

Abstract

Animation played a central role in the early history of advertising film in Europe. While there were, of course, many live-action films, by the 1910s product advertising relied heavily on the techniques and conventions of the trick film. After WWI, advertising would come to offer a fertile terrain for the development of nearly every type of animation, from drawn caricature to avant-garde experimentation and from stop trick to puppets and silhouettes. In this article, I examine this predilection for such graphic forms in advertising film within the context of control strategies both aesthetic and economic. Tracing the development of animation in advertising from trick films to industrialized animation, I show how animation served both to work through questions of capitalist modernity and – increasingly – to realize new forms of instrumental images based on the dictates of advertising psychology as it arose after WWI.

Advertising and Animation From the Invisible Hand to Attention Management

“The attraction that radiates from objects in film is that of seeing something inanimate become animate.”
Arnold Zweig, “Theoretische Grundlegung des Films in Thesen” (1922)

Although early product advertising film came in many forms, it is hard to overlook the extensive use of animation. While the earliest film advertisements tended to use live-action, the institutionalization of advertising film in Europe during the 1910s coincided with the adoption of conventions from trick film, and advertising went on to employ nearly every type of animation, from stop-trick and sand animation to silhouettes, experimental abstraction and – the most widespread form of advertising in the 1920s – drawn character animation. This work includes many films by well-known experimental directors such as Lotte Reiniger, Walter Ruttmann and Dziga Vertov, but it also encompasses an entire army of professional illustrators and animators such as Robert Lortac (France), Peter Eng (Austria), Harry Jäger (Germany) and Victor Bergdahl

(Sweden).¹ [FIGURE 1a-b] If such work is garnering renewed interest today, that interest is certainly due, in part, to the influence of digital technologies, which – following Lev Manovich’s call to rethink cinema as a subset of animation – have helped to rekindle interest in the widespread “graphic” traditions that have always existed within and alongside photographic cinema.² The animated advertising film – or what its chief practitioner in Germany, Julius Pinschewer, described as the “advertising film on graphic basis” (Werbefilm auf graphischer Grundlage) – represents an important domain of early animation, but one that has received little attention in animation studies.³ In what follows, I consider some of the reasons for animation’s prevalent role in product advertisements, as well as some of the specific functions that animation assumed when used in advertising. Tracing the trajectory of advertising film in Germany from the 1910s to its transformation into a full-fledged industry in the 1920s, I argue that animation served both to thematize issues of consumerist modernity and to forge instrumental images analogous to contemporary developments in graphic design, which were themselves spurred on by the new field of advertising psychology.

Tricks, Control and the ‘Invisible Hand’

Writing in 1920, a reporter for the trade journal *Seidels Reklame* argued that a new form of “film caricature” offered an ideal opportunity for advertisers in their effort to arouse audience interest:

¹ For a discussion of some of this work, see Donald Crafton, *Before Mickey. The Animated Film 1898-1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 217-258.

² See Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press,), 252. For the new interest in animation, see Suzanne Buchan (ed.), *Pervasive Animation* (London: Routledge, 2013); Karen Beckman (ed.), *Animating Film Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

³ Julius Pinschewer, “Von den Anfängen des Werbefilms,” *Die Reklame* 20 (1927), 409-411, here 410.

The very process by which the image emerges over the white screen is extremely interesting and spurs viewers to reflection. It looks as if one of those lightning-sketch painters from the variety stage were drawing the image line by line before the audience's eyes. But the difference is that we do not see the draftsman. The pencil appears to be moved by the invisible hand of a ghost. [...] The audience is astonished, for it cannot help but ask itself how this image was recorded.⁴

The writer was most likely describing the work of pioneering animator *Emil Cohl*. Although Cohl's famous *fantasmagorie* films did often show the artist's hand setting up the image or intervening, their main attraction came precisely when the hand left the frame and characters and objects seemed to move and transform on their own as if propelled by an hidden agency.⁵ But the reference to the variety stage situates early advertising more widely within a tradition of attractions and magic tricks that also lay behind the trick films of magician-artists such as Georges Méliès, Segundo de Chomón, Walter Booth and James Stuart Blackton – all of whom had adapted the famous “lightning sketch” genre to trick film.⁶ The work of German pioneer Julius Pinschewer is characteristic here. [FIGURE 2] After beginning with a few live-actions films such as *Die Korsett-Anprobe* (1910), Pinschewer quickly adopted stop motion and other tricks to create a world of magical commodity display, in which products perform dances (e.g. *Tanz der Flaschen*, 1912), sewing kits mend buttons on their own (*Der Nähkasten*, 1912), fairies appear – via superimposition – as tiny figures atop giant champagne glasses (*Sektzauber*, 1912) and paintings come alive by magic (*Das Ahnenbild*, 1912). In such films, Pinschewer sought to visualize commodities that appear – as he put it in an article from 1914 – to be “guided by invisible hands” as they move about, transform and interact

⁴ Karl Mischke, “Die Reklame der Film-Karikatur,” in *Seidels Reklame* 5 (1920), 309.

⁵ See Crafton, *Before Mickey*, 87-88.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 49-58.

with one another on the screen.⁷ [FIGURE 3] In keeping with the trick film tradition, such films aimed to astonish audiences unfamiliar with the technology behind the display: “The audience wonders how it is technologically possible, for example, that a coffee pot moves on its own and buttons produced by a certain company line up to spell the company name.”⁸

The use of the “invisible hand” to describe trick technology also linked animated film advertisements to numerous other forms of animated advertising beyond the cinema, such as the moving automata that were adapted to advertising in shop windows and the animated electric light advertisements [FIGURE 4]. The latter, in particular, were often described as mysterious spectacles, in which words and images unfurl themselves over the nighttime skyline as if drawn by an unseen hand. Thus another writer for *Seidels Reklame*, commenting on the post-war ban on electric advertisements in Berlin, remembered the prewar animated light spectacles as follows: “An invisible hand would draw spectacular characters over the building facades: long lines of striking text flared up suddenly, only to disappear after a few seconds as other texts took their place. Colorful animated images appeared on the roof to direct the attention of willing and even unwilling spectators.”⁹ Similarly, the author Erich Kästner, after visiting the Leipzig Trade Fair in 1925, described an entire array of animated street advertisements in magical terms, including electric light advertisements written by “invisible hands” and “disguised automobiles driven by ghostly hands.”¹⁰

⁷ Julius Pinschewer, “Vom Reklamefilm,” *Seidels Reklame* 2 (1914), 273-278, here 274.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁹ Heinrich Lux, “Lichtreklame mit Glimmlampen,” *Seidels Reklame* 7 (1922), 109-110, here 109.

