



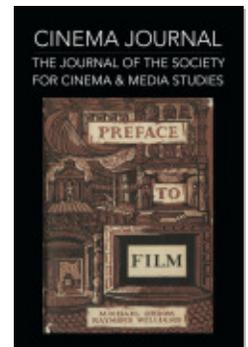
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Absolute Advertising: Walter Ruttmann and the Weimar Advertising Film

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Absolute Advertising: Walter Ruttmann and the Weimar Advertising Film

by MICHAEL COWAN

Abstract: Examining Walter Ruttmann's early animated advertisements in relation both to his *Opus* films and to contemporary advertising psychology, this article argues that advertising, far from representing a marginal phenomenon or a compromise of artistic integrity, was central to Ruttmann's professional identity as an avant-garde filmmaker. In so doing, I also seek to reframe our understanding of abstract animation in the 1920s as a form profoundly compatible with capitalist modernity and its regulation of perception. Through their combination of abstraction and figuration, Ruttmann's advertisements sought to incorporate contemporary theories of advertising pleasure and activate spectatorial competencies specific to the newly commodified spheres of post-World War I Germany.

While designations such as “absolute film” or “cinéma pur” once served to associate the experimental film culture of the 1920s with a modernist narrative of artistic autonomy and medium specificity, recent research has tended to sketch a more complex picture. Hardly a unified group, avant-garde filmmakers pursued a number of divergent agendas, many of them directly engaging with forms of mass culture and deeply imbricated in the financial and political interests of their time. As Esther Leslie has shown, the emergence of abstract animation in the work of Hans Richter, Walter Ruttmann, Lotte Reiniger and others cannot be understood without taking into account the widespread fascination, among avant-garde artists and critical theorists alike, with the mass cultural form of cartoons.¹ From a financial perspective, moreover, the very notion of an “autonomous” avant-garde film culture appears paradoxical when one recalls the critical role of institutions such as Hans Cürli's Institut für Kulturforschung (Institute for Cultural Research) and the Kulturfilm-Abteilung (Section for Cultural

1 Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2002).

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Films) of the Universum-Film AG (Ufa) studio in supporting experimental filmmakers during the 1920s.² Indeed, as Malte Hagener has pointed out, even such signature events as “Der absolute Film”—the celebrated screening of abstract animation and experimental montage films in Berlin in 1925—or the 1929 International Congress of Independent Film at the castle of La Sarraz, in Switzerland, were dependent on studio collaborations and acts of patronage.³

Hagener’s reexamination of avant-garde networks in the interwar period exemplifies a new paradigm of contextualized archival research into modernist film, and this return to the archive also goes hand in hand with a newfound interest in the long-overlooked realm of avant-garde activity in *commissioned* work. In an examination of films on architecture and urban planning by Slatan Dudow, Hans Richter, and others, Thomas Elsaesser has thus argued that research on commissioned films also calls for a particular type of meticulous contextualization, one leading away from traditional aesthetic and auteur-centered accounts to what he dubs the three *As*: *Auftraggeber* (the instance for which the film was commissioned), *Anlass* (the occasion and purpose for which it was made), and *Anwendung* (the film’s intended use).⁴ In this article, I focus on another area of commissioned film rife with possibilities for such investigations—namely, that of product advertising. As Ingrid Westbrook showed long ago, nearly all the major proponents of avant-garde film in interwar Germany—including Ruttmann, Richter, Reiniger, Guido Seeber, and Oskar Fischinger—collaborated with advertising producers such as Julius Pinschewer.⁵ Most, if not all, of this work takes up the signature forms we have come to associate with experimental cinema, from abstract animation (Ruttmann, Fischinger, Reiniger) to montage (Ruttmann, Seeber, Richter), which these artists placed in the service of advertisements for products as diverse as chocolates, tires, liqueurs, flowers, cigarettes, skin care, exhibitions, tourism, and illustrated magazines.⁶ One might be tempted to read such films as compromises or opportunistic means of financing the artists’ more “serious” experimental

2 Founded in 1919 for the propagation of political and cultural ideas through animated films, Cürli’s institute produced much of Lotte Reiniger’s early work. On the importance of the Kulturfilmabteilung at the Ufa for the Weimar avant-garde, see Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, “‘6. September.’ Walter Ruttmann: 1929,” in *1929: Beiträge zur Archäologie der Medien*, ed. Stefan Andriopoulos and Bernhard Dotzler (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2002), 327.

3 Malte Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-Garde and the Invention of Film Culture* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 47, 87. On the paradoxes surrounding the La Sarraz meeting, see also Elsaesser and Hagener, “6. September,” 316–320.

4 Thomas Elsaesser, “Die Stadt von Morgen: Filme zum Bauen und Wohnen,” in *Geschichte des dokumentarischen Films in Deutschland*, vol. 2, *Weimarer Republik 1918–1933*, ed. Klaus Kreimeier, Antje Ehmann, and Jeanpaul Goergen (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2005), 381–409. For further discussion of this concept, see Thomas Elsaesser, “Archives and Archaeologies: The Place of Non-Fiction Film in Contemporary Media,” in *Films That Work*, ed. Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 23; Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau, introduction to *Films That Work*, 8–16.

5 See Ingrid Westbrook, *Der Werbefilm: Ein Beitrag zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des Genres vom Stummfilm zum frühen Tonfilm* (Hildesheim, Germany: Georg Olms, 1983).

6 One can find parallels in Russia, where artists such as Alexander Rodchenko placed their design skills in the service of poster advertisements, and Dziga Vertov celebrated the power of film advertising within the new state. See Lora Wheeler Mjolsness, “Vertov’s Soviet Toys: Commerce, Commercialization and Cartoons,” *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 2, no. 3 (2008): 247–267.

projects.⁷ But if we adopt the contextualized approach called for by Elsaesser and others, a different picture emerges, one suggesting—as Jacques Rancière has argued in a different context—that modernist formalism and advertising design in fact shared some fundamental goals and principles.⁸ In the case of film, such an investigation can help us revise our understanding not only of the place of advertising film within modern film culture but also of the *aesthetics* of advertising film—and indeed of abstract animation itself, its uses, and its possible meanings in the 1920s.

In what follows, I want to pursue this argument through an analysis of one of the most prominent representatives of abstract film: Walter Ruttmann. Examining Ruttmann's advertising output in both its contextual and formal dimensions, it becomes apparent that abstract film, far from being understood uniformly as a resistance to the culture industry, could appear both to filmmakers and to advertising theorists as a form rife with financial and industrial possibilities, a means for harnessing film's effect on spectators, and a nodal point around which a filmmaker like Ruttmann could lay claim to a certain type of professional expertise. As I show here, Ruttmann's animated advertisements draw on these understandings of abstract film while ultimately blending abstraction and figuration to stage a loss and retrieval of meaning that was part and parcel of early advertising theory itself.

Certainly, Ruttmann's own checkered career renders difficult in advance any attempt to mythologize him as a proponent of an autonomous avant-garde. Ruttmann has, on the one hand, been seen as the very embodiment of Weimar formalism on account of his abstract *Opus* films (1921–1925), as well as his use of associative montage in *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (*Berlin: The Symphony of a Great City*, 1927), which Siegfried Kracauer famously charged with having undermined the documentary role of photography by privileging ornamental patterns of movement.⁹ But Ruttmann would go on after 1933 to make numerous industrial, advertising, and propaganda films, including a discarded prologue to Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), glorifying the rise of the Nazi Party. Here, too, one could read Ruttmann's post-Weimar career as a “fall” from the formal heights of his Weimar years. But it is worth questioning whether Ruttmann's formalism was ever really as detached as once believed. As Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener remind us, even before 1933, the vast majority of Ruttmann's filmic production consisted of commissioned work, and Ruttmann never espoused a purely formalist position of film as a disinterested or contemplative art form.¹⁰ Writing in 1928, he explicitly rejected any effort to close film off from economic and political

7 This is a frequent explanation of these filmmakers' involvement in advertising. See, for example, Marion von Hofacker, “Chronology,” in *Hans Richter: Activism, Modernism and the Avant-Garde*, 257; William Moritz, *Optical Poetry: The Life and Work of Oskar Fischinger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 54.

8 Rancière has argued that a modernist surface—whether the pages of Mallarmé's visual poetry or the posters of Peter Behrens's industrial trademarks—served as the setting of a shared experimentation with elementary types, which promised to reorder perception and redistribute the shared space in a world where the old forms of religious and courtly ceremony no longer held sway. See Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), 121–123; “The Surface of Design,” trans. Gregory Elliot, in *The Future of the Image* (London: Verso), 91–108.

9 See Siegfried Kracauer, “Wir schaffen,” *Frankfurter Zeitung*, November 17, 1927, reprinted in Jeanpaul Goergen, ed., *Walter Ruttmann: Eine Dokumentation* (Berlin: Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek, 1989), 118.

