

Weimar Rococo:
The Cinema Posters of Josef Fenneker
as a Reflection of 1920s Berlin Society

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The Weimar Republic was a period of seismic change within Germany. Having recently been defeated in the First World War, and struggling under the weight of crushing economic reparations while adjusting to a new political system (*fig. 1*), Germany found itself splintered in the post-war era, especially in Berlin. The city was crowded with a remarkable mix of communities, from workers of all types—especially women—looking for new opportunities, to ideologically conservative industrialists, to trade unionists, academics, and political activists. New perspectives and freedoms revolutionized gender roles, urban social mores, and the arts, especially architecture and design, while street battles, food shortages, and spiraling inflation created chaos and systemic instability.

Adding to the cognitive dissonance was the concurrent modernization of Berlin itself, which included expanded transportation systems, state-of-the-art lighting, and an expansion of the city itself in 1920 (*fig. 2*) from the six boroughs of Alt Berlin—shown in red—to the twenty of Greater Berlin, which quadrupled its size and increased its population to over 4 million people.¹ The result was a dizzying societal whirlwind, whose general cacophony was visually captured by Nikolaus Braun in his 1921 painting *Street Scene in Berlin* (*fig. 3*).

One avenue of escape from this cultural maelstrom, enjoyed across the societal spectrum, was the cinema. For many, the cinema provided

1. Karl Baedeker, *Berlin and Its Environs* (Leipzig: Karl Baedeker, 1923), 41.



Fig. 1
Philipp Scheidemann
announcing a German republic,
November 9, 1918

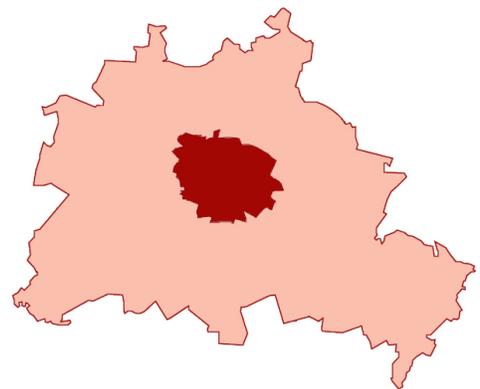


Fig. 2
Expansion of Berlin, 1920



Fig. 3
Nikolaus Braun
Street Scene in Berlin, 1921

an enveloping cocoon that temporarily sheltered them from the monotony and distress of everyday life, providing what Vladimir Nabokov poetically referred to as the “velvety darkness.”² Led by Universum Film AG, or UFA, the German film industry of the 1920s became one of the largest business concerns in the country, and indeed, the period is often referred to as the golden age of German cinema. An astounding range of movies was released, from Expressionist masterpieces such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (fig. 4) to comedies, historic spectacles, and thinly-veiled morality tales; many were directed



Fig. 4
Film still from *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*

by future cinematic legends, among them F. W. Murnau, Fritz Lang (fig. 5), and Ernst Lubitsch (fig. 6). The relative inexpensiveness of the cinema made it easily available for all Berliners, particularly during the inflationary period, and this greatly contributed to its eventual widespread cultural acceptance. Its overwhelming popularity in



Fig. 5
Fritz Lang



Fig. 6
Ernst Lubitsch

Berlin can be seen in the exponential increase of the city’s movie theaters, which rose from 218 in 1920 to 387 by 1928; by 1924, 40 million movies tickets were sold in the city alone.³ These were sold at both small neighborhood theaters, as well as those outfitted like palaces, such as the UFA Palast am Zoo (fig. 7), the Marmorhaus, the Mozartsaal, and the Gloria Palast.