¹⁰ Erich Kästner, “Der Karneval des Kaufmanns” (1925), in *Der Karneval des Kaufmanns. Gesammelte Texte aus der Leipziger Zeit 1923-1927*, ed. Klaus Schuhmann (Leipzig: Lehmann, 2004), 169-175, here 172-173. Kästner’s contemporaries had no trouble making links between such forms of “animated” advertisements and filmic animation, as when another writer for *Seidels Reklame* describes his vision of

But if such “ghostly” hands underscore the link between animation and the conventions of stage magic, they also point towards another issue at stake in filmic animation: namely the *control* over the image. In an oft-cited essay, William Schaffer has argued that in animated film, every visible frame is “accompanied by the performance of an *invisible hand*,” since the animator intervenes in each individual frame at a level absent in live-action cinematography.¹¹ The result, Schaffer argues, is a “paradox of control” in which animators control the image to an unprecedented extent, while also seeing themselves exposed (increasingly as industrial methods are adopted into animation) to a division of industrial labor beyond their control.¹² Schaffer’s emphasis on the hand as the ontological ground of animation has not been without its critics.¹³ But his identification of control as the key issue in “graphic” filmmaking provides a useful entryway for an *historical* investigation of the use of animation in early advertising. For if contemporary observers invoked the notion of the invisible hand so often to describe advertising spectacles, this is not only on account of its link to trick film, but also on account of the resonances it held with market language and corresponding questions of control within the new capitalist marketplace. Adam Smith’s use of the metaphor of the

animated light advertisements in London as follows: “Tiere und Maschinen erscheinen zehn bis zwanzigmal variiert in Bewegung nach Art der Trickfilmaufnahmen” (13). Yet another writer argued in 1926 described animated electric signs “as if drawn by a mysterious hand” and argued that such spectacles could take a cue from trick film: “Wenn bei der Kupferberg-Lichtplakat der Sekt aus der Glase wieder zurück in die Flasche fließen würde, so wäre das ja an sich ganz falsch, für die Beschauer des Lichtplakates aber sehr belustigend und originell. Der rückwärts gekurbelte Film ist zwar selten zu sehen, findet aber immer großen Beifall.” L. von Bialy, “Das Lichtplakat,” *Seidels Reklame* 11 (1926), 353-354, here 353-354.

¹¹ William Schaffer, “Animation 1: The Control Image,” in *The Illusion of Life II. More Essays on Animation*, ed. Alan Cholodenko (Sydney: Power Publications, 2007), 456-485, here 466.

¹² Schaffer sees this paradox acted out in popular cartoons through what he calls “allegories of control,” where figures of “controllers” in the cartoon point to the invisible instances of control affecting the image from without (*ibid.*, 471-474).

¹³ Thomas Lamarre has questioned Schaffer’s emphasis on human hands above machines and cel layering (precisely the technology implicated in the industrialization of animation). See Lamarre, *The Anime Machine. A Media Theory of Animation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xxix.

“invisible hand” to describe a benevolent agency that regulates market forces unbeknownst to its actors is well known.¹⁴ But as Stephan Andriopoulos has shown, Smith’s model of the invisible hand – itself one of many versions of benevolent agencies thought to order the contingencies of human action and history in 18th and 19th century social thought – already had a more sinister counterpart in the gothic literature that emerged during the same period, where the motif of ghostly hands returns obsessively to designate supernatural agencies that thwart individual intentions.¹⁵

One can find an analogous mixture of phantasmagoric motifs and economic thinking at work in early advertising. Like the work of Méliès, Pinschewer’s early films often feature demons, imps and conjurers. The 1912 film *Sektzauber* for Kupferberg champagne, for example, shows a demon figure conjuring up a Kupferberg champagne bottle from an exploding volcano. [FIGURE 5] Like Méliès’s “diable noir,” who (in the 1905 film of the same title) moves around the furniture of a hotel room while remaining invisible to the hapless patron, such figures served both as a narrative justification for the filmic tricks and as a means of situating those tricks within a much longer tradition of fantasmagoria and magic display – a tradition they took up, as Pinschewer stated again and again, in order to capture the attention of audiences enchanted by the film’s special effects. But the trick film also offered a particular level of control over the image and thus – it was hoped – over audience response. Pinschewer described this double valence

¹⁴ The metaphor of the invisible hand would be invoked again periodically to describe various invisible forces at work in the marketplace. C. Wright Mills would use the metaphor of the “unseen hand” to describe the massive regulatory apparatus of enterprise capitalism after WWII. See for example C. Wright Mills, *White Collar. The American Middle Classes* (Oxford University Press, 1951): 189. Alice Gambrell has examined how such economic theories underlie a group of contemporary stop motion films that reflect on the work of animation. See Gambrell, “In Visible Hands: The Work of Stop Motion,” *Animation Practice, Process and Production* 1 (2011), 107-129.

¹⁵ See Stefan Andriopoulos, “The Invisible Hand: Supernatural Agency in Political Economy and the Gothic Novel,” *English Literary History* 66 (1999), 739-758.

of the animated image in an article from 1916 when he praised “the cinematographic trick film, which is particularly interesting for audiences on account of its technique, but which also allows one to place the brand being advertised directly in the center of the short action being projected.”¹⁶ This centering of attention on the *brand* is a staple feature of advertising film aesthetics from Pinschewer’s early stop-trick advertisements to 1920s silhouette advertisements and beyond. [FIGURE 6] And it suggests a broader motivation for the appeal of animation in advertising films; through the presence of the animator’s invisible hand, controlling the image at the level of the individual frame and reducing the contingencies of photographic representation, animation seemed to promise a control over spectatorial responses and a focusing of spectatorial attention on the brand.

