CHAPTER 5

Transforming Vision: Film, Photography, and the Politics of Social Hygiene

5.1 Introduction: The Birth of Homo Cinematicus

Writing in Deutsches Volkstum in 1919, the conservative cultural critic Wilhelm Stapel lamented the advent of film, arguing that ‘[t]he cinema is forming a new type of human being, inferior both intellectually and morally: the Homo cinematicus’.\(^1\) Stapel’s comment reflected a broader unease with the new medium of film that was felt especially strongly in the aftermath of the War. For cultural conservatives like Stapel, who was a vocal German nationalist and anti-semite,\(^2\) the post-War lifting of censorship had exacerbated the already questionable moral impact of the cinema, but film had its detractors across the political spectrum. The ‘cinema debates’ (Kino-Debatte) so prominent in the early decades of the twentieth century centred on a number of issues: the status of film as art; its relationship to older forms of cultural production like theatre; and its exacerbation of the fragmenting impact of modern life.\(^3\) At the heart of these debates, a point often lost in works on Weimar film, were the profound anxieties over the social hygienic implications of the medium. The exploding size of cinema audiences meant that many, especially bourgeois critics, saw it as a growing threat to the health of the Volkskörper. It was not bourgeois audiences that provoked this worry, however, but the exploding numbers of workers, women, and youth who attended film. These were seen as impressionable viewers unequipped to deal with the potentially dangerous themes of movies, and with the medium itself.

The commercial character of film was arguably that which made it seem so threatening to so many, but also that which drove film’s development. Both the left and the right were deeply troubled by this aspect of the industry, although they approached the issue in very different ways. Conservatives perceived the promiscuous and uncontrolled expansion of the medium primarily as a moral

---

1 Quoted in Cowan 2008, p. 295n145.
2 Stapel was influenced in this regard by the racial theory of Hans F.K. Günther, whose work I will examine in detail in the final section of the chapter.
3 The work of Anton Kaes has been instrumental in delineating these debates, although his focus is primarily on the aesthetic questions (see Kaes 1978 and 1987).
threat, while on the left many critics saw capitalist culture, film in particular, as repressive. Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s later critique of what they called the ‘culture industry’ had it roots in these Weimar debates. At the heart of these different perspectives on film was the question of class. For the educated bourgeoisie, the Bildungsbürgertum, and many on the right, it was the mass nature of the new medium that made it so dangerous, both in terms of challenging the cultural authority of traditional forms of art such as literature, painting, and theatre, and in producing potentially uncontrolled forms of working-class sociality. Thus, the social hygienist Albert Moll contended that ‘[t]he power of suggestion of film is so strong, that it can hardly be compared with that of the theatre’. This power was tied directly to the new working-class audiences attending these films; for Moll and others, the danger represented by film and other mass media was conceptualised in terms of the familiar language of degeneration.

The role of class in left critiques was very different, focusing on film’s production of forms of repressive or false consciousness. Despite this focus, however, their critiques often retained strong traces of bourgeois fears over its impact on impressionable new audiences, a point to which I will return at length. The SPD’s approach to culture, which sought to claim the bourgeois heritage for the working class, often led them to defend classical bourgeois culture against film. In a 1911 article on ‘Cinema as Educator’, for instance, the editor of the radical Expressionist journal Die Aktion Franz Pfemfert contrasted film, ‘this poor imitation of naked reality, this brutal image-reporting’, to true culture.

Stapel shared the radical right fear of film, but his comment goes beyond merely identifying a troubling influence. In speaking of the ‘Homo cinematicus’, he was arguing that the new medium in fact produced new forms of perception, embodiment, and subjectivity; in short, a new human. This was the locus of danger. However, while Stapel lamented this shift, other critics, especially amongst the avant-garde, argued that these new forms of subjectivity represented a dramatic and potentially positive transformation. For these critics and artists, film was part of a broader perceptual revolution in which photography also played a key role. Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold described this in

---

4 They argued that the film industry ‘is the triumph of invested capital. To impress the omnipotence of capital on the hearts of expropriated job candidates as the power of their true master is the purpose of all films, regardless of the plot selected by the production directors’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, p. 98).
5 Moll 1926, p. 1103.
6 Pfemfert 1911, p. 562.