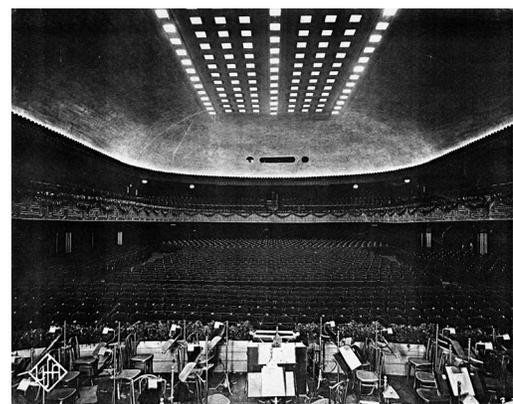


Fig. 7
UFA Palast am Zoo, interior, c. 1925

With such a plethora of films, available venues,

2. Brigitte Flickinger, “Cinemas in the City: Berlin’s Public Space in the 1910s and 1920s,” *Film Studies* 10 (Spring 2007), 72.
3. Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 172.

and communities, though, not to mention Berlin's already visually crowded and fast-paced urban milieu, theater owners had to expend great efforts to attract the "gaze" of the harried pedestrian. Rudi Feld, UFA's marketing director, stated that "Our advertising must make a deep imprint.... The public rushing by can only be chained to us if we succeed in projecting the material [of the film] onto the outside world."⁴ Graphically-arresting posters, prominently lit and displayed along the streets and outside the theaters, were thus a necessary component of these campaigns.

The posters themselves were of large scale, over 3 feet wide by 2 feet tall for horizontal designs, and over 4.5 feet tall by 3 feet wide for those of vertical orientation; note the size of the people in the photograph (*fig. 8*). They were brightly colored, which would visually pop on predominantly grey and brown streetscapes where the majority of people also wore dark colors. And, the striking graphics were calculated to jolt and capture attention. Siegfried Kracauer, in *The Mass Ornament*, notes their effectiveness in his statement that the cinema posters themselves "swoop into the empty space that the spirit itself would not mind pervading; they then drag it in front of the silver screen...."⁵

Prior to 1925, these posters were mainly commissioned by the individual theaters, which utilized discrete communication and artistic cues to specifically appeal to the distinctive populations of their surrounding neighborhoods. A sign of the medium's importance to the industry was the willingness of owners to assign top designers for the task. Among the most prominent and prolific was Josef Fenneker (*fig. 9*).

Josef Fenneker was born on December 6, 1895, in Bocholt,

4. Ward, *Weimar Surfaces*, 170.

5. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 332.



Fig. 8
U.T. Theater



Fig. 9
Josef Fenneker

Germany, a manufacturing town on the Dutch border. Creatively inclined, he opted at age 13 for an artistic career instead of the priesthood for which he was being prepared at a Belgian convent school.⁶

Between 1908 and early 1918, Fenneker received training at academies in Münster, Düsseldorf, Munich, and Berlin,⁷ and his first cinema poster, *Die Nonne und der Harlekin* (fig. 10), was designed in June 1918. By the end of the year, he had created over 40 other highly-accomplished designs, including *Siegerin Weib* (fig. 11), and *Carmen* (fig. 12); by 1920, his annual output had risen to 51 posters, most of them for first-run houses.

Fenneker considered films to be living things, which in turn provided him with manifold inspirations for the imagery in his

strikingly original posters. His main approach to poster design in this period was distinct in that rather than faithfully rendering a scene from a movie or using photographic stills, he chose instead to artistically interpret the emotional *mien* of the film. As he stated in the design journal *Gebrauchsgrafik*, “It seems to me that it would work much better to picture the dominant idea of the film under treatment—as it were, to draw up the balance of the action, pick out the essen-



Fig. 10
Josef Fenneker
Die Nonne und die Harlekin, 1918



Fig. 11
Josef Fenneker
Die Nonne und die Harlekin, 1918



Fig. 12
Josef Fenneker,
Carmen, 1918

6. Rolf Badenhausen, “Fenneker, Josef,” *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 5 (1961): 77–78, online version (http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/artikelNDB_pnd117505366.html). Accessed on June 20, 2010.