10 Elsaesser and Hagener, “6. September,” 344.

concerns, a project he equated with a return to the *l'art pour l'art* doctrines of the late nineteenth century and saw as antithetical to the very nature of film:

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. *Art is no longer abstraction, but rather the taking of positions!* Any art that does not contain a pronouncement belongs in the antiquities museum. Of course, it is a matter of indifference what this pronouncement applies to: feminine beauty; socialism; or technology, nature and their various imbrications. What is important is simply the fact of taking a position.¹¹

Published in 1928, Ruttmann’s statement, which might appear as a rather classical formulation of committed art, was clearly meant on one level to explain his own turn away from abstract animation and toward documentary (indexical-photographic) images with his *Berlin* film. But it also affords some insight, I believe, into a public personality that Ruttmann had been fashioning for some time, one in which the filmmaker participates in social process, placing film aesthetics in the service of other causes, be it political propaganda (e.g., “socialism”) or product advertising (e.g., “feminine beauty”). This notion of the artist as an intervener in social life—and Ruttmann’s own stated indifference to the object of intervention—might help to explain, more than any specific political positions that Ruttmann may or may not have espoused, his own willingness to participate in both advertising and, later, propaganda.¹²

Ruttmann’s advertising films from the early 1920s offer a fascinating case study in the formation of this new persona of the artist-expert. Ruttmann was, along with Lotte Reiniger, among the first experimental filmmakers to delve into product advertising, with the film *Der Sieger* (*The Victor*) from 1922, an advertisement for Excelsior tires produced by Julius Pinschewer. Advertising would go on, moreover, to form a major part of Ruttmann’s Weimar output in the 1920s, with at least seven titles from 1922 to 1929.¹³ Seen against the backdrop of debates about Ruttmann’s formalism, what makes these films particularly interesting is the way in which they reinstate figuration in the very medium generally associated most closely with abstract filmmaking:

- 11 Walter Ruttmann, “Die absolute Mode,” in Goergen, *Walter Ruttmann*, 82. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
- 12 Ruttmann’s insistence on the “indifference” of the object of art echoes contemporary sentiments about advertising and propaganda. See Corey Ross, “Mass Politics and the Techniques of Leadership: The Promise and Perils of Propaganda in Weimar Germany,” *German History* 24, no. 2 (2006): 192.
- 13 Surviving films from this period include *Der Sieger* (1922), *Das Wunder* (1922), *Das wiedergefundene Paradies* (1925), *Der Aufstieg* (1926), *Spiel der Wellen* (1926), *Dort wo am Rhein* (1927), and *Melodie der Welt* (1929). Ruttmann also made a sound-film advertisement for German radio titled *Tönende Welle* (1928), and there were likely several other films that are now lost. Ruttmann’s assistant Lore Leudesdorff would later recall advertising films they created for grand pianos, sleeping pills, and gas factories. See Jeanpaul Goergen, “Walter Ruttmann—Ein Porträt,” in Goergen, *Walter Ruttmann*, 25.

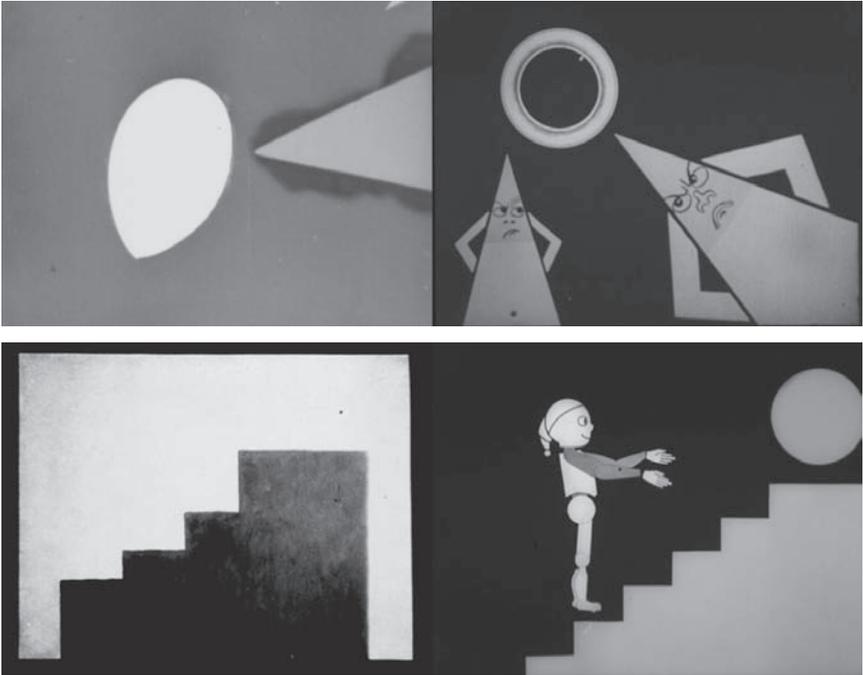


Figure 1. Stills from *Lichtspiel Opus I* (1921) and *Der Sieger: Ein Film in Farben* (1922).
 Figure 2. Stills from *Lichtspiel Opus II* (1922) and *Der Aufstieg* (1926).

animation. Or rather, the particular quality of these films lies in the way they seem to hover between absolute formalism and denotative referentiality, constantly moving back and forth between elemental forms and recognizable objects and thus highlighting the fluid border between the two. Particularly in Ruttmann's advertising films from the early 1920s, one finds precise echoes of the forms operative in his *Opus* films, but those forms now morph into identifiable faces, bodies, and objects. Thus in *Der Sieger*, the dance of round and angular forms from *Opus I* (1921) and *Opus II* (1922) becomes a struggle between anthropomorphized spikes and Excelsior tires (Figure 1). Similarly, the familiar round and paisley shapes from *Opus I* and *Opus II* become two arguing heads in the 1922 advertisement for Kantorowicz liqueur, *Das Wunder* (*The Miracle*); the spirals from *Opus III* (1924) become the serpent in the garden of Eden in the 1925 flower advertisement *Das wiedergefundene Paradies* (*Paradise Regained*); and the geometric shapes from *Opus II* and *Opus III* become the stairs on which the ravaged German nation climbs to health in *Der Aufstieg* (*The Climb*), a 1926 advertisement for the "Gesolei" exhibition on health and physical fitness (Figure 2).¹⁴ Nor is Ruttmann alone here; examining the range of advertising work by experimental filmmakers, one can find similar correspondences in works ranging from Reiniger's chocolate

14 The exhibition title "Gesolei" was an acronym formed from the words *Gesundheit* (health), *Sozialfürsorge* (social welfare), and *Leibesübung* (bodily training).

advertisement *Die Barcarole* (*The Barcarole*, 1923) to Fischinger's cigarette advertisement *Muratti greift ein* (*Muratti Steps In*, 1934).

In asking what made possible the translation of experimental forms from abstract film to advertising, it is worth reconsidering, here at the beginning, Ruttmann's "absolute" films themselves, which arose almost simultaneously with his advertising output. In his 1926 study *Expressionismus und Film* (*Expressionism and Film*), the critic Rudolf Kurtz described the abstract work of Richter and Ruttmann, not surprisingly, as an effort to do away with the "psychological" dimensions of spectatorship—that is, all of the processes of cognition, association, and temporal ordering by which spectators normally identify things and people and piece together stories—to access elementary forms and laws of movement. But if abstract film emptied out the "psychology" of spectatorship, it nonetheless left room for, and even cultivated, a "psychophysical" dimension, in which the film elicits an elemental empathetic reaction from spectators. As Kurtz described it:

Despite its rejection of the possibility for psychological comprehension, absolute art doubtless exerts effects on audiences in certain cases. Only this is not an act of contemplation that perceives forms in their pure relations to one another, but rather a mental process sufficiently familiar from psychophysics: the spectators feels his way into the mathematical forms [*fühlt sich in die mathematischen Formen ein*] and answers them with corresponding sensations. This process occurs at an unconscious and compulsory level; the elementary lines and form relations lead the spectator's sensation in their directions, making him move with their movements and guiding him through their various degrees of clarity—so that a mental counter-image arises that corresponds to the struggle, harmony, or reconciliation of the forms on the screen.¹⁵

Kurtz's reference to "psychophysics" here is hardly fortuitous; already in the late nineteenth century, the idea that the sight of movement could provoke a tendency towards countermovements within the spectator was a standard axiom of psychophysical research, invoked by scientists such as Charles Féré and Théodule Ribot—under the term *psychomotor induction*—to explain all sorts of phenomena, from telepathy to the predilection for popular spectacles of movement such as sports.¹⁶ This emerging model of spectatorship also came to inform a widespread understanding of film as a medium of visual movement that could affect spectators psychosomatically, inducing

15 Rudolf Kurtz, *Expressionismus und Film*, ed. Christian Kleining and Ulrich Johannes Bell (Berlin: Chronos, 1997), 93–94.

16 See Charles Féré, *Sensation et mouvement* (Paris: Alcan, 1900), 91: "Le goût des jeux de force, d'adresse et d'agilité: lutttes courses, combats de bêtes, etc.[.] n'a pas d'autre raison. On aime le mouvement sous toutes ses formes, et, dans les arts, sa représentation a la plus grande importance au point de vue de l'esthétique." On the role of sympathetic imitation in telepathy, see page 16: "Si on peut lire la pensée de son interlocuteur sur son visage, c'est qu'en le regardant on prend inconsciemment son expression, et l'idée se présente en conséquence."