This control of attention forms part of a broader technology of economic control in the early 20th century, in which branding and trademarks played a central role. Although trademarks might seem self-evident today, their very presence in advertising was still relatively new in the early 20th-century, having emerged around 1900 when powerful new corporations such as the National Biscuit Company in the U.S. and Kupferberg Champagne in Germany sought to gain control of widening markets by creating a loyal consumer base. [FIGURE 7] In this sense, mass trademark advertising forms a key example of what James Beniger famously dubbed the “Control Revolution” around 1900, where bureaucratic systems, telecommunications and emerging mass media were enlisted to manage the centrifugal forces unleashed by industrial production

¹⁶ Julius Pinschewer, “Der Film als Werbemittel,” *Mitteilungen des Vereins deutscher Reklamefachleute* (1916), 115-118, here 117.

methods.¹⁷ Branding helped to manage increased production by stimulating consumption; but it also helped to forge a new *habitus* of consumption marked by affective investments in specific brands. For the companies involved, the mass distribution of identical trademarks promised to wrest market control from middlemen—retailers, wholesalers and department stores—by appealing directly to consumers. And it was precisely this development that led to the emergence of what the economist Viktor Mataja, writing in 1910, described as a new “professional group of advertising experts [Reklamefachleute]” — i.e. advertising agencies — who promised to help companies forge effective brands and distribution strategies.¹⁸

This desire for control over a broad consumer base also forms a key part of the background to the development of film advertising and its expert practitioners such as Pinschewer. The expense of film alone — the cost of labor-intensive “trick films,” but also and above all the distribution costs — favored large enterprises such as Kupferberg (champagne) and Excelsior (tires).¹⁹ But for those who could afford it, film advertising promised to reach broad swathes of the population and expose them — through tricks and animation — to a particular brand in a pleasant way. Thus Pinschewer, in his first published article on advertising film, could cite a “statistical study,” based on the observation of 1000 screenings in 600 theaters, which showed that 90% of advertising films had elicited positive responses on the part of audiences to the brands shown.²⁰ The number of visitors in these 600 theaters alone, he continued, amounted to some 58

¹⁷ See James Beniger, *The Control Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 264-278, 344-356. For an analysis of the rise of trademark advertising in the German context, see Schwartz, “Commodity Signs: Peter Behrens, AEG and the Trademark,” *Journal of Design History* 9:3 (1996) 153-184, here 157.

¹⁸ Viktor Mataja, *Die Reklame im Geschäftsleben* (Vienna: Verlag des Niederösterreichischen Gewerbevereins, 1910), 11, 15-17. On this point, see also Beniger, *Control Revolution*, 349-352.

¹⁹ On the expense of advertising film, see for example Hermann Behrmann, *Reklame* (Berlin: Industrieverlag Spaeth und Linde, 1923), 223-224.

²⁰ Julius Pinschewer, “Filmreklame,” *Seidels Reklame* 1 (1913), 243-246, here 245.

million people per year stemming from all classes and professions. (By 1926, Pinschewer would boast that of his monopolies with theaters totaling 300,000 seats or 3 million viewers per week).²¹ Little wonder, then, if Pinschewer argued in the same article that advertising film was particularly well suited for “those products that enter into circulation under a specific trademark.”²² The cinema circuit offered a seemingly ideal distribution platform for advertisements designed to bind a broad public to a particular brand.

But if movie theaters offered an advantageous form of distribution, the cinema also appeared – in the eyes of advertising theorists – as a powerful *dispositif* for controlling spectatorial attention. Whereas newspapers inserts and street advertisements had to compete with dozens of neighboring advertisements for the attention of distracted readers and passers-by, the darkened space of the theater promised to focus attention on the product and its trademark: “Every patron in the movie theater,” Pinschewer claimed in the 1913 article, “perceives the advertising film shown during the program and follows its content with excitement and interest.”²³ In this sentiment, Pinschewer was hardly alone; numerous advertising psychologists emphasized the importance of the darkened space of the theater for focusing spectators’ attention. As another industry specialist would put it in 1926: “One can deliberately oversee 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.”²⁴ [FIGURE 8]

²¹ Advertisement for Pinschewer-Film, *Die Reklame* 19 (June 1926).

²² Pinschewer, “Filmreklame,” 244.

²³ *Ibid.*, 245.

²⁴ Fritz Pauli, “Das Problem des Werbefilms,” *Die Reklame* 19 (1926), 616.

This is not to argue that we should take the claims of advertisers at face value, and the frequent discussions of dissatisfied or angry audiences in the trade literature of the time offers one indication of just how tenuous advertising's control strategies might have been in reality.²⁵ But it does suggest that the logic of control was a central motivation for the enlistment film as an advertising medium in the years around WWI and would continue to shape the way in which advertising theorists approached the medium throughout the 1920s. If the "invisible hands" of the animator promised control over the image, those of distribution specialists promised control over a new marketplace of late capitalism and its flows of consumer attention. It was precisely this double role that characterized the new class of advertising film entrepreneurs such as Pinschewer.

Animated Things

This nexus of control helps to account for the predilection for graphic forms in advertising film. But it does not necessarily explain particular the fixation these films evince with showing products *in movement*. Again and again, Pinschewer's early films display anthropomorphized commodities dancing, marching, mending shirts, pouring champagne etc. Indeed, it was precisely such films that the reporter for *Seidels Reklame* cited at the beginning of this article had in mind when he wrote that animation served as a perfect form for advertising the new world of consumer things: "Thousands of objects lend themselves to this kind of advertising, and this kind of advertising lends itself to

²⁵ Thus the passage by Pauli continues: "'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" (ibid). On this point, see also my article "Absolute Advertising: Walter Ruttmann and the Weimar Advertising Film," *Cinema Journal* 52.4 (2013), 49-73 (here 68).

thousands of objects.”²⁶ This is a pattern that would last well into the 1920s and 1930s – one still visible, for example, in Oskar Fischinger’s famous Muratti cigarette advertisements *Muratti greift ein* (1934) and *Muratti privat* (1935), where animated cigarettes perform various group dances to the music. Here too, moreover, filmic advertisements found a counterpart in other forms of “living advertisements” such as the parades of human cigarettes and other products that could be seen marching in trade fairs or in the city streets of Berlin [FIGURES 9a-b].