7. Ibid.

tials, and thus ensure a different impression every time.”⁸ He outlined this thought process in his description of the poster design for *Die Morder Dmitri Karmasoff* (fig. 13):

I tried to represent the woman with a calm, almost disinterested bearing, to indicate the coldness and beauty that were so destructive; in contrast we have the dramatic expression of the man’s had with its wildly staring eyes, as if he already has an inkling of his fate. No photo can give this supremely dramatic touch, for it comes of the pure impression made by the film material and this is the point where there is a sharp division between photography and painting.⁹

Fenneker further emphasized this visual split by employing a remarkable range of artistic genres in the creation of his interpretations. In fact, Fenneker’s studied employment of a variety of visual genres—among them modified Art

Deco (fig. 14), Neo-Historicism, Sachplakat objectivism, and Cubism (fig. 15)—inspired a contemporaneous critic to refer to his *oeuvre* as “Tauntzien Rococo” in acknowledgment of the graphically flamboyant nature of his Berlin-centric approach (the Tauntzienstrasse was a major shopping and entertainment

boulevard in the city).¹⁰ However, the style he employed most was Expressionism.



Fig. 13
Josef Fenneker
Der Morder Dimitri Karmasoff, 1927



Fig. 14
Josef Fenneker
Der Frauen-König, 1922



Fig. 15
Josef Fenneker
Clown Charly, 1918

8. Josef Fenneker, “Joseph Fenneker,” trans. by E. T. Scheffauer, *Gebrauchsgrafik* 12, no. 4 (April, 1935): 5.

9. *Ibid.*, 7.

10. Goethe-Institut, *Josef Fenneker 1895–1956: Cinema Posters from the Weimar Republic* (Berlin: Stiftung Deutsche Kine-

It appears that the greatest influence on Fenneker was the work of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (fig. 15), one of the co-founders of the pioneering Expressionist group Die Brücke, whose angular, vibrantly colored, and heavily-outlined work (fig. 16) was almost certainly influenced by the group's extensive experimentation with woodblock printing.



Fig. 15
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner



Fig. 16
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner
Woodblock poster, 1910

After a move to Berlin, though, and the group's disintegration in 1913, Kirchner's work transformed itself, moving away from the boldly-defined figures of the Brücke style to forms that were less clearly delineated. This metamorphosis can be seen

in two examples from his well-known Berlin Street Scenes series—*Five Women in the Street* (fig. 17) and *Two Women in the Street* (fig. 18)—which depict Berlin's infamous prostitutes in vivid tones with angular physiques and mask-like visages. The figures are irregular and dif-



Fig. 17
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner
Five Women on the Street, 1913

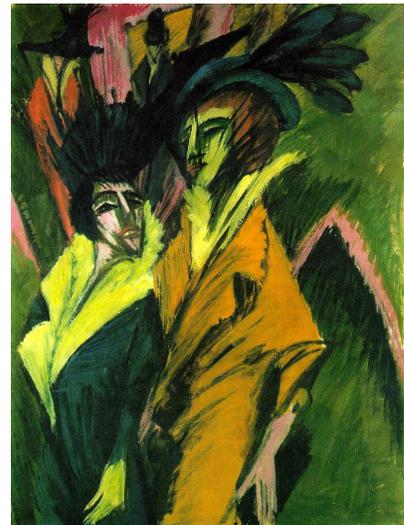


Fig. 18
Ernst Ludwig Kirchner
Two Women in the Street, 1914

fused, almost blurred on the edges, implying movement and haste. In many cases, the faces are almost smeared on, so that the viewer derives an uncomfortable sense of the briskness and anonymity of the women's work.