“countermovements” at the micro-physiological level.¹⁷ As late as 1927, a writer for the journal *Filmtechnik*, in an article titled “Von der Psychomechanik des Zuschauers” (“On the Psychomechanics of the Spectator”), could still rely on this psychophysical explanation to argue that movement shown on the screen could elicit tendencies toward elementary countermovements in spectators: “When we see a movement, it calls forth in us a need to produce our own movement in turn. When executed correctly, it ‘hits’ its target and infects us. . . . These are qualities that make man an appropriate object for film’s effects.”¹⁸ But while it could theoretically be applied to any form or genre of filmmaking, this notion that visual movement could elicit countermovements in spectators proved particularly attractive for describing the desired effects of *abstract* film, which was widely understood as an effort to reduce “content” to isolate and amplify—through the exclusion of psychological processes—such psychophysical mechanisms. Not only theorists such as Kurtz, but also practitioners such as Hans Richter, saw absolute film among other things as a field for cultivating the psychophysical power of moving images. As Richter explained in the 1924 text “Die schlecht trainierte Seele” (“The Badly Trained Soul”): “This film here offers no ‘stopping points,’ at which one could look back through memory. The viewer is—exposed—forced to ‘feel’—to go along with the rhythm.”¹⁹

My point in rehearsing such arguments is not to maintain that Richter or Kurtz was empirically correct in his assessment of abstract film’s ability to affect spectators. But such statements do tell us something about the ideas and motivations informing the very emergence of “absolute” film in the 1920s. That emergence was motivated not simply by artistic questions but also by a desire to trade in psychological understanding for psychophysical effects. In this, absolute film can be read, at least in part, as one result of a broader media paradigm shift in the nineteenth century explored in recent media archeology. Like the visual practices and discourses examined by Jonathan Crary, these films were created for an *embodied* spectator, one for whom the faculties of attention, sensation, and affect mobilized in acts of visual consumption had become the new terrain of social power.²⁰ Like the modernist poetry examined by Friedrich Kittler, moreover, these films carried into aesthetic production a “flight of ideas” inaugurated by psychophysics. Kittler famously saw Hermann Ebbinghaus’s use of meaningless syllables to measure quantitative memory capacity as the paradigmatic

17 This tradition of psychophysics is related to, but also slightly distinct from, the tradition of empathy (*Einführung*) also invoked by Kurtz in the passage above when he describes the process by which spectators “feel their way” (*einfühlen*) into the forms on the screen. While empathy theorists did describe the spectator’s reaction in terms of countermovements, they tended to insist on the *metaphorical* quality of such bodily action in an effort to salvage a notion of disinterested aesthetic experience. On this point, see Scott Curtis, “Einführung und die frühe deutsche Filmtheorie,” in *Einführung: Zu Geschichte und Gegenwart eines ästhetischen Konzepts*, ed. Robert Curtis and Gertrud Koch (Munich: Fink, 2008), 79–105 (esp. 91–98).

18 Leo Witlin, “Von der Psychomechanik des Zuschauers,” *Filmtechnik*, no. 23 (1927): 407.

19 Hans Richter, “Die schlecht trainierte Seele,” in *Hans Richter: Film ist Rhythmus*, ed. Jeanpaul Goergen (Berlin: Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek, 1989), 28.

20 See Jonathan Crary, “Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory,” *October* 50 (Autumn 1989): 96–107; *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 1–25; *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 3–4, 73–79.

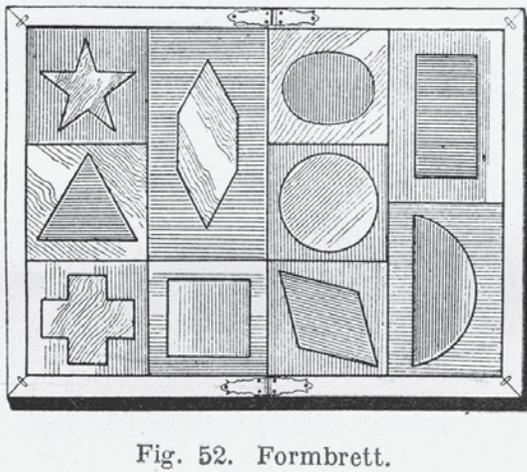


Figure 3. Form board test. Illustration from Fritz Giese, *Methoden der Wirtschaftspsychologie* (1927).

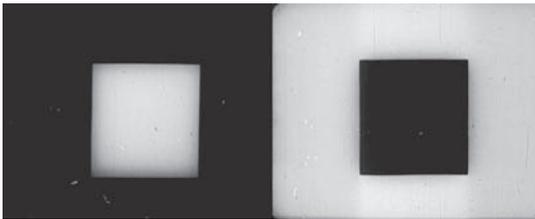


Figure 4. Stills from Hans Richter, *Rhythmus 21* (1926).

in children's education and in performance intelligence tests, or the *Farbenkreisel* (color wheel) designed to test the perception of color combinations. Both devices were still being used in the 1920s for intelligence and aptitude testing, as witnessed by their inclusion in publications such as *Methoden der Wirtschaftspsychologie* (*Methods of Economic Psychology*) by the German psychotechnician Fritz Giese (Figure 3).²² Indeed, one could point to numerous similarities between the modernist textual phenomena noted by Kittler and the visual experimentations of absolute filmmaking. Just as Mallarmé discovered the importance of the white page for defining the black of letters, so Hans Richter highlighted the relativity of black and white in the famous reversal of figure

incarnation of a new regime of materialist media experience, one that would find its aesthetic continuation in the experimental "nonsense" poetry that emerged some twenty years later in works by Kurt Schwitters and Christian Morgenstern.²¹ A similar relation between art and science can be observed in absolute painting and film, which operate with many of the same parameters on the visual level. The attention to elementary forms, for example, as well as the effects of primary colors and color combinations, were standard components of psychophysical experimentation—and scientists invented all sorts of apparatuses for testing them, such as the "form board" devised by Édouard Séguin in 1866 and subsequently used

21 See Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985), 206–226.

22 An early history of the "form board test" (which was first devised by the French doctor Jean Marc Gaspard Itard in an effort to train a so-called *enfant sauvage*, later developed by Séguin and others to test the intelligence of children and the mentally ill, and finally employed by doctors at Ellis Island to test the mental capacity of immigrants) can be found in Reuel Hull Sylvester, "The Form Board Test" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1913). On the use of the *Farbenkreisel* in nineteenth-century science and industry, see, for example, *Das neue Buch der Erfindungen, Gewerbe und Industrien, Zweiter Band: Die Kräfte der Natur und ihre Benutzung*, 6th ed. (Leipzig: Otto Spamer, 1872), 243.

and background in his first rhythm film, a motif he would return to in his *Filmstudie* of 1926 (Figure 4).

Seen in this light, the absolute film of the 1920s would appear less as a mode of resistance to mass culture than as one part of a broader elaboration of new techniques of spectatorship, where the viewer figures more as an embodied object of psychophysical testing than as a hermeneutic interpreter. It was precisely this status as a forum for perceptual experimentation, moreover, that made abstract film, in the eyes of contemporary observers, an obvious realm to combine with advertising; for perhaps no other domain of applied science in the 1920s adopted the lessons and tools of psychophysics more enthusiastically than advertising psychology. That science emerged in the wake of World War I—almost simultaneously with the emergence of abstract film—from its status as a branch of psychotechnics to become a major field of independent scientific research during the Weimar Republic, one marked by the opening of institutes and laboratories (e.g., the Institut für Wirtschaftspsychologie, or Institute for Economic Psychology, founded in 1920 in Berlin), the proliferation of specialty journals (e.g., *Die Reklame*, *Seidels Reklame*), and a host of books on advertising psychology.²³ Drawing explicitly on the pioneering research of figures such as Ebbinghaus and Hugo Münsterberg (particularly his *Psychologie und Wirtschaftsleben*, or *Psychology and Economic Life*, from 1912), theorists within this new branch sought to forge a new science of advertising spectatorship by meticulously testing—via rapid-flash windows of tachistoscopes—the psychophysical effects of such material factors as composition, contrast, color, typography, letter spacing, image size, and ad placement.²⁴ And their experiments—responding to the need to compete for ever more fleeting and divided forms of attention within the mass-mediated public spheres of the 1920s—resulted in a widespread call for the simplification of images not a little reminiscent of abstract film itself; specifically, theorists argued that advertisements should strive for clarity and rapid recognition through the reduction of images to elementary geometric forms, the adoption of streamlined typographies, and the strategic use of high contrast.²⁵ Such principles were put to use in the trademark designs by Wilhelm Deffke and others, but they also came to characterize the aesthetics of poster design, most famously in the so-called *Sachplakate* (objective posters) of Lucien Bernhard, which simplified shapes and colors to the extreme to draw attention to the object advertised.²⁶ A case in point is seen in a celebrated advertisement by Bernhard for home movie projectors by the Heimlicht company, in which the family members, projector, and light were reduced to abstract white geometrical shapes over a black background. This was singled out for special mention in 1920 in the pages of *Seidels Reklame*, which lauded Bernhard's

23 The first book in German devoted to advertising psychology was Christof von Hartungen's *Psychologie der Reklame* (Stuttgart: Poeschel, 1921). Other titles include Theodor König's *Die Psychologie der Reklame* (PhD diss., Würzburg, 1922), Käthe Kurtzig's *Untersuchung zur Wirkung der Reklame* (PhD diss., Frankfurt, 1925), and Karl Marbe's *Psychologie der Werbung* (Stuttgart: Poeschel, 1927).

24 Hugo Münsterberg, *Psychologie und Wirtschaftsleben* (Leipzig: Barth, 1912); see Theodor König, *Reklame-Psychologie: Gegenwärtiger Stand—ihre praktische Bedeutung*, 2nd ed. (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1924), 27–101.

25 Ibid., 40, 52, 78. König insists again and again that the guiding rule for advertising theory is the energetic imperative, that is, the imperative to achieve a maximum effect on spectators with the most economic means possible.

26 See Adolf Behne, "Deffke," *Seidels Reklame* 8 (1923): 2–6.

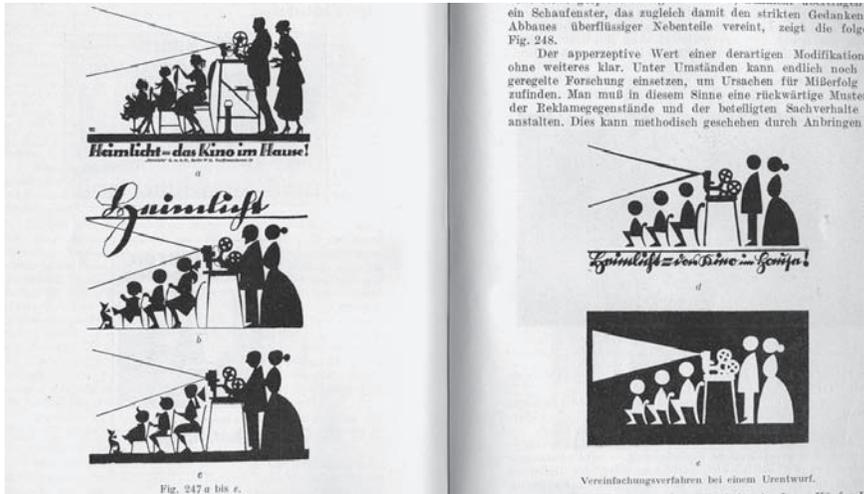


Figure 5. Lucien Bernhardt, advertisement for Heimlicht projectors. Illustration from Fritz Giese, *Methoden der Wirtschaftspsychologie* (1927).

use of “spherical human figures” (*Kugelmenschen*) and the “effects of black-and-white contrast.”²⁷ Looking back in 1927, Fritz Giese would also take Bernhardt’s advertising as a model of effective advertising layout in his *Methoden der Wirtschaftspsychologie*, in which he walked readers through the simplification of a complex image via the reduction of detail and the reversal of black and white (Figure 5).