It would be hard to overlook the link between such spectacles of animated commodities and that other form of market magic so critical to modern life: commodity fetishism. Marx’s model – in which the labor of production and social relations assume “the phantasmagorical form of a relation between things”²⁷ – informed numerous more expansive diagnoses of modernity that sought to explain how the products of human culture seemed to emancipate themselves from human control. From Georg Simmel’s model of the “tragedy of culture” to Georg Lukács’s theory of “reification,” modernist thought continually drew upon the Marxian concept of fetishism to explain the process by which the forms of modern culture – technology, bureaucracy, law, etc. – assume an autonomous status while human beings are reduced to “passive observers.”²⁸ Even the early Jean Baudrillard could draw on this paradigm when he described consumer culture

²⁶ Mischke, “Die Reklame der Film-Karikatur,” 304.

²⁷ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital I*, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, Volume 23, 3rd Edition (Berlin: Dietz, 1969), 86.

²⁸ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968), 100. For Simmel’s link to Marx, see Georg Simmel, “The Concept and Tragedy of Culture,” in *Simmel on Culture*, ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1997), 55-75: “The ‘fetishistic character’ which Marx attributed to economic objects in the epoch of commodity production is only a particularly modified instance of the general fate of the contents of our culture. These contents are subject to a paradox – and increasingly so as ‘culture’ develops – that they are indeed created by human subjects and meant for human subjects, but follow an immanent developmental logic in the intermediate form of objectivity which they take on at either side of these instances and thereby become alienated from both their origin and their purpose” (70).

and its products as a kind of coercive (structural) social system – “the code by which the entire society communicates and converses” – to which twentieth-century individuals are trained to conform no less nineteenth-century rural populations were trained for industrial and bureaucratic work.²⁹

As powerful as such theoretical paradigms are, however, they cannot account for the particular affective mode in which commodities come to life to address spectators in early animated advertisements: namely their humor. For this, we do better to take a cue from Arjun Appadurai, who famously called for “methodological fetishism” in the study of things, one that follows the things themselves – their forms, their circulation and above all the work they do – rather than reflexively seeking to dissipate fetishistic illusions and reveal the human actors or social networks underneath. The particular humor of early product advertising was part and parcel of a broader culture of humor in early consumer society, which sought precisely to come to terms with the increased agency of material things. Perhaps the best known articulation of the topos came from the aesthetic theorist and novelist Friedrich Theodor Vischer, who coined the term “Tücke des Objekts” (cunning of objects) in his 1879 novel *Auch Einer: eine Reisebekanntschaft (Another One: A Travelling Acquaintance)*, in which the protagonist rails against the capacity of everyday objects to thwart the idealistic strivings of thought with their stubborn contingency.³⁰ Vischer’s comedy of “cunning” objects looked back to his own romantic theories of comedy, where (building on Jean Paul’s model of comedy as an “inverted sublime”) he identified the comic with moments in which human thought is forced to

²⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Sage, 1998), 79-81. “This fetishistic logic,” Baudrillard wrote elsewhere, “is, strictly, the ideology of consumption” (59).

³⁰ For a reading of Vischer’s novel, see Jorg Kreienbrock, *Malicious Objects. Anger Management and the Question of Modern Literature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 122-172.

come back down, as it were, and attend to the realm of the body and material reality.³¹ But by attaching such moments to everyday objects, Vischer also looked forward to an emerging discourse consumer objects. Product advertising itself was often conceptualized in terms of romantic humor on account of its ability – as one writer for *Seidels Reklame* described it in 1922 – to “dissolve seemingly serious values into naught.”³² But Vischer’s humor of “cunning objects” also provided a template for a broader experience of everyday things in the era of consumerism. Thus the writer Arnold Zweig, in a humorous feuilleton article from 1923 still resonate with Vischer’s view of the cunning object, lamented that consumer objects had “gone on the attack”:

Threateningly and violently they besiege us, always there, constantly announcing themselves anew – be it because they have run out, because they require restoration, because they need mending, or simply because they are lost. Shifted into the center of attention, feeding on everyone’s energies, they tear open the calm in which innovation takes place. They have banded together and surrounded us; when they shift into attack mode they make us old and tired. We must constantly renew the battle to regain that concentration that used to last through weeks of undisturbed work.

For intellectuals such as Zweig, the experience of everyday objects in consumer society was precisely one of being pulled back down, cast into a stubborn material realm where autonomous theoretical pursuits become impossible.

Early cinema is, of course, full of representations of things assuming their own agency. For theorists such as Béla Balázs and Jean Epstein, this capacity of objects to assume a living physiognomy on screen is precisely what made film an art form, whose defamiliarizing close-ups could restore a mode of vision characteristic of children who

³¹ See Vischer, “Über das Erhabene und das Komische” (1837), in *Über das Erhabene und das Komische und andere Texte zur Ästhetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967).

³² G. Schultze-Pfaelzer, “Die Hauptformen öffentlicher Werbung,” *Seidels Reklame* 7 (1922), 256. According to the writer, this is precisely what separated humorous product advertisements from the more “serious” forms of publicity such as public service and propaganda films.