When one compares these paintings with Fenneker's 1920 poster for *Maulwürfe* (fig. 19), the aesthetic connections are readily observed. The similarities, especially in the facial expressions, mathek; Munich: Goethe-Institut, 1987), 9.

choice of colors, formal delineation, and sense of action, are striking. In particular, all three works utilize staggered repetition, which creates a visceral sense of rhythm and movement. Perhaps this structural affinity should not be surprising, as Kirchner's paintings—drawn from life—were essentially frozen moments in time, much as were the film stills that Fenneker used to design his posters. This subjectal correlation may partially



Fig. 19
Josef Fenneker
Maulwürfe, 1920

explain Fenneker's early attraction to this segment of Kirchner's work; the implication of imminent action was not only an integral, elemental factor in the film posters Fenneker would soon become renowned for, but one which was especially useful in conveying the essential character of the film medium within a static, two-dimensional form. The sense of motion, of vital and exigent energy, was also what made these posters so effective in capturing pedestrians' gazes in the overwhelming street life of the early Weimar Republic, and which undoubtedly inspired Dr. Walter Schubert to write in *Das Plakat* that Fenneker's work "always has style, a real roaring, surging cinematic style. Therein lies its mystery, its attraction, its success. And it usually succeeds by producing work of unprecedented impact."¹¹

It can be said, though, that Fenneker's use of Expressionism in his posters also embodies many elements of the movement in general; as noted by Peter Gay, "[Expressionists] took the strong, simple, aggressive colors, the consciously primitive craftsmanship, the passionate line, and the cruel distortion of the human figure...to new extremes."¹² Most of the poster commissions in this style (*fig. 20*) were for cinemas located in



Fig. 20
Josef Fenneker
Der Graf von Cagliostro, 1920

11. Dr. Walter F. Schubert, "Das Deutsche Filmplakat," *Das Plakat* 11, no. 10 (October 1920): 447.

12. Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 106.

the newer, western sections of Berlin that were added during the creation of Greater Berlin in 1920 (fig. 21). They were generally more well-to-do, and post-war were the site of numerous theaters, cafés, and restaurants. Among the neighborhoods are: Spandau, Wilmersdorf, Steglitz, Zehlendorf, and, particularly, Charlottenburg, which had the greatest concentration of high-end movie palaces in the city.

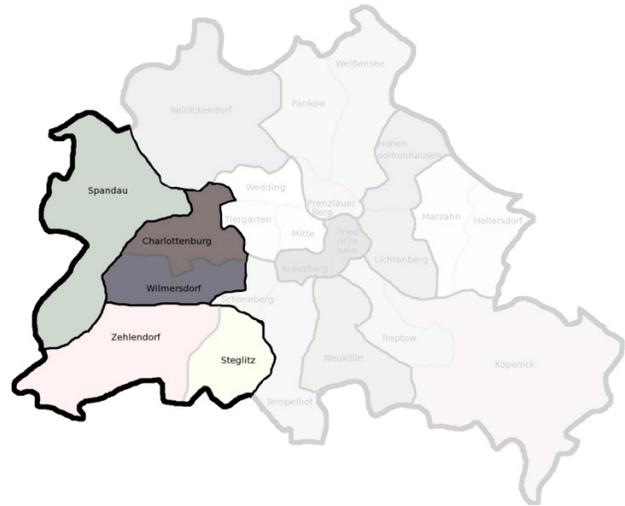


Fig. 21
Upper class neighborhoods of Berlin

Why this style in particular for this audience? As Paul Rennie remarks, the use of Expressionism in film posters at all could be seen as surprising for an industry which later developed a very conservative approach to its advertising campaigns.¹³ For more upper-class, bourgeois clientelles, though, Expressionism in all its distorted, garish glory was not only appropriate for film posters, but seen as connoting the imprimature of artistic content; they were believed to denote artistically-inclined—and, therefore, culturally-acceptable—establishments. Naturalism was not important, and, as Gero Gandert notes, “in the provinces, or even in the working class areas of Berlin, they would have frightened people off, whereas in Berlin’s elegant West End they served to thrill and attract the snobbish and flashy audiences.”¹⁴ In particular, the over 130 posters he designed for the Marmorhaus in Charlottenburg (fig. 22) are emblematic of both this visceral attraction and its visual application (figs. 23-34):



Fig. 22
Marmorhaus

13. Sylvia Backemeyer, *The Silent Screen: German Film Posters from the Central Saint Martins Museum and Study Collection* (London: Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, 1999), 26.