Such reversals of black and white recall, once again, the work of Richter. But advertising theorists also meticulously discussed and tested the effects of contrasting colors. Wilhelm Ostwald’s color theories, according to which “harmonious” color compositions could be achieved through the exact determination of the brightness of adjacent colors, generated widespread interest in advertising circles.²⁸ But more often, advertising theorists latched onto ideas about complementary and contrasting color tones derived from Goethe’s *Farbenlehre* via experimental psychology and understood as a means of maximizing the advertisement’s effect on attention. In an article published in *Die Reklame*, for example, the head of the Institut für Wirtschaftspsychologie in Berlin, Walther Moede, cited the “law of contrast” as the key to effective advertising design and recommended not only the use of black and white but also *Farbenkontrast* (color contrast).²⁹ Similarly, the editor of *Seidels Reklame*, Robert Hösel, described a series of experiments designed to determine which color combinations would produce the most effective contrast between text and background on posters.³⁰ In one of the first book-length presentations of experimental advertising psychology, Theodor König would

27 “Inserat vom Tage,” *Seidels Reklame* 5 (1920): 193.

28 *Die Reklame* published an article by Ostwald summarizing his theories in 1919. See Wilhelm Ostwald, “Farbkunst und Werbekunst,” *Die Reklame* 13 (1920): 7–8.

29 Walther Moede, “Psychologie der Reklame,” *Die Reklame* 13 (1920): 244.

30 See Robert Hösel, “Die Plakatfarben in ihrer Fernwirkung,” *Seidels Reklame* 4 (1919): 187–188.

argue in 1922 that the greatest effect on consumer attention could be achieved by contrasting the complementary colors of green and red or yellow and blue.³¹

It is perhaps no accident that the same color combinations show up frequently in Ruttmann's animated advertising films, which suggests that he and Pinschewer were at least minimally aware of the latest science on fashioning words and images in terms of their effects on the attention. Such an awareness is, moreover, hardly surprising when one considers the intense research into color taking place simultaneously at the Bauhaus, where the study of color played a key role in the preliminary course, and courses in advertising, typography, and even experimental film formed part of the school's curriculum.³² Bauhaus teachers frequently employed color wheels of the type described above (including a device developed by Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack, who also screened abstract color projections at the *Absoluter Film* matinee in 1925) to illustrate effects of color combinations, and it is surely no accident that the famous children's block set designed by Alma Siedhoff Buscher to familiarize children with primary forms—itsself reminiscent of “form board” tests—employed the same primary color combinations of red and green and yellow and blue.³³ In fact, it was one of the Bauhaus's students, Lore Leudesdorff, who would serve as Ruttmann's principal assistant on several *Opus* films and advertising films, and would later recall bringing to Ruttmann's films specific knowledge gained from her Bauhaus courses, including “new techniques of colors and forms” (*das Neue an Farben und Formen*).³⁴

As Frederic Schwartz has argued, the interest in psychophysics and advertising among Bauhaus artists, along with a predilection for the metaphor of the artist as “engineer,” formed part of a widespread tendency, during the 1920s, to redefine the role of the artist as a potential “expert” in social and media questions rather than a hermetic creator withdrawn from social concerns.³⁵ This cult of the artist as “expert” was particularly pronounced among the constructivist circles of the Weimar avant-garde—one thinks here of the circle around Hans Richter, Werner Graeff, and the constructivist journal *G. Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*—and it also informed the

31 König, *Reklame-Psychologie*, 42–43.

32 On advertising at the Bauhaus, see Frederic J. Schwarz, “The Eye of the Expert: Walter Benjamin and the Avant Garde,” *Art History* 24, no. 3 (2001): 414–415; on experimental film at the Bauhaus, see Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, 38.

33 On Siedhoff-Buscher's blocks and their relation to pedagogical practices stretching back to the early nineteenth-century work of Friedrich Froebel and Heinrich Pestalozzi, see Christine Mehring, “Alma Buscher: ‘Ship’ Building Toy, 1923,” in *Bauhaus 1919–1933: Workshops in Modernity*, ed. Berry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 156–162. On the use of the color top in Bauhaus preliminary courses, see Bruce Elder, *Harmony and Dissent: Film and Avant-Garde Movements in the Early Twentieth Century* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), 68.

34 Cited in Westbrock, *Der Werbefilm*, 53. The entire quote reads: “Da konnte ich alles anwenden, was ich am Bauhaus gelernt hatte. Das Abstrakte, das Hintergründige, das Neue an Farben und Formen, und dazu noch dreidimensional.”

35 This is precisely the development that Robert Hösel had in mind when he explained in a 1920 article for *Seidels Reklame*: “Der *L'art pour l'art* Standpunkt ist freilich durch die veränderten Zeitverhältnisse heftig erschüttert worden. Man stellte der wirklichen Kunst die Gleichberechtigung der sogenannten Nutzkunst gegenüber, betonte, daß ein wahres Kunstwerk nichts von seinem Wert verliere, wenn es eine Zwecke diene und wies als schlagendes Beweismittel auf die Architektur, als Mutter aller Künste, die immer eine praktische Aufgabe erfüllt.” Robert Hösel, “Reklame und Kunst,” *Seidels Reklame* 5 (1920): 299.

frequent collaborations of avant-garde filmmakers with advertisers. Those collaborations in fact signaled the filmmaker's entry into a very specific kind of "expert" culture. As Corey Ross has shown, the emergence of a professional caste of "advertising experts" in the Weimar Republic (the most prominent association bore the title *Verein deutscher Reklamefachleute*, or Association of German Advertising Experts) was centrally bound up with a question and process of legitimation: having witnessed the new prominence ascribed to propaganda as a means of mobilizing public opinion during World War I, Weimar scientists and policy makers came to see advertising and propaganda as crucial forces within the "mediatized public spheres" of modern mass democracies. Advertising theorists capitalized on this newfound prominence to legitimate their own role as "experts" in mass psychology and as a key professional class, alongside work scientists and psychotechnicians, within the management of the new industrial consumer society.³⁶

It is against this background, moreover, that one can understand the transformations in the area of film advertising after 1918. Although filmic advertisements can be traced back to the earliest years of cinematography (the first verifiable advertising film in Germany dates from 1897), the period after World War I saw a veritable explosion in advertising production, with more than eighty companies operating in Germany alone by the end of the 1920s.³⁷ These companies and their major players stayed abreast of the latest developments in advertising theory and competed fiercely for their reputations as experts in the newly defined professional sphere of filmic advertising. As one writer described it in an article for *Die Reklame* from 1925, "Not every person—no matter how talented—is an expert in this field. Not every person can master the difficult instrument of propaganda, and this goes especially for filmic propaganda, since this form must be treated in a very specific way."³⁸

Within this new field of professional film advertisers, the most prominent player was surely Julius Pinschewer. Having started in advertising well before the outbreak of the war, Pinschewer went on to become a major producer of propaganda film during the war years, before founding one of the most successful advertising enterprises of the Weimar Republic in 1918; and he would continue to produce advertising films

36 Ross, "Mass Politics and the Techniques of Leadership," 184–193.

37 On the history of advertising film before 1918, see Westbrock, *Der Werbefilm*, 30–44; Günter Ägde, *Flimmernde Versprechen: Geschichte des deutschen Werbefilms im Kino seit 1897* (Berlin: Verlag das Neue Berlin, 1998), 1–72. For a history of two of these companies, see Ralf Forster, *Ufa und Nordmark: Zwei Firmengeschichten und der deutsche Werbefilm 1919–1945. Schriftenreihe der Cinémathèque Municipale de Luxembourg* 17 (Trier, Germany: WVT, 2005); Jeanpaul Goergen, "In filmo veritas! Inhaltlich vollkommen wahr. Werbefilme und ihre Produzenten," in *Geschichte des dokumentarischen Films in Deutschland*, vol. 2, *Weimarer Republik 1918–1933*, ed. Klaus Kreimeier, Antje Ehmman, and Jeanpaul Goergen (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2005), 348–363.

38 Fritz Ziege, "Neue Wege der Filmpropaganda," *Die Reklame* 18 (1925): 155. Not surprisingly, Ziege legitimates the importance of propaganda and advertising in film with reference to the war: "Das Ausland hat von der ungeheueren Werbekraft des Films bereits im Kriege in überlegener Weise Gebrauch gemacht. Noch heute haben wir unter den Nachwirkungen des Propagandafeldzuges des Auslandes zu leiden, es ist daher auf das lebhafteste zu begrüßen, wenn im Bund mit der Aufklärung durch Wort und Schrift die deutschfreundliche Filmpropaganda einhergeht" (157).

after his flight to Switzerland in 1933.³⁹ Pinschewer held numerous contracts, many exclusive, with major cinemas, variety stages, schools, and exhibition spaces throughout Germany, and even with the onboard cinemas of the Hamburg-Amerika cruise ships, so that he could claim by 1926 that his films were seen by three million spectators weekly.⁴⁰ It was Pinschewer who inaugurated the trend of avant-garde advertising films in Weimar, beginning with his collaborations with Ruttmann and Reiniger in 1922. Given the increasing prominence of advertising in the mass-mediated public spheres of the new democracy, working with Pinschewer's company—as so many of the experimental filmmakers of the period did—meant a legitimization of the public role of film itself within the new republic and a confirmation of the filmmaker's status as an expert: a professional with expertise analogous to that of scientific experts in advertising.