“do not yet judge things as tools,” but “regard each thing as an autonomous living being with a soul and face of its own.”³³ Such readings of film’s resistance to instrumental vision resonate with entire strain of modern aesthetics, from Surrealism to Heidegger to contemporary “thing” theory, dedicated to rediscovering what Bill Brown has called “the thingness of objects” whose “flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily.”³⁴

But if the humor of the “cunning object” resonates with cinema’s defamiliarizing powers generally, it finds a more specific on-screen representation in slapstick. Méliès’s *Diable noir*, itself a proto-slapstick comedy, derived its humor precisely from a spectacle of malevolent objects – chairs, tables and beds – that thwart even the simplest intentions of the unsuspecting hotel guest. And this humor would come to a head in the films of Chaplin and Buster Keaton, which offered, in André Bazin’s formulation, “the dramatic expression of the tyranny of things.”³⁵ [FIGURE 10] Whereas Chaplin’s optimistic comedy consisted in making such tyrannical objects assume new – artistic - functions, it was Keaton, Bazin argues, who “knew how to create a tragedy of the Object.”³⁶ Writing some thirty years later, Stanley Cavell could argue that Keaton’s comedies offered filmic equivalents of the Heideggerian experience of worldliness, in which the objects of the world, ceasing to function as transparent tools, step forth “in their conspicuousness, their

³³ Béla Balázs, *Visible Man*, in *Early Film Theory. Visible Man and the Spirit of Film*, ed. Erica Carter and Rodney Livingstone (London: Berghan, 2010), 46. Epstein famously argued that film revived a sense of “animism” familiar from “certain primitive religions,” which “attributes a semblance of life to the objects it defines.” Jean Epstein, “Le Cinémaographe vu de l’Etna,” trans. Stuart Liebman, in *Jean Epstein. Critical Essays and New Translations*, ed. Sarah Keller and Jason N. Paul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 295.

³⁴ Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 23 (2001), 1-22, here 4. For Brown, such moments form the model for a kind of theory that attempts to resist the sublations of hermeneutic reading.

³⁵ André Bazin, “Theater and Cinema,” in *What is Cinema? Volume 1*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965, 2005), 121.

³⁶ *Ibid.* For Bazin’s reading of Chaplin and objects, see “Charlie Chaplin,” in *What is Cinema? Volume 1*, 145-147.

obtrusiveness, their obstinacy.”³⁷ One can only imagine what Keaton might have done with some of the uncanny “things” that inhabited the landscape of early advertising – for example the “giant models of packages of Reemstma cigarettes” on display at the 1921 Frankfurt International Trade Fair,³⁸ or the motorized Walfisch shampoo vehicles riding through the Leipzig trade fair the same year. [FIGURE 11] Considering such larger-than-life commodities, it is little wonder that Kästner could describe such trade fairs as the “Karneval des Kaufmanns” (salesman’s carnival): the product trade fair not only had its roots in carnival, but also retained a carnivalesque quality in Bakhtin’s sense, where autonomous products and trademarks towered over their human visitors.³⁹

It might be tempting to approach such advertising representations as part of the nexus of popular culture by which capitalism creates its own immanent critiques. Many recent histories of animation have highlighted the utopian potential that thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Sergei Eisenstein saw in cartoons such as Mickey Mouse with their ability to “unhinge experience and agency from anthropomorphic identity” through morphing and other tricks.⁴⁰ Here too, however, there is a crucial distinction to be made. For if advertising *evoked* the rebellious objects of slapstick and cartoons, it always did so with a view towards *taming* those objects and reassuring spectators precisely of their instrumental status. This is, no doubt, a central motivation behind the predilection for orderly ornamental dances in advertising films, where the objects such as Pinschewer’s

³⁷ Stanley Cavell, “What Becomes of Things on Film?,” *Philosophy and Literature* 2:2 (1978), 249-257, here 250. See also Cavell, “Leopards in Connecticut,” *The Georgia Review* 30:” (1976), 241.

³⁸ J. M. Merich, “Die III. Frankfurter Internationale Messe,” *Seidels Reklame* 5 (1920), 284-286, here 285.

³⁹ See Kästner, “Der Karneval des Kaufmanns.” Kästner was hardly alone in describing the trade fair as a carnivalesque event. Numerous were the complaints that these events, with their parades of animated objects, had retained an “obnoxious carnival character” (aufdringliche Karnevalscharakter). Robert Hösel, “Die Messe und die neue Zeit,” *Seidels Reklame* 5 (1920), 209-210 (here 210).

⁴⁰ Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street,” *Critical Inquiry* 25 (1990) 306-343, here 323. See also Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands. Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2002), 80-123.

champagne bottles or Fischinger's cigarettes arrange themselves in geometrical mass ornaments. Where Siegfried Kracauer saw ornamental "girl troops" as the expression of an abstract rationality that had transformed man into its raw material, advertising films promised an orderly rationality in the service of the consumer. This topos of the obedient object also informed the rudimentary narratives of many animated advertising films. For example, in a 1927 advertisement by Epoche for the Hamburg gas works, *Umsturz am Nordpol* (*Overthrow at the North Pole*, 1927), an Eskimo family flees in terror before an "invading army" of animated gas ovens, only to erupt with joy when the ovens end up bringing warmth and modern comfort ("progress") to their cold igloo.⁴¹ Similarly, in a Pinschewer advertisement for Vim cleaning products entitled *Küchen-Rebellen* (*Kitchen Rebels*, 1928), a frustrated housewife struggles to clean her stubborn pots, which then come to life via stop-trick animation. However, the pots' "rebellion" consists not in a scenario of cunningness, but rather in an orderly procession to the local grocery store to purchase a box of Vim scrubbing powder and dutifully carry it back to the elated housewife. [FIGURE 12] Aimed at middle-class spectators, such advertisements constantly invoked the specter of the rebellious only to perform its taming on the screen.

This taming of the object was part and parcel of the codes of advertising film and corresponded to the particular brand of reassuring humor such films sought to cultivate. The advertising theorist Fritz Pauli, for example, argued in an article from 1926 that German advertisements displayed a more "refined" humor than the vulgar slapstick of Felix the Cat: "Unlike the bawdy humor of American films, these films feature a

⁴¹ Like the majority of advertising films from the period, this one is now lost. However, a synopsis and illustrations survive in a print advertisement for Epoche. See "Aus Film-Manuskripten," advertisement, *Die Reklame* 20 (1927), 421.

dignified and unobtrusive humor.”⁴² Similarly, the artist Lutz Michaelis could write the following year that animators working in advertising “should ensure that they do not develop aggressive humor (satire); rather, their figures should be based in a jovial humorous characterization. (To offer a crass comparison, Wilhelm Busch’s caricatures are funny and jovial, while George Grosz’s every pen-stroke is caustic and aggressive).”⁴³ Such “jovial” (bequem) humor was omnipresent in the animated advertisements of the 1910s and 1920s, and this is precisely what separated advertising animation from the provocations of Keatonesque slapstick. Even as these films evoked modernity’s “cunning” objects, they visualized, in scenario after scenario, the transformation of the rebellious object into an obedient commodity.