14. Gero Gandert, “Tauntzien-Rococo,” in *Josef Fenneker: 1895–1956*, 10.



Fig. 23
 Josef Fenneker
Monte Carlo, 1921



Fig. 24
 Josef Fenneker
Der gelbe Tod, 1920



Fig. 25
 Josef Fenneker
Das alte Gesetz, 1923

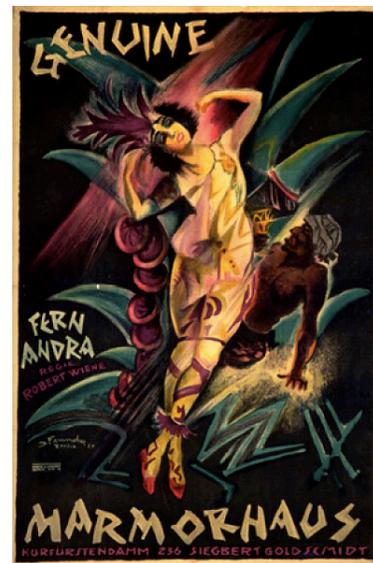


Fig. 26
 Josef Fenneker
Genuine, 1920



Fig. 27
 Josef Fenneker
Der Richter von Zalamea, 1920



Fig. 28
 Josef Fenneker
Die Prinzessin vom Nil, 1920



Fig. 29
 Josef Fenneker
Der Eisenbahn-König, 1921



Fig. 30
 Josef Fenneker
Der Sträfling von Cayenne, 1921



Fig. 31
 Josef Fenneker
Pogrom, 1919

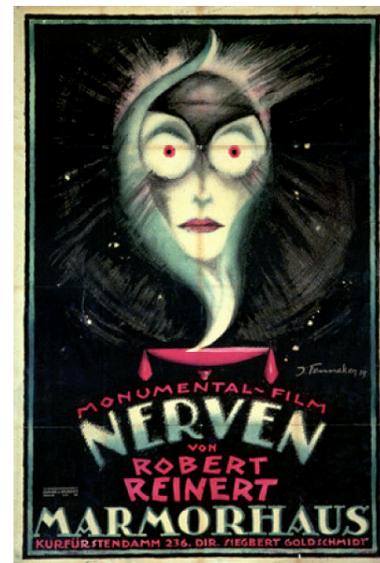


Fig. 32
 Josef Fenneker
Nerven, 1919



Fig. 33
 Josef Fenneker
Der unsichtbare Dieb, 1920



Fig. 34
 Josef Fenneker
Die treibende Kraft, 1921

However, as undeniably arresting as the Expressionistic posters are, Gandert's assertion about the style's overall aesthetic attraction was correct, in that Expressionism was indeed outright rejected in working class sections of Berlin such as Wedding, Prenzlauer Berg, Neukölln, Kreuzberg, and Schöneberg (fig. 35). The

