts. In that sense, the new movie posters, and the artists who created them, could build on a vibrant tradition of applied poster graphics, stretching from Toulouse-Lautrec's sinuous advertisements for Montmartre nightlife in the 1890s to the "object posters" ("Sachplakate") created by Lucien Bernhard in the 1910s to advertise German consumer goods such as cigarettes, matches and shoes. (Figure 11)

Film posters were latecomers to this scene, partly for reasons already suggested: a thriving culture of high quality film posters could only emerge once the film industry itself

had achieved a certain level of institutionalization. More precisely, the process was driven by a newly consolidated commissioning structure, where emerging studios and independent distributors—known as Monopol-Verleiher—ramped up investment in high-quality graphic



Figure 11

Poster for
Manoli
cigarettes
by Lucien
Bernhard
(1910)

design to help ensure the success of their titles. Similar models were also adopted by the newly emerging picture palaces. For instance, most of Fenneker's work from this period was commissioned by the cinema mogul Siegbert Goldschmidt for films playing at his opulent Marmorhaus cinema in Charlottenburg (which, though founded in 1913, really took after the war). This connection also led to Fenneker receiving commissions for interior designs in several Berlin theaters owned by Goldschmidt. (Figure 12) Leonard, similarly, was employed by the Union-Theater chain (see Figures 6 & 9).

This status of film posters as promotional images also brings us back to the aesthetic qualities discussed above. Like other advertisements, film posters needed to stand out, not only in the crowded visual spaces of streets and mass transportation, but also in film magazines, where dozens of production companies and monopoly distributors advertised their latest film releases side by side. Anyone who has leafed through an issue of *Der Film* from those postwar years is immediately struck by the sheer volume of advertisements competing for readers' attention with loud and sensationalist headlines, often accompanied by the kinds of dynamic visual compositions discussed above. Schubert alludes to this

function when he praises poster artist Robert Leonard for his ability to create “thrilling and new posters,” which “direct the dulled nerves of city-dwellers to the film offerings of his clients.”⁵

This need to stand out in the saturated visual spheres of early Weimar culture connects the film posters of this period to a broader surge of visual advertising in the years around WWI, which in turn fed the emergence of a new field of advertising psychology in the

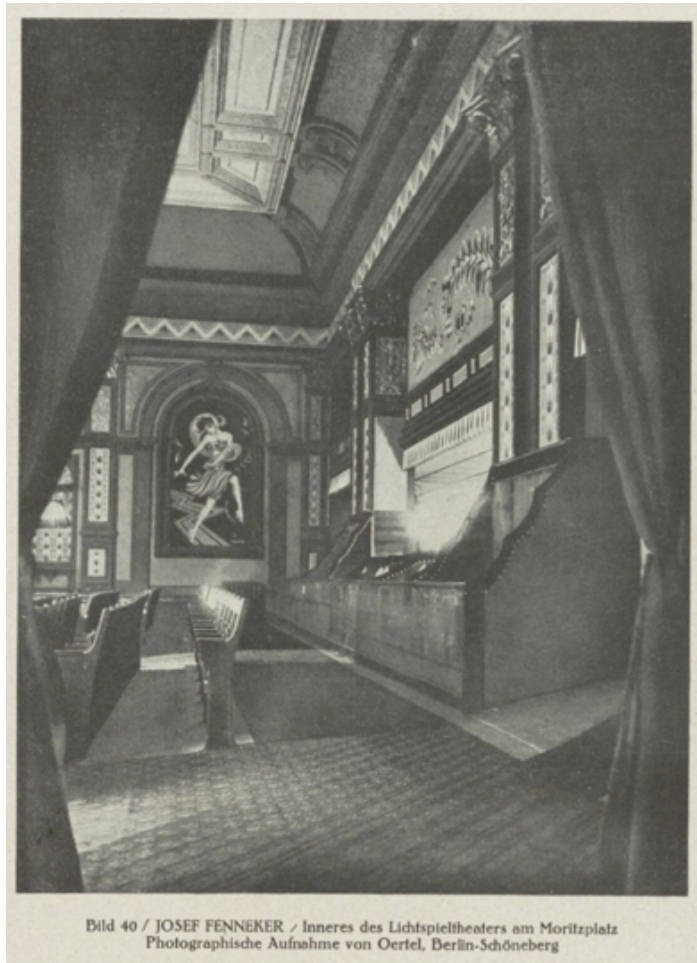


Figure 12

Interior of the
Lichtspieltheater
am Moritzplatz,
designed by
Josef
Fenneker (1919)

immediate postwar years. As Corey Ross has shown, advertising psychology was also driven by efforts to repurpose wartime propaganda techniques into a civilian advertising science that would bolster economic recovery.⁶ A milestone here was the founding of the Berlin Institut für Wirtschaftspsychologie (Institute for Economic Psychology), whose director Walter Moede created various guidelines for attracting the fleeting visual attention of mobile spectators and media consumers. Key among these were the use of striking visual elements

or motifs, what Moede dubbed “eye catchers” (*Blickfänge*), such as the famous depiction of the eye on Franz von Stuck’s 1911 poster for the Dresden Hygiene Exhibition. (Figure 13) Another key element was a feature that Moede called “lines of eye movement” (*Blickbewegungslinien*), which would direct the gaze of the masses through the image and