Expertise

The laments of Vischer and Zweig – that the overwhelming presence of material objects had destroyed “that concentration that used to last through weeks of undisturbed work” – could also be understood in terms of advertising itself. The period after WWI, in particular, saw an exponential increase in the presence of advertising in Germany as public institutions such as the rail system, streetcars, the post office, subway stations, streets, highways, construction sites, sidewalks were opened up to advertising for the first time, resulting in a widely observed “flood of advertising” in the public spaces of the new republic.⁴⁴ This went hand in hand with a massive expansion of professional film advertising as new companies such as Deulig, Döring, Epoche, Nordmark, Ufa,

⁴² Fritz Pauli, “Das Problem des Werbefilms,” *Die Reklame* 19 (1926), 616-617, here 617.

⁴³ Lutz Michaelis, “Wie entsteht ein Werbetrickfilm?” *Die Reklame* 20 (1927): 434.

⁴⁴ On this context, see my article “Taking it to the Street. Screening the Advertising Film in the Weimar Republic,” *Screen* 54.4 (forthcoming).

Werbedienst, Werbelicht and dozens more got into the business. At the same time, the emergence of portable projectors and daylight screens meant that advertising film was no longer confined to cinemas but also shown in display windows, trade fairs, on shop floors and advertising vehicles that made the rounds in urban streets. [FIGURE 13]. With the return of animated light advertisements after the postwar blackout in the early 1920s, the sight of animated advertising displays became a ubiquitous feature of public space – so much so that a utopian image of “Berlin in 2000,” printed in 1926 in *Die Reklame*, could imagine the city as a giant collection of animated advertising surfaces. [FIGURE 14]

One writer who sought to come to terms with the implications of this new mode of visual culture was Walter Benjamin. Eschewing Zweig’s nostalgia, Benjamin argued in his *Einbahnstrasse* (1928) that advertising posed both a new challenge and new possibilities for vision:

Fools lament the decay of criticism. For its day is long past. Criticism is a matter of correct distancing. [...] Now things press too urgently on human society. [...] Today, the most real, mercantile gaze into the heart of things is the advertisement. It abolishes the space where contemplation moved and all but hits us between the eyes with things as a car, growing to gigantic proportions, careens at us out of a film screen. And just as the film does not present furniture and facades in completed forms for critical inspection, their insistent, jerky nearness alone being sensational, the genuine advertisement hurtles things at us with the tempo of a good film.⁴⁵

Benjamin’s description of advertising “hitting us between the eyes” prefigures his better-known characterization of Dada collage and film montage as phenomena that “hit the spectator like a bullet.” The passage also underscores the relation between the aggressive objects of advertising and the cinema of attractions – the image of the car careening towards the spectator recalling nothing so much as early automobile films such as Cecil

⁴⁵ Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1985), 89.

Hepworth's *How it Feels to be Run Over* (1900) – and suggests that Benjamin attached the same utopian hopes to advertising that he did to film as a means of training vision.

Following Benjamin, Janet Ward has rightly emphasized the contribution of advertising to the elaboration of a visual culture of “shocks” during the Weimar years.⁴⁶ At the same time, the very insistence of advertising theorists themselves on distinguishing between advertising and Dada suggest that they understood the visual power of advertising images in ways that went beyond the mere shock of novel impressions. Parallel to the increase in advertising practice in the 1920s, there also emerged a new professional sphere of advertising psychology – one undergirded by new trade publications, university curricula and experimental institutes such as the *Institut für Wirtschaftspsychologie* in Berlin – which saw as one of its central tasks the overhauling of advertising design to achieve a maximum level of control over spectatorial attention. Blending doctrines of suggestion with experimental psychology, theorists such as Walther Moede – head of the *Institut für Wirtschaftspsychologie* and editor of the new journal *Industrielle Psychotechnik* – devised models of advertising images designed to capture the attention, guide the spectator's gaze, stimulate associations and motivate consumer habits.⁴⁷ In their writings, these theorists conceived of advertising spectatorship as a terrain of “fleeting glances,” which images sought to attract by means of striking visual elements (the so-called “Blickfang” or “eye-catcher”) and steer through carefully controlled layouts (so-called “Blickbewegungslinien” or “lines of eye movement”) in order to forge lasting associations between needs, pleasures and particular brands.⁴⁸ (Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that the field of advertising psychology, while

⁴⁶ Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2001), 92-142.

⁴⁷ Walther Moede, “Psychologie der Reklame,” *Die Reklame* 13 (1920): 244-246

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 244-245.

drawing on many longstanding tenants of experimental psychology and mass psychology, became intelligible as a doctrine of *brand* advertising). The result was a new conception of visual culture, in which images struggle for control over attention and the wandering gaze is exposed to constant solicitations by instrumental representations. Here, the “invisible hand” was not no longer that of a magician, but rather the hand of the advertising expert, aspiring to guide the spectator’s gaze – as Moede put it – “in the desired direction.”⁴⁹

Significantly, this new caste of advertising experts sought to define themselves against the world of magic and “tricks” that had characterized much earlier advertising. “Tricks,” wrote the editor of *Seidels Reklame*, Robert Hösel in 1926, “[...] can no longer help us. Today’s audiences demand that the advertisement provide them with essential information, that it come to the point.”⁵⁰ Hösel’s call forms part of a trend towards *Sachlichkeit* (objectivity) – consistently championed by the contributors to *Seidels Reklame* such as Adolf Behne – that found its most famous embodiment in the reductive “object posters” (*Sachplakate*) of Lucien Bernhard.⁵¹ [FIGURE 15] But the passage is also indicative of a new era of *expertise*, in which advertising sought no longer to astonish, but rather – according to the dictates of the new advertising psychology – to control and direct visual attention.

Developments in film animation after WWI should clearly be seen in parallel with this professionalization of print advertising. It was precisely during and after the war that

⁴⁹ Ibid., 245.