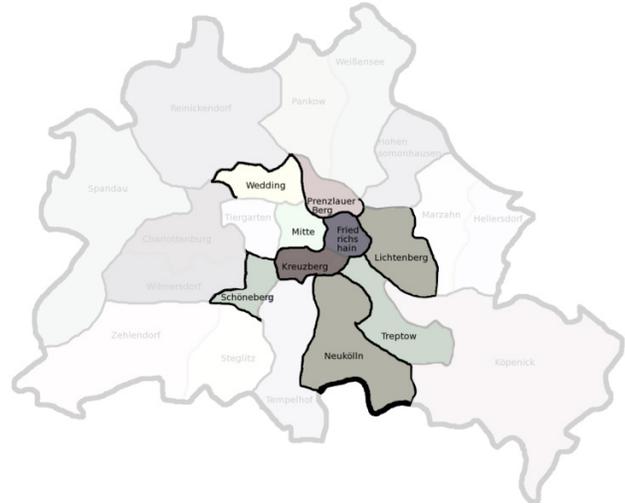


Fig. 35
Working class neighborhoods of Berlin

The critic Hans Friedeberger wrote that workers felt “the pointed, sharp representations that the new art used were perceived...as caricature ...and suspected of representing a lack of respect and esteem.”¹⁵ Blue-collar workers were among the most socially conservative segments of the population during the Weimar Republic. Their employment circumstances, limited financial resources, and societal environment generally did not allow them the opportunities, time, or inclination to expand their creative sensibilities beyond the necessities of everyday life, and this was extended across the cultural sphere. For a class that already leaned toward traditional cultural and artistic conventions, the foremost Expressionist tropes of deformed figures, garish colors, slashing strokes, and distorted perspective were not understood as symbolic representations of inner turmoil, but as vicious satirical depictions rendered by a scornful, bourgeois intellectual elite. Instead, they preferred to rely on “familiar, clearly recognizable, nature-emulating forms” that could be understood as is, without additional explication, and so demanded “readily recognizable realism and inspiring idealism.”¹⁶ Furthermore, the pervasive use of Expressionism by the bourgeoisie for commercial purposes had rendered it fashionable, as opposed to radical, and thus something to be distrusted.¹⁷ Fenneker’s designs for theaters within these districts perfectly reflect these ideas (figs. 36-47):

15. Hans Friedeberger, “Das Künstlerplakat der Revolutionszeit,” *Das Plakat* 10, no. 4 (July 1919): 275.

16. Ida Katherine Rigby, “German Expressionist Political Posters 1918-1919: Art and Politics, a Failed Alliance,” *Art Journal* 44, no. 1 (The Poster—Spring, 1984): 38.

17. Joan Weinstein, *The End of Expressionism: Art and the November Revolution in Germany, 1918–19* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 231.