That Ruttmann himself was understood at least partly in this sense can be gathered, among other things, by the reception his advertising work received in the trade literature of the advertising industry. As film itself came to figure more prominently in advertising discussions in the Weimar Republic, advertising theorists took an increased interest in the use of abstract film on account of its perceived psychosomatic effects on spectators, and they held out particularly high hopes for the films of Ruttmann. Thus, in a 1926 article on advertising film for the journal *Industrielle Psychotechnik* (edited by the head of the Berlin Institut für Wirtschaftspsychologie, Walther Moede), the advertising theorist Käthe Kurtzig reserved special praise for Ruttmann's abstract films, arguing that the reduction of narrative allowed for an experience of “resonance” (*Mitschwingen*) with the movement on the screen:

Absolute film, this latest type of artistic film, offers no rounded stories. Rather, it attempts to give visible expression to an intellectual content through the movement of ornaments and figures; it works above all through the rhythmic power of movement, which brings the spectator into resonance with its movements [*den Zuschauer zum Mitschwingen bringt*] and allows him not simply to see and understand events on the screen, but also to experience them.⁴¹

The same year, in an article for *Die Reklame*, the official organ of the *Verein deutscher Reklamefachleute*, the association member Fritz Pauli, who had argued at length for the psychosomatic power of rhythm in film and light advertisements in his study *Rhythmus*

39 For more on Pinschewer's career, see Jeanpaul Goergen, “Julius Pinschewer: A Trade-Mark Cinema,” in *A Second Life: German Cinema's First Decades*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996), 168–174; André Amsler, “*Wer dem Werbefilm verfällt, ist verloren für die Welt*: Das Werk von Julius Pinschewer 1883–1961 (Zurich: Chronos, 1997), 9–45.

40 See the newspaper advertisements for Pinschewer's company from 1925 and 1926 reproduced in the CD-ROM section of *Julius Pinschewer: Klassiker des Werbefilms*, ed. Martin Loiperdinger (DVD; Berlin: Absolute Medien, 2010).

41 Käthe Kurtzig, “Die Arten des Werbefilms,” *Industrielle Psychotechnik* 3 (1926): 314. Interestingly, Ruttmann would use the same kind of language the following year to describe his own efforts in Berlin: *Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*: “Und wenn es mir gelungen ist, die Menschen zum Schwingen zu bringen, sie die Stadt Berlin erleben zu lassen, dann habe ich mein Ziel erreicht.” Ruttmann, “Wie ich meinen BERLIN-Film drehte” (1927), in Goergen, *Walter Ruttmann*, 80.

und Resonanz als ökonomisches Prinzip in der Reklame (*Rhythm and Resonance as Economical Principles in Advertising*, 1926), singled out Ruttmann's films *Der Sieger* and *Das wiedergefundene Paradies* for offering what Pauli described as "the innovative use of forms and colors for effects in a clearly recognizable effort of rhythmical organization."⁴² Similarly, another article published in *Die Reklame* the following year argued that Ruttmann's films, with their "wavelike movements" (*Wellenbewegung*) and play of primary colors, "exert a lasting influence on the attention" (*Jesseln nachhaltig*).⁴³

Interestingly, despite all their enthusiasm for abstract forms, colors, and rhythms, none of these theorists acknowledged the extent to which Ruttmann's advertising films had, in fact, deviated from the precepts of "absolute" cinema through the reintroduction of identifiable objects. This, too, however, could find a justification in advertising theory. Indeed, the one point on which advertising psychology contradicted the "flight of ideas" inaugurated by psychophysical testing was precisely the question of meaning and recognition. Theodor König, for example, in the same book cited above, identified three principal goals for a successful advertisement: capturing the attention, producing pleasure, and stimulating memory. And he argued—even as he extolled at length the benefits of Ebbinghaus's experiments in meaningless syllables for advertising—that the use of *identifiable* objects was critical to all three phases. First, while novel impressions can stimulate our curiosity, the qualities of familiarity (*Vertraulichkeit*) and meaningfulness (*Bedeutsamkeit*) capture the attention more effectively because the objects thus recognized speak to spectators' interests.⁴⁴ Second, in terms of pleasure, König argued that, alongside other factors such as harmony of form or the use of humor, the very familiarity of objects served to stimulate spectatorial pleasure: "According to a well-known psychological law, the pleasure we receive from the very act of recognizing something is easily transferred to that object itself."⁴⁵ Finally, and in direct distinction to Ebbinghaus, König argued that while meaningless syllables might provide the ideal zero-degree material for testing perception and memory, in actual practice, representations allowing for meaningful associations were much more effective at *stimulating* memory. Customers, he argued vehemently, perceive and retain meaningful words much more effectively than "concatenations of meaningless syllables" (*Verbindungen sinnloser Silben*).⁴⁶ The same logic, moreover, applies to images: "Memory can and must be supported by images, drawings and diagrams that are, to the greatest extent possible, meaningful and easy to perceive and understand."⁴⁷ Similarly, for trademark design, König argued: "Trademarks should be meaningful, for the figures that are

42 Fritz Pauli, "Das Problem des Werbefilms," *Die Reklame* 19 (1926): 617. For more on Pauli's importance within Weimar advertising circles, see my article "Advertising, Rhythm and the Filmic Avant-Garde in Weimar: Guido Seeber and Julius Pinschewer's *Kipho* film," *October* 131 (Winter 2010): 23–50.

43 Richard F. C. Béringuier, "An der Peripherie des Reklamefilms," *Die Reklame* 20, no. 12 (1927): 429.

44 König, *Reklame-Psychologie*, 94–97.

45 *Ibid.*, 156.

46 *Ibid.*, 48.

47 *Ibid.*, 135.

retained and distinguished from others are above all those that provoke an associative chain of thoughts and a process of interpretation.”⁴⁸

Within certain parameters, then, advertising theory actually sought to *temper* the evacuation of meaning that characterized both modern psychophysics and much experimental art. But I would hasten to add that this was not to return to any eighteenth-century model of spiritualizing or interiorizing hermeneutics. Rather, the call for “meaningful” associations was made in the very interest of increasing the advertisement’s material efficacy with actual consumers: only a combination of signifiers and signifieds, only a mix of abstraction and identifiable content, could elicit the maximum productivity of attention and memory that advertisers sought, and thus guarantee the advertisement’s real-world success.

At this point, we can better understand how Ruttmann’s advertising films—with their slippage between abstraction and figuration—enacted questions of advertising theory as it had developed by the 1920s. Indeed, according to Rudolf Kurtz, Ruttmann’s absolute films themselves already contained something of this mixture of abstraction and recognition key to the successful advertisement. In the endless multitude of rounded, wavelike, and pointed forms populating Ruttmann’s films, as well as their lively interaction on the screen, Kurtz saw a far greater degree of what he called “organic associations” or “organic reminiscences” (*organische Anklänge*)—and thus far greater room for psychological operations—than in the reductive geometry of Viking Eggeling and Richter: “The strong attraction of Ruttmann’s films lies in their psychological impulses, which make possible their effects on spectators. His compositions are animated by a drama in which the actors are mathematical forms that contain a wealth of organic associations.”⁴⁹ Moreover, it is precisely on account of this increased propensity to psychological associations, Kurtz argues, that Ruttmann’s filmic aesthetic lends itself so well to advertising: “Just how great a wealth of expression is contained in these colorful forms in movement can be seen in the fact that Ruttmann had considerable success with an industry advertising film in this style.”⁵⁰

While one may or may not agree with Kurtz’s assessment of Ruttmann’s *Opus* films and their effects on spectators, it does suggest what was at stake in Ruttmann’s *advertising* films. For what those films repeatedly thematize is precisely the line between abstraction and “organic” associations—associations they continually make and undo before our eyes. A case in point can be seen in Ruttmann’s first advertisement for Excelsior tires, *Der Sieger*. For his film, Ruttmann borrowed motifs from a previous advertisement for Excelsior tires by Harry Jäger titled *Im Lande der Apachen* (*In the Land of the Apaches*, 1920). Drawn in a black-and-white caricature style, Jäger’s animated film

48 Ibid., 117–118. In this call for the reintroduction of meaningful syllables and forms in practical situations, König was hardly alone. Fritz Giese, for example, argued that meaningless syllables, though useful for experimental psychology, were less helpful for advertising because they could not be remembered by laypeople: “Die Gedächtnisleistung wird beim Laien erst möglich, indem er sich künstlich zu Dingen wie ‘zöf’—‘mik’—‘lur’ mnemotechnische Assoziationen künstlicher Art mühsam ermittelt.” Fritz Giese, *Methoden der Wirtschaftspsychologie* (Berlin: Urban & Schwarzenberg, 1927), 21.