⁵⁰ Robert Hösel, “Kopf hoch, Charly,” *Seidels Reklame* 11 (1926), 57-58, here 58

⁵¹ Pinschewer himself would later recast his trick films in this light when he described them, in an article from 1927, as “Werbefilme [...], in denen das propagierte Fabrikat, wie in einem ‘lebenden Sachplakat’, dem Beschauer näher gebracht wurde.” Julius Pinschewer, “Von den Anfängen des Werbefilms,” *Die Reklame* 20 (1927), 408-411, here 409.

industrialized modes of animation production – where studios were organized along Taylorist principles of industrial efficiency and animators employed labor-saving cel techniques – became the norm in the United States.⁵² It was also during this period that drawn animation separated from the tradition of the “trick film” and the aesthetics of attractions to become an autonomous film genre focused above all on character drawing.⁵³ This professionalization of animation forms the context in which the new advertising film companies began to take up animation *en masse*,⁵⁴ including the new cel techniques developed in the United States.⁵⁵ [FIGURE 16] Like other cultural phenomena coded as “Americanist,” this new culture of professionalized animation provoked an ambivalent reaction. The advertising theorist Hermann Behrmann, for instance, complained that the outsourcing of animation to “individuals wanting in artistic talent” and working for “insufficient pay” was creating a market of bad advertising films.⁵⁶ Behrmann saw the new vogue for “artistic” advertising films – he specifically cited silhouette film and puppet animation – as a German answer to such “American” models, which he hoped might replace Taylorized animation studios with the quality work of the “artist’s hand.”⁵⁷ Such artistic endeavors by Reiniger, Ruttmann and others remain the

⁵² See Crafton, *Before Mickey*, 162-168.

⁵³ See Philippe Gauthier, “A ‘Trick’ Question: Are Early Animated Drawings a Film Genre or a Special Effect?,” *Animation* 6 (2011), 163-175.

⁵⁴ Not surprisingly, advertising theorists also began to distinguish between “trick film” and “animation” in the early 1920s. Thus one book from 1923 described a new class of film he called “die gezeichneten Filme, die eigentlich nicht ganz mit Recht Trickfilme genannt werden” (Behrmann, *Reklame*, 228). Behrmann identifies the trick film with photographed objects and sees its attraction in the “Widerspruch zwischen der Photographie als urkundlicher Wiedergabe des Wirklichen und der Unwahrscheinlichkeit der sich abspielenden Vorgänge” (ibid.). Pinschewer too, in the above-cited article from 1927, distinguishes between his early “Trickfilm” and the “Trickzeichnungsfilm” of the 1920s. See Pinschewer, “Von den Anfängen des Werbefilms,” 409.

⁵⁵ Lutz Michaelis, for example, described the use of cel animation as the standard process for advertising film in 1927: “Die Dekoration (Hintergrund) der jeweiligen Szene ist [...] eine nur einmalig angefertigte Zeichnung, auf der sich die Karikaturen bewegen” (Michaelis, “Wie entsteht ein Werbetrickfilm,” 435).

⁵⁶ Behrmann, *Reklame*, 229.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

most celebrated examples of interwar animated advertisements today. But the vast majority of animators from this period came from the professional world of print illustration and drawn caricature.⁵⁸ Artists and illustrators such as Paul Simmel, Wolfgang Kaskeline, Arthur Kraska, Curt Schumann, Lutz Michaelis and numerous others now found work as animators for the many new advertising film companies that emerged after WWI.⁵⁹ These companies competed fiercely for the status of expertise, and touted – alongside their monopolies with various theaters – their mastery of the latest animation techniques, such as the so-called combination process (*Kombinationsverfahren*) in which animated figures and live actors were composited on the screen.⁶⁰

At the same time, advertising film itself was increasingly conceptualized within the parameters of the new advertising psychology. On the one hand, the animated images of advertising film appeared to offer an efficacious type of *Blickfang* (eye-catcher). Thus the industrial filmmaker Arthur Lassally argued that – with the emergence of the new portable daylight projectors – filmic images would replace posters and cruder forms of animation “as an eye-catcher [Blickfang] in shop windows” and other public spaces.⁶¹ This was, indeed, one of the main arenas for the projection of animated advertising films via portable projectors such as Pinschewer’s “Capitol” projector. [FIGURE 17] On the

⁵⁸ Pinschewer, who praised Ruttmann and Reiniger’s artistic talents, nonetheless argued that caricature “is pleasing and comprehensible everywhere in the world and to all classes of the population.” Pinschewer, “Von den Anfängen des Werbefilms,” 410.

⁵⁹ For an overview, see Günter Agde, *Flimmernde Versprechen. Geschichte des deutschen Werbefilms im Kino seit 1897* (Berlin: Das Neue Berlin, 1998), 28-72, esp. 59-65.

⁶⁰ For example, an announcement for the company Epoche read: “Je verblüffender der Trick in dem zur Werbung verwandten Reklamefilm, desto größer sind die Aussichten seines Erfolges. Ganz neuartig ist das Zusammenspiel einer gezeichneten Figur mit lebenden Menschen und innerhalb einer realistischen Umgebung. [...] Wir sind in der Lage, die schwierigsten Aufgaben, die an eine Werbefilm-Produktion gestellt werden können, aufs beste zu erfüllen.” “Eine Reklame durch die ‘Epoche’ – eine Epoche in der Reklame!,” advertisement, *Die Reklame* 20 (1927), 528.

⁶¹ Arthur Lassally, “Filmreklame und Reklamefilm,” *Die Reklame* 14 (1921): 425-426, here 425.

other hand, theorists argued that film's status as a time-based medium, capable of narrative development, offered ideal conditions for putting the new advertising psychology into practice. Thus in another article from 1921, C. F. Müller applied the new doctrines of advertising psychology directly onto film when he argued that a good advertising film should 1) include an "eye-catcher" (*Blickfang*) early on to attract spectators' attention, 2) communicate a "need" (Bedürfnis) through the scenario to retain attention and arouse interest, and 3) introduce the trademark at the end in such a way as to forge a lasting association with a specific brand. This last point, Müller argued, was the key to controlling the actions of spectators after they leave the cinema:

The cigarette brand [...] must be introduced in such a way that it is impressed inextinguishably upon the spectator's attention, which has been carefully prepared by the preceding action in the film. [...] In this way, according to the laws of mental association, whenever the spectator of this advertising film subsequently sees an elegant wine bar or hears a dance melody, the brand of cigarettes associated with them through the film will light up in his mind's eye. At the same time, if the need to smoke becomes active in the consumer's mind, this should also call forth memories of the film he saw and with it the relevant brand of cigarettes.⁶²

Müller's model – in which the trademark is introduced at the end to be associated with certain needs and their pleasurable fulfillment – offers something of a standard template for advertising films using narrative vignettes such as *Umsturz am Nordpol* and *Küchen-Rebellen*.