Fig. 36
 Josef Fenneker
Söhne des Volkes, 1918



Fig. 37
 Josef Fenneker
Die Ratte, 1918

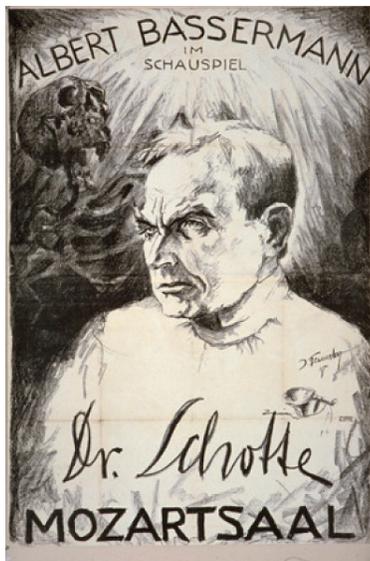


Fig. 38
 Josef Fenneker
Dr. Schotte, 1918



Fig. 39
 Josef Fenneker
Die Bettelgräfin, 1918



Fig. 40
 Josef Fenneker
Der Cowboy, 1918



Fig. 41
 Josef Fenneker
Vater und Sohn, 1918



Fig. 42
 Josef Fenneker
Der müde Theodor, 1918



Fig. 43
 Josef Fenneker
Der gelbe Schein, 1918



Fig. 44
 Josef Fenneker
Der Eisenbahn-Mörder, 1918

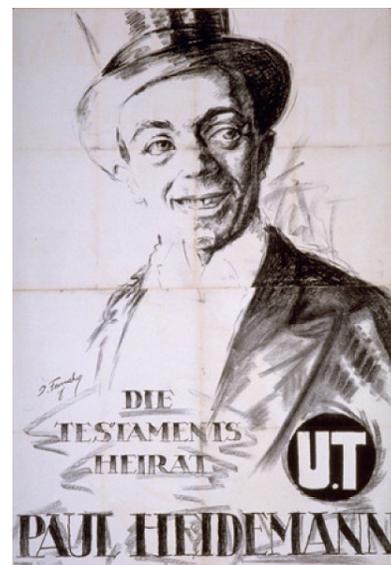


Fig. 45
 Josef Fenneker
Die Testaments-Heirat, 1918



Fig. 46
 Josef Fenneker
Der siebente Kuss, 1918

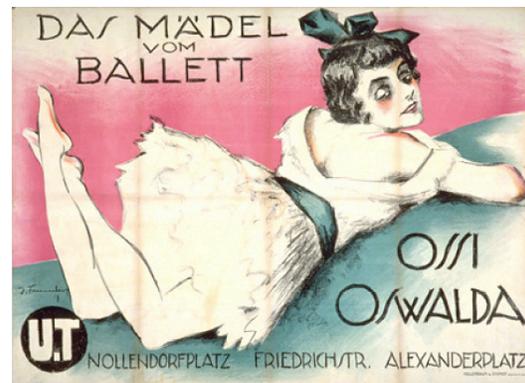


Fig. 47
 Josef Fenneker
Das Mädel vom Ballett, 1918

This discrete and calculated use of divergent artistic styles is a crucial aspect of Fenneker’s work, for, as Max Gallo points out, the objectives of posters differ from those of paintings:

A poster should never be thought of as a painting; it should be considered only in the context of the specific publicity campaign to which it belongs. Among other things, a publicity poster on a wall is a reduced image of a more complex advertising message that establishes a dialogue with the viewer.¹⁸

So, in order to appeal effectively to the vastly disparate demographic constituencies of Weimar Berlin, Fenneker designed his posters to “speak” the distinct visual language of each indi-

vidual neighborhood. In addition, while part of the promotional task of film posters was to visually convey something of the dramatic and emotional scope of a movie, the nature of the film medium itself—predicated as it is on up-close depictions of human emotion—often required that the faces actors and actresses of the industry be recognizable in a



Fig. 48
Asta Nielsen



Fig. 49
Josef Fenneker
Dirnentragödie, 1927

movie’s advertising, no matter where the theater was located. This became increasingly important as the marketing machinery of the German film industry began to mimic that of Hollywood in its use

of star actors for their publicity campaigns. Fenneker, as a top designer, thus also depicted many of the best-known stars in his posters, among them Asta Nielsen (figs. 48 & 49) and Conrad Veidt (figs. 50 & 51).



Fig. 50
Conrad Veidt

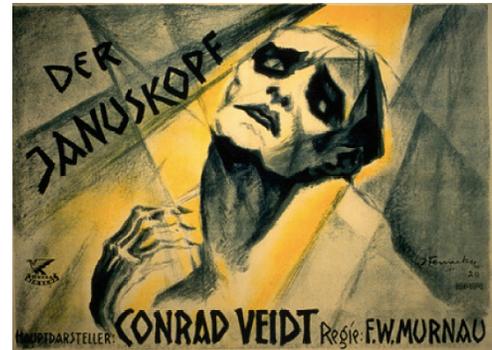


Fig. 51
Josef Fenneker
Der Januskopf, 1920

18. Max Gallo, *The Poster in History* (New York: New American Library, 1975), 230.

Beginning around 1925, though, Fenneker’s work began to exhibit a lack of stylistic distinction, which reflected the growing political, social, and cultural conservatism of both Berlin itself and the film industry, as well as the movie studios taking over the creation of film advertising

from the individual theaters. The change was also impacted by the financial difficulties of UFA. By 1924, UFA was in the red, and to survive entered into a contractual agreement with the Hollywood film studios of Paramount and Metro.¹⁹ This caused a decided shift of both the movies and their marketing materials to a more

American style of “large dramatic figures, brilliant coloring, and a small amount of letters”²⁰ (figs. 52 & 53). A Museum of Modern Art