49 Kurtz, *Expressionismus und Film*, 102.

50 Ibid.

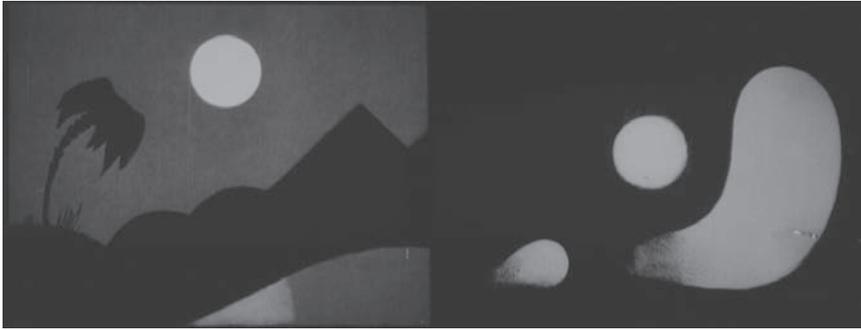


Figure 6. Stills from *Der Sieger: Ein Film in Farben* (1922).

showed a group of men in an automobile being attacked by bow-wielding “Indians,” but escaping when their opponents’ arrows prove no match for the resistant Excelsior tires. Where Jäger’s film relied on a familiar adventure scenario, however, Ruttmann’s film plays out its drama almost entirely on the formal level. Following a title card that reads “Der Sieger: ein Film in Farben” (“The Victor: A Film in Colors”), the film opens onto a clearly identifiable image of a tropical landscape, over which a sun then rises, reflected in the lagoon below. But hardly have we had time to absorb this harmonious image—with its static and balanced composition of palm tree, sun, water, and mountain—when it is immediately transformed by a dark and menacing storm cloud into an abstract field of frenetic explosions, followed by a dance of circular and paisley forms in primary colors of red, blue, and yellow (Figure 6).

This transformation has everything to do with pleasure. For *Der Sieger* will recount precisely the effort to reinstate the lost idyll of the establishing image on a higher, industrial plane, and the Excelsior tire will form the agent of that sublation. As the tropical lagoon disappears in the opening sequence, only the form of the circle remains,



Figure 7. Still from *Der Sieger: Ein Film in Farben* (1922).

no longer denoting a sun, but simply constituting one form among others in an abstract graphic conflict of colored shapes. Soon, however, this circle—the dominant form of Ruttmann’s film—will morph back into an object, namely the Excelsior tire, which rolls over abstract waves, geometrical rectangles, and finally a new industrial landscape, all presented in various combinations of red, blue, yellow, and green (Figure 7). Throughout these transformations, the tire—here recalling Jäger’s scenario—is characterized by its bouncy elasticity and its corresponding ability to

withstand the shocks of Ruttmann's angry spikes. But seen within Ruttmann's new abstract technological environment, this theme of elasticity takes on further connotations, recalling George Grosz's contention, in his 1917 poem "Man muß Kautschukmann sein" ("One Must Be a Rubber Man"), that the modern psyche had to become as elastic as rubber to adapt to the jolts of the technological environment, with its traffic accidents, explosions, and dizzying heights.⁵¹ Indeed, in an image reminiscent of Freud's postwar description of consciousness as a protective shield, the elastic tire now encircles the sun itself, which smiles in glee, as if happy to be shielded from the storms that destroyed the former paradise. Finally, at the end of the film, the tire literally becomes a new sun, filling the screen with its glowing yellow halo. As the culmination of a narrative of paradise lost and found, Ruttmann's sunny tire is thus associated with much more than simply a smooth ride; the pleasure this ad promises is one of psychic stability, the pleasure of adapting to the perceptual shocks of war and industrial modernity—shocks that, as Janet Ward has shown, included the exponential increase in advertising itself with its myriad strategies for breaking through spectators' stimulus shield to take hold of consumers' attention.⁵²

Most important, however, this loss and restoration of stability is echoed, on the formal level, by a drama of the disappearance and restoration of identifiable objects: the passage from the representation of familiar things into abstract forms and back again. Such a back-and-forth movement, as I argued above, echoes a tension between meaning and meaninglessness—between abstract shapes or letters and "organic associations"—already present in advertising theory itself. But within the context of Ruttmann's narrative of paradise lost and found, this tension cannot but also recall Wilhelm Worringer's famous theory of the dualism between "abstraction" and "empathy" in visual art. In his *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (*Abstraction and Empathy*, 1908), Worringer associated naturalistic representations with a relation of trusting "familiarity" (*Vertraulichkeit*) between the observing subject and its environment, while he understood abstraction as a compensatory activity undertaken in reaction to a sense of anxiety before a chaotic or threatening external world.⁵³ Worringer attributed such an anxiety above all to "primitive" cultures, but he also saw it work in the burgeoning avant-garde of the early twentieth century (e.g., cubist painting), and he compared it with the signature conditions discussed in the psychological literature of his day, citing the well-known condition of agoraphobia (*Platzangst*) as an explanation for the elimination of

51 See George Grosz, "Man muß Kautschukmann sein!" *Neue Jugend* 1, no. 2 (1917): 1: "Wo vordem die gotische Kirche, messelt sich heute das Warenhaus hoch-! / Die Fahrstühle sausen . . . Eisenbahnunglücks, Explosionskatastrophen . . . Wie gesagt, Kautschukmann sein / beweglich in allen Knochen / nicht bloß im Dichter Sessel dösen / oder vor der Staffelei schön getönte Bildchen pinseln."

52 See Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 116–128.

53 See Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, 14th ed. (Munich: Piper, 1987), 49–56: "Während der Einfühlungsdrang ein glückliches pantheistisches Vertraulichkeitsverhältnis zwischen dem Menschen und den Außenwelterscheinungen zur Bedingung hat, ist der Abstraktionsdrang die Folge einer großen inneren Beunruhigung des Menschen durch die Erscheinungen der Außenwelt und korrespondiert in religiöser Beziehung mit einer stark transzendentalen Färbung aller Vorstellungen" (49).

three-dimensional space in the abstract surface.⁵⁴ In unmaking and remaking the perceptual world of objects on the surface of the filmic canvas, Ruttmann's film rehearses, as it were, Worringer's conceptual opposition, passing from an aesthetic of empathy to one of abstraction and back again. And the tire, as the successor to Ruttmann's abstract circle, figures as the agent of this process.

Of course, Ruttmann's abstraction differs from that described by Worringer in that it occurs not only at the level of spatial forms but also at the level of *temporal* movement. In an unpublished manuscript titled "Malerei mit Zeit" ("Painting with Time") written around 1920, Ruttmann described his own transition from painting to film precisely as an effort to achieve such a temporal abstraction by isolating abstract trajectories of movement, a project he understood as a reaction to a potentially "hostile" environment—namely, one characterized by the acceleration of perception and a surplus of information:

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 made known results in a state of continuous inundation by material that can no longer be processed by traditional methods.⁵⁵

Nearly all of the developments described here—most explicitly the train and the rotary press—would play key roles seven years later in Ruttmann's *Berlin* film as the catalysts of a process in which perception (of train tracks or lines of newsprint) literally becomes blurred by acceleration.⁵⁶ But already in his 1920 essay, Ruttmann saw these factors as the catalysts for his own explorations in abstract animation. For it is above all in reaction to this sense of accelerated information flows, he argued, that art needed to abstract from the contingent details of individual images to focus on *lines of movement*:

[A]s a result of the increased speed with which individual data is cranked out, the gaze is now diverted from individual contents to the overall trajectory of a curve formed from the various points, a phenomenon that unfolds *in time*. Thus 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.⁵⁷

54 Ibid., 49, 57–58. Although Worringer himself never framed his arguments about abstraction in terms of industrial modernity, Anthony Viddler has shown how his recourse to the notion of agoraphobia was part of a much broader debate about the experience of modern urban space. See Anthony Viddler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 25–50.

55 Walter Ruttmann, "Malerei mit Zeit," in *Walter Ruttmann: Eine Dokumentation*, ed. Jeanpaul Goergen (Berlin: Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek, 1989), 74.

56 I am referring, of course, to the film's opening sequence, but also to the sequence—arguably the most anxiety ridden of the film—in which a kind of animated rotary press appears to spin out headlines ("Krise," "Heirat," "Mord," "Börse," and "Geld") at an ever-increasing tempo, followed by shots taken from a speeding roller coaster and the famous images of a woman jumping from the bridge into the Spree River. Significantly, Ruttmann would later recycle both the train sequence and the newspaper sequence in *Blut und Boden: Grundlagen zum Neuen Reich* (1933), a propaganda film commissioned by the Stabsamt des Reichsbauernführers to illustrate the dangers of urbanization.

57 Ruttmann, "Malerei mit Zeit," 74.

Ruttmann's language of "curves" here recalls, of course, a long tradition of abstract representations of movement stretching back into the nineteenth century: namely, the scientific curves, by which nineteenth-century scientists—most prominently Étienne Jules Marey—reduced the contingent details of individual objects in movement to reveal the abstract lines of movement itself.⁵⁸ But this is not to argue that Ruttmann sought simply to transpose the epistemological project of nineteenth-century motion studies onto film; on the contrary, as his description of the curve's "continuous transformation" suggests, Ruttmann's motivation for temporal abstraction was not to isolate trajectories of movement for study in a static image but to create a new vocabulary of abstract movement-patterns unfolding in time (Ruttmann goes on to provide a long list of such movements with names such as *wellenförmig* [wavelike], *tanzartig* [dancelike], *schlangenartig* [snakelike], *galoppierend* [galloping], and *tobend* [raging]). In other words, what was at stake in Ruttmann's filmic abstractions was no longer an epistemological project but rather an *experiential* one, one motivated by a desire to adapt vision and spectatorship to the information overload that threatened to overwhelm subjective perception. While such a project clearly resonates with Worringer's view of abstraction as a reaction to a hostile environment, that environment is now defined explicitly by technology (mass media and rapid transportation) rather than nature, and the central quality of its "chaos" is a temporal one linked directly to the modern experience of acceleration. This was, we might recall, the same experience that informed the development of advertising psychology itself, with its constant search for new ways of capturing the fleeting attention of consumers caught between myriad impressions in movement.