To be sure, this was not the only model around. A competing model, emerging in the wake of avant-garde advertising films by Walter Ruttmann, Guido Seeber and Oskar Fischinger, drew on recent psychological research to argue for the use of abstract rhythms in advertising. [FIGURE 18] Elaborated most fully by the advertising theorist Fritz Pauli (who once again linked animated film to other forms of animated advertisements such as

⁶² C. F. Müller, "Gedanken über die Reklame durch den Film," *Die Reklame* 14 (1921), 469.

electric signage), the abstract model relied less on a singular *Blickfang* than on hypnotic repetition, by which – Pauli hoped – consumers could be brought into “resonance” with the rhythms unfolding on the screen.⁶³ In the trade literature of the 1920s, one can find various “taxonomies” of the advertising film that include both of these types and others. For example, a 1926 article by the advertising theorist Käthe Kurtzig, published in Walther Moede’s journal *Industrielle Psychotechnik*, distinguished three prevalent types of animated advertising: the humorous caricature, the ornamental silhouette (which she saw as the best form for advertising women’s products) and the rhythmical “absolute” film.⁶⁴ In every case, however, the animated filmstrip functions as an “expert” tool for controlling spectatorship: captivating the attention and forging associations with particular brands.

None of this is to argue that the conventions of the “trick film” completely disappear in the 1920s. But those conventions are now combined with new forms of expertise and psychological management introduced by applied experimental psychology. Within this context, the “invisible hand” of the magician is once again subordinated to another invisible hand: that of the advertising expert, whose “applied animation” would serve to control spectatorship at every level by capturing and directing attention, provoking psychological reactions and stimulating acts of consumption through film. In conclusion, I offer a brief reading of one film, among many, that combines these various moments. Made by Curt Schumann – a prominent member of the new cohort of

⁶³ See Pauli, *Rhythmus und Resonanz als ökonomisches Prinzip in der Reklame* (Berlin: Verlag des Verbandes deutscher Reklamefachleute, 1926), 38. As another writer put it in 1927, this work sought to “capture our gaze with suggestive force through the strange rhythms of animated lines.” Max Friedländer, “1000 Worte Werbefilm,” *Die Reklame* 20 (1927), 411. Pinschewer himself, who produced the films of Ruttman and Reiniger, also saw such experimental films as a separate category of advertising, “which limits itself to rhythmical-dynamic design alone.” Pinschewer, “Von den Anfängen des Werbefilms,” 410.

⁶⁴ Käthe Kurtzig, “Die Arten des Werbefilms,” *Industrielle Psychotechnik* 3 (1926): 311-314.

professional animators in the 1920s – for Kaisers coffee products in 1927, *Gespensterstunde* (*The Ghostly Hour*) uses cel animation to create a phantasmatic world in which the phantom-like products of a Kaiser’s grocery store come to life during the wee hours of the night.⁶⁵ [FIGURE 19] In its use of the night-time setting and in its specific dramaturgy (such as the tracking over the city’s buildings in the opening shot), the film recalls such works of early cinema as *The Dream of Rarebit Fiend* (1906), an Edison trick film based on a comic strip of Windsor McKay, in which the drunken protagonist is plagued in his sleep by a series of “cunning” objects (culminating in an animated bed that takes him on a harrowing flight over the city). But while *Gespensterstunde* evokes a similar carnivalesque scenario, the film’s development works towards transforming such animated objects into obedient commodities. Awoken by their “leader,” a group of Kaiser coffee pots marches down the counter and watches as the various products perform ethnographically marked dances one by one in orderly mass ornaments: a dance of Swiss maidens for “Kakao,” a Chinese dance for “Tee,” etc. [FIGURE 20] With these typological ethnographic dances, the film clearly follows a well-known pattern from ethnographic exhibitions and educational films. But it also inscribes them with a distinctly consumerist gaze: the same imperialist gaze inscribed into the confection shop itself, where the world’s products appear lined up in orderly rows at the disposition of the consumer.

But this “taming” of the object at the level of spectacle is also echoed in the film’s narrative. At the end of *Gespensterstunde*, after the dances have been completed, a female “shopper” emerges from a poster in the store to order products from the animated coffee pot, who tells her (and the film’s audience) that only the Kaiser’s trademark can

⁶⁵ For a biography of Schumann, see Agde, *Flimmernde Versprechen*, 61-62.

guarantee the product's quality. As this exchange plays out, an animated line – quite literally a filmic “Blickbewegungslinie” – draws itself across the screen from the woman's eyes to the coffee package, leading our gaze to the space where the trademark should be. [FIGURE 21] In the next shot, the animated pot then jumps onto the package and becomes the Kaiser trademark, telling viewers: “I must always be present. For only the Kaiser's trademark guarantees quality.” At this point, the trademark is frozen into place, and the other figures also run back to their places as still objects and images. [FIGURE 22] What began with the evocation of the uncanny powers of animation thus ends with the figurative and literal stilling of the rebellious object.

As the focal point for visual attention, the all-important trademark thus not only promises “quality,” but also the pleasures of taming the “cunning” objects of modern consumer society. At the same time, *Gespensterstunde* transforms the anarchical trick film into a forum for visual pedagogy for the consumer's gaze. Not only does the film culminate with the trademark, thus forging associations between grocery shopping and Kaiser's brand. It also trains the spectator, as it were, *to look for trademarks*, to identify with a brand in the interest of “quality” consumption. Within this pedagogical scenario, the “invisible hand” has passed from the magician to the expert: from the phantasmagoria to the laboratories and studios of psychologists and professional animators.