Figures 13-14

Left: Poster for International Hygiene Exhibition, Dresden (1911) by Franz von Stuck

Right: Poster for *Der Blick in den Abgrund* / *The Gaze into the Abyss* (1919), artist unidentified

ultimately to the product or trademark in question. While there is no evidence that poster artists like Fenneker, Matejko or Leonard knew Moede’s research, those artists were certainly operating in the same advertising milieu that Moede sought to theorize, and it’s not surprising that they would adopt similar strategies. Those include the dynamic diagonal compositions already discussed, as well as various types of “eye-catchers,” including some that might appear directly influenced by the Dresden hygiene poster. (Figure 14) As with other types advertising, the key goal for film posters was to capture and hold the fleeting attention of mobile spectators they passed by in the street or flipped through a magazine.

Beyond advertising considerations, the sensational quality of film posters in the immediate postwar years may also have been influenced by wider social conditions. As outlined in the film series *Weimar Uncensored: Taboos and Transgressions in German Cinema 1919-1920*, playing in this year’s edition of the Giornate del Cinema Muto, the period between November 1918 and May 1920 presented a unique film-historical window, in which federal film censorship was temporarily suspended. That lack of federal oversight of the

emerging film industry contributed to the widespread proliferation of sensationalist content, and the films of this period abound in lurid, provocative and excessive themes: crime and punishment, prostitution and sexuality, addiction and intoxication, rage and revenge, hypnosis and occultism, death and disease. This surplus of sensationalism, which offers a barometer of the widespread sense of moral and societal instability in those postwar years, is registered and often amplified in the posters of this period.

Perhaps by historical coincidence, sensationalism could also overlap here with advertising considerations. In those advertising pages of *Der Film* already mentioned, it is as if each poster design were striving to outdo the last one in provocative, suggestive, or lurid content. That content itself seems to operate as a proverbial “eye catcher,” striving to arrest the wandering attention of readers. (Figures 15-17) In this sense, one could say that the first golden age of German film posters was influenced by a unique confluence of factors, where advertising considerations, sociopolitical instability and unique film-historical conditions came together to produce a dazzling array of sensational film advertising in the years after



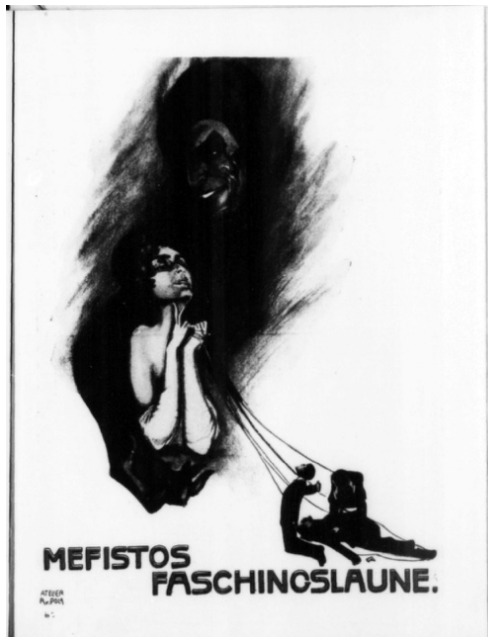
Figure 15

Poster for *Fieber* / *Fever* (1919), signed by W (Willy?) Dietrich

WWI.

So many of these posters—especially the ones visible in a journal like *Der Film*—are for titles now lost, and in closing it is also worth emphasizing the value of these film posters as

traces. Alongside surviving films like *Caligari*, the sensationalist turn in the filmmaking of 1919-20 produced hundreds of films that have disappeared, either through archival neglect



Figures 16-17

Left: Poster for *Mephistos Faschingslaune / Mephisto's Carnival Spirit* (1919), artist unidentified

Right: Poster for *Sündenlust / Lust for Sins* (1919), likely by Vintila Antonescu

or deliberate destruction after the reinstatement of censorship. In that context, the poster is often all we have left, standing as a fragment and synecdoche for the larger life of a film we'll likely never get to see. And even then, in many cases, the posters themselves only survive as “poor images,” copied and recopied through archival devotion, but with their own history now shrouded in mystery and their artists often unidentifiable.⁷ In that context, posters can offer precious, if imperfect, visual traces of a lost film culture, one that deserves to be much better known.

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¹ For more on Fenneker, see the online Fenneker collection at the Deutsche Kinemathek [here](#).

² See Walter F. Schubert, "Das deutsche Filmplakat," *Das Plakat* 11, no. 10 (October 1920), 443-457.

³ Schubert, "Das deutsche Filmplakat," 443.

⁴ Schubert, "Das deutsche Filmplakat," 448.

⁵ Schubert, "Das deutsche Filmplakat," 447.

⁶ Corey Ross, "La professionnalisation de la publicité et de la propagande dans l'Allemagne de Weimar," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, no. 101 (2009), 9-26.

⁷ See Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux journal*, no. 10 (November 2009).