Coming back to *Der Sieger*, one could thus argue that the real pleasure promised by Ruttmann's tire—an emblem of acceleration if there ever was one—consists precisely in its promise to navigate this new industrial world by overseeing the restoration, as it were, of the lost paradise of the opening image on a higher industrial plane. In this narrative of paradise lost and found, moreover, *Der Sieger* establishes a pattern that is repeated in different variations in several of Ruttmann's subsequent advertising films, in which pleasure is constantly evoked through an eminently Freudian narrative of restoring a state of harmony that existed before the tension or conflict introduced by the play of graphic forms.⁵⁹ This narrative finds its most explicit expression in Ruttmann's 1925 ad *Das wiedergefundene Paradies*, which recounts a modified version of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden to promise viewers that flowers will literally "awaken memories of paradisiacal pleasures." But the promise of pleasure is also present in films such as *Das Wunder*, where liqueur has the magical power to resolve conflict; in the 1926 film *Spiel der Wellen* (*Play of the Waves*), in which the AEG radio receives waves from an African landscape, transporting the latter into the protected space of a European radio listener's headphones; and in *Der Aufstieg*, in which the famous "Gesolei" exhibition promises to restore the nation to its healthy state before the ravages of warfare and

58 On this point, see Georges Didi-Huberman, "La courbe de toute chose," in *Mouvements de l'air: Étienne Jules-Marey, photographe des fluides*, by Georges Didi-Huberman and Laurent Mannoni (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 191–213.

59 See Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 18, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953–1974), 37.

hyperinflation. Thus, these films repeatedly stage moments of anxiety linked to the destruction of pleasurable origins through graphic conflict, only to promise their restoration on a higher plane by means of technological products. At the formal level, this back-and-forth between pleasurable stasis and displeasurable conflict finds its parallel in the very tension between the unfamiliar world of abstract forms and figurative images of familiar things. Like Freud's child, Ruttmann's advertisements thus constantly throw away the object only to reel it in again in a repetitive back-and-forth trajectory between empathetic description and defensive abstraction, where the commodity and the trademark figure as the agents of a new trust in the world of things and three-dimensional space.

Pleasure was, not surprisingly, a central preoccupation for proponents of the advertising film and their imagination of the audience. In a 1926 article for *Die Reklame*, for example, Fritz Pauli argued that the darkened movie theater had the unique advantage over billboards, newspapers, or radio of completely monopolizing the spectator's captive attention:

[T]he audience *has* to register the advertisement, whether it wants to or not. One can deliberately overlook the advertisements section of a newspaper; one can more or less avoid the sight of traffic and electric 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 movie theater.⁶⁰

However, Pauli continued, such a compulsory claim on the attention could backfire if didactic or boring films failed to please spectators through humor or interesting tricks: "Audiences do not wish to feel cheated, as it were, out of their time or their ticket price. . . . They wish to be amused, thrilled or educated in an interesting way. When this is the case, they feel entertained and regard the product being advertised with favor."⁶¹ Pauli's argument here was echoed more or less verbatim in numerous other books and articles from the time, and it found an illustration the following year on the title page of a special issue of *Die Reklame* devoted to advertising film, on which a caricature drawing compared bored, angry, and entertained audiences to suggest that pleasure played a central role in the success of filmic advertisements.⁶² Nor was Pinschewer himself unaware of such theories, as he would later resort to the same argument to explain the prevalence of animation in advertising film:

A particular advantage of film advertising resides in the fact that spectators sitting in the darkened room cannot avoid paying attention to the film. Precisely for this reason, the advertising content should be presented in a plea-

60 Fritz Pauli, "Das Problem des Werbefilms," *Die Reklame* 19 (1926): 616.

61 Ibid.

62 Käthe Kurtzig, for example, in an article on advertising film for *Die Reklame*, wrote: "Der Werbefilm, ob im Lichtspieltheater oder im Vortragssaal, drängt sich dem Beschauer fast unweigerlich auf und muß von ihm beachtet werden, gleichgültig, ob ihn das Dargebotene interessiert oder nicht. . . . [E]s muß [daher] unter allen Umständen vermieden werden, daß der Betrachter von vornherein dem Gebotenen Widerstand entgegengesetzt. Bei der Dauer der zwangsweisen Beobachtung müßte eine solche Einstellung des Zuschauers den erstrebten Erfolg der Werbung in das krasseste Gegenteil umkehren." Käthe Kurtzig, "Werbefilm und Volkswirtschaft," *Die Reklame* 20 (1927): 417–418.

surable form. This is also the reason why people prefer to clothe advertising film in the form of animation (*Trickfilm*), for animation satisfies the need for relaxing entertainment.⁶³

It was also in the interest of stimulating such pleasure that product advertisements resorted from the beginning to strategies of humor, a topic much discussed in the literature on advertising and one of the principal motivations for the widespread use of caricature animation in film advertisements of the 1920s. As one writer for *Seidels Reklame* put it in 1927, “Audiences today want humor. The animated film offers the possibility of conjuring up the most grotesque Chaplinades, the most fantastical improbabilities on the screen.”⁶⁴ In particular, advertisers called for the use of gentle humor typical of German print caricature traditions as opposed to the biting satire of Dada and expressionist cabaret. Typical in this respect was a 1927 article by the animator Lutz Michaelis, who argued that the advertising animator “should ensure that he does not develop aggressive humor (satire); rather, his figures should be based in a jovial humorous characterization. (To draw on a crass comparison, Wilhelm Busch’s caricatures are funny and jovial, while George Grosz’s every pen-stroke is caustic and aggressive.)”⁶⁵

Although Ruttmann’s experimental advertisements sought to distinguish themselves from the caricatures of animators such as Michaelis and Harry Jäger, he was not averse to employing such moments of gentle humor—for example, in the Kantorowicz film, where the bickering faces begin to kiss one another lovingly after consuming the liqueur from the bottle conjured up by a magician (Figure 8). But as I have argued, his films also sought to produce pleasure at the formal level through the play of abstraction and empathy, by which Ruttmann continuously staged perceptive reactions to the new technological conditions with which these advertisements were concerned. If Ruttmann’s commodity objects promised pleasure, this was above all through their promise to navigate this new world of accelerated information, and more precisely to restore a sense of trust in the new landscape of people, objects, and

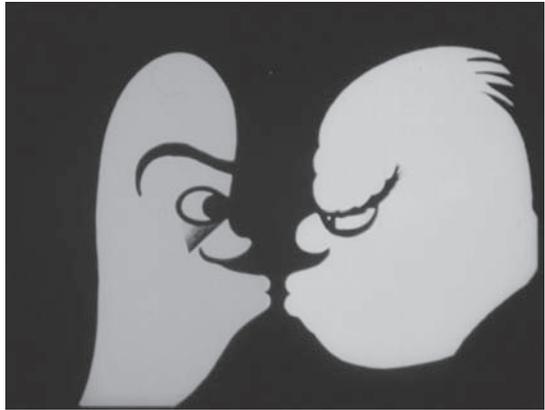


Figure 8. Still from *Das Wunder: Ein Film in Farben* (1922).

63 Julius Pinschewer, “Der Trickfilm in der Reklame,” *Vortrag auf der Kantonalen bernischen Handelskammer* (1938), reprinted in *Julius Pinschewer: Klassiker des Werbefilms*, ed. Martin Loiperdinger (Berlin: Absolute Medien, 2010), CD-ROM pt. 1.

64 “Glasbild und Glasstreifen,” *Seidels Reklame* 11 (1927): 163.

65 Lutz Michaelis, “Wie entsteht ein Werbetrickfilm?” *Die Reklame* 20 (1927): 434.

information in motion. Ruttmann's advertisements not only participated, with their targeted stimulation of attention through color and movement, in the shocks of this new media environment, but also promised to help spectators come to terms with that environment in and through acts of consumption.

Throughout these advertisements, abstraction, one might conclude, forms the site of an ambivalent investment. On the one hand, it was understood as a means of testing perception, adapting it to modern conditions and elaborating new techniques of spectatorship. On the other hand, it also took part in a narrative of loss and restoration that informed the hesitations between abstraction and figuration. Given this ambivalence, it is worth returning, at the end of this article, to the question I raised at the beginning concerning the continuity between such ideas, as they played out in Ruttmann's early advertising films, and Ruttmann's subsequent filmmaking under Nazism.

I have already argued that to see Ruttmann's turn toward propaganda after 1933 as a "fall" from some purported aesthetic purity of Weimar independence would be to ignore the important role that advertising already played in his work throughout the 1920s. As historians have pointed out, Nazism itself was steeped in the science and practice of advertising developed during the Weimar Republic, from which the movement gleaned not only strategies for designing slogans, symbols, and campaign posters but also its ideas about the power of mass suggestion, the functioning of mass media, and the generation of party loyalty.⁶⁶ Thus, it should hardly be surprising that the new regime would take interest in a figure like Ruttmann, who had become one of the foremost names in advertising film by the end of the decade and who would go on to make at least eighteen advertising, propaganda, and industrial films after 1933, most of them from his position as an employee of Germany's most prominent studio, Ufa.

Looking at this work, several film historians have posited a fundamental continuity between Ruttmann's Weimar films—particularly *Berlin*, with its emphasis on formal patterns of rhythmical movement—and his post-1933 productions, which appear to exemplify a compatibility between certain facets of the 1920s avant-garde and Nazism.⁶⁷ With their numerous mass ornaments and their techno-fetishistic cult of machine parts in motion, films such as *Mannesmann* (1937)—Ruttmann's advertisement for Mannesmann steelworks—do indeed recall the formalism of *Berlin*, thus leading scholars to emphasize the similarities between *Neue Sachlichkeit* and *Nazi-Sachlichkeit*, or to see Ruttmann's work as a whole within a narrative of "reactionary modernism" stretching

66 See Sabine Behrenbeck, "'Der Führer': Die Einführung eines politischen Markenartikels," in *Propaganda in Deutschland*, ed. Gerald Diesener and Rainer Gries (Darmstadt, Germany: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996), 51–78; Peter Zimmermann, "Filmpropaganda und Warenästhetik," in *Geschichte des dokumentarischen Films in Deutschland*, vol. 3, 'Drittes Reich' 1933–1945, ed. Peter Zimmermann and Kay Hoffmann (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2005), 505–510; Corey Ross, "La professionalisation de la publicité et de la propagande dans l'Allemagne de Weimar," *Vingtième Siècle* 101 (2009): 2–26.

67 See Barry A. Fuks, "Walter Ruttmann, the Avant-Garde Film, and Nazi Modernism," *Film and History* 14, no. 2 (1984), 26–35, translated as "Walter Ruttmann, der Avantgardefilm und die Nazi-Moderne," in *Walter Ruttmann, eine Dokumentation*, 67–71; William Uricchio, "Ruttmann nach 1933," in *Walter Ruttmann: Eine Dokumentation* (Berlin: Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek, 1989), 59–65; Imbert Schenk, "Walter Ruttmanns Kultur- und Industriefilme," in *Mediale Mobilmachung I: Das Dritte Reich und der Film*, ed. Harro Segeberg (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2005), 103–128.

from Italian futurism to the Nazi cult of technology.⁶⁸ Such continuity would also give credence to Kracauer's thesis that Ruttmann's formalism, in distinction to the more socially committed films of Vertov, lends itself to reactionary appropriations. Indeed, a film such as *Deutsche Panzer*, Ruttmann's 1940 advertisement for the German tank industry, in which factory workers, Nazi youths, and glistening metallic tank parts are all reduced to cogs within a giant war machine, would seem to embody the dangers of fascist appropriation of form implicit in Kracauer's judgment.

In transforming abstract shapes into product advertisements, Ruttmann's Weimar advertisements could be seen to portend, as it were, such applications of form under Nazism. But it is also worth remembering that the uses and functions of advertising underwent significant changes between the Weimar Republic and National Socialism, which submitted the sector to the policies of *Gleichschaltung* (alignment or coordination). Beginning in 1933, the new Ministry of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment sought, among other things, to institute a strict regulation of terminology—which had often been used loosely and interchangeably in the Weimar years—by discouraging the Latinate term *Reklame* (advertising) in favor of the Germanic *Werbung* and drawing a distinction between *Werbung* (economic advertising) and *Propaganda* (the propagating of political ideas or “worldviews”). But although advertising and propaganda were now distinguished, both were charged with the task of winning audiences for the goals of the new regime.⁶⁹ This new ideological function of advertising is directly evoked in Ruttmann's 1938 advertisement for Henkel laundry products when a character tells her customers, “You see, ladies, *Werbung* is different from *Reklame*,” adding that Henkel advertising is made “in full knowledge of the great educational value that *Werbung* possesses.”⁷⁰ Such an “educational value” (*Erziehungswert*) informed the Nazi rating system for advertising and industrial films, and Ruttmann's films themselves consistently received praise with terms such as *volksbildend* (educative of the people), *künstlerisch Wertvoll* (artistically valuable), and *staatspolitisch wertvoll* (politically valuable).

This is not to argue that humor or entertainment disappeared from advertising film—caricature advertisements, for example, continued under Nazism—or that advertising became a monolithic practice after 1933. But the notion that advertising should have an “educational value” did point to a series of ideological constraints, which affected both the content and the form of films such as Ruttmann's. Any formal comparison between Ruttmann's animated advertising films and his post-1933 work is rendered difficult by the fact that Ruttmann had all but abandoned animation for montage by 1928, and one would need to undertake a closer analysis of Ruttmann's use of montage before and after 1933 than I can offer here. But one can make an observation concerning “abstraction,” which is not entirely absent from Ruttmann's work under Nazism. The tendency toward abstraction is still present not only in the mass ornaments mentioned above but also in other places, for example, in the image

68 The term *Nazi Sachlichkeit* was first proposed by Barry Fulks. See Fulks, “Walter Ruttmann,” 67. On the fetishization of technology in Ruttmann's industrial films after 1933, see Uricchio, “Ruttmann nach 1933,” 59, 62. On the relations between Ruttman, Italian futurism, and reactionary modernist thought, see Irmbert Schenk, “Walter Ruttmanns Kultur- und Industriefilme.”

69 Forster, *Ufa und Nordmark*, 21.

70 Censor card, *Henkel: Ein deutsches Werk in seiner Arbeit*, Bundesarchiv/Filmarchiv, Berlin, Germany.

of an animated meteorite at the beginning of the steel advertisement *Metall des Himmels* (*Metal from the Sky*, 1934–1935), in the soapsuds that fill the screen in the opening shot of the Henkel advertisement, and in the many images of glowing steel plates and beams in films such as *Mannesmann*.⁷¹ These echoes of Ruttmann’s abstract films—which find their counterpart in Ruttmann’s widespread recycling of experimental montage forms after 1933—do indeed suggest that the experimental aesthetics of Weimar film were not simply suppressed by the Nazis. But they did have to be reconciled with Nazi ideology.

Among other things, this meant reconciling any tendency toward abstraction with official aesthetic dictates, which—following Worringer—associated abstraction with primitivism and the “degeneracy” of modernist art. The case of Oskar Fischinger, whose abstract experiments were judged “contrary to the spirit of the times,” is well known (although Fischinger himself produced several popular advertisements after 1933 before emigrating to the United States).⁷² Ruttmann, for his part, appears to have adapted more easily to the new dictates, which he in fact thematized in the first film he directed for the new regime, *Altgermanische Bauernkultur* (*Ancient German Peasant Culture*, 1934), an educational film commissioned by the Stabesamt des Reichsbauernführers (Staff Office of the Reich Peasant Leader). There, a young Nazi student makes an impassioned defense of the tradition of German applied arts when a Weimaresque professor cites Worringer’s theses on abstraction almost verbatim to argue that ancient Germans were uncultured “savages.” “Before Charlemagne brought Christianity to our ancestors,” the professor argues, “they possessed absolutely no culture. All they had was an incredibly primitive art of ornamentation with a tendency toward abstraction, which is of course common to all savage peoples.”⁷³ In defense of ancient German culture, the student then argues that the surviving relics of ancient Germanic culture—pots, urns, tools, swords, jewelry, belt buckles, and other items, which we see spinning on rotating platters like items in a shop window—in fact display a *Formgefühl* (feeling for form) that belies any effort to associate ancient Germans with the abstract ornamentation of “savages.” Central to Ruttmann’s film and its ideological argument is precisely this notion of form and forming, which is emphasized repeatedly in the student’s invocation of terms such as *Formgefühl*, *Gefühl für Formenschönheit* (feeling for the beauty of form), *Schönheit der Form* (beauty of form), and *Kraft künstlerischer Gestaltung* (power of artistic forming).⁷⁴

This insistence on “forming” as the characteristic of Germanic productivity points to one strategy for negotiating the problem of “abstraction” after 1933, for when Ruttmann’s films feature abstraction at all, this generally occurs within a narrative of “forming,” where the abstract appears above all as raw material for national production. This is the motif that drives nearly all of Ruttmann’s many films dealing with the theme of steel, from *Metall des Himmels* (in which an ancient Germanic blacksmith forging his sword from molten metal provides the model for twentieth-century steelworks

71 On this point, see also Schenk, “Walter Ruttmanns Kultur- und Industriefilme,” 114.

72 Cited in Moritz, *Optical Poetry*, 55. See also Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, 189.

73 Censor card, *Altgermanische Bauernkultur*, Bundesarchiv/Filmarchiv, Koblenz, Germany.

74 Ibid.

and weapons manufacturers) through *Mannesmann* (in which animated sequences tout the ability of steel to shape itself into any desirable form and, like the Excelsior tire, to bend without breaking) to Ruttmann's armament films such as *Deutsche Panzer* (in which the operation of the tank factory machines consists almost entirely in cutting, drilling, and shaving raw steel into the interlocking parts of the tank).

But the narrative of forming also describes the "educational" goal of these films, which is nothing more or less than that of "forming" a national community (*Volksgemeinschaft*). The linkage is suggested by a sequence of *Deutsche Panzer* in which Ruttmann's associative montage juxtaposes an image of molten steel being hardened in water with members of the Hitler Youth diving into a pool. Comparing the training of youths to the forming of parts for a tank, this sequence—and the film as a whole—offers a clear model of Nazism's "educational" project, in which audiences, no less than the tank parts and the tank builders on the screen, were supposed to be molded and mobilized for a national "struggle" and eventually for warfare.

One could, to be sure, draw a parallel between such visions of molding raw material into form in Ruttmann's post-1933 films and his Weimar advertisements, with their constant morphing of abstract forms into figurative objects. But there are also differences. The "educational" quality of Ruttmann's Nazi films is nearly entirely lacking from his Weimar advertisements, where the pleasure of tires, liqueurs, illustrated newspapers, and AEG radio equipment has little to do with projects of national indoctrination. That is to say, if Ruttmann's formalism lent itself to multiple appropriations, those appropriations *did* have a different ideological character and a different purpose before and after 1933. But this ideological transformation also entailed a formal one. For the path between abstraction and empathy now becomes a one-way street; unlike Ruttmann's Weimar advertisements, which shuttled back and forth between abstraction and figuration, Ruttmann's Nazi films almost always display processes leading from raw material to finished product (sword, tank, or *Volk*), whose "beauty of form" these films were meant to display. In this narrative, abstraction no longer functions as an ambivalent figure, representing modern perception in both its exhilarating and its anxious capacities, but has rather become the site of a *problem*, which has to be contained through a constant invocation of German productivity and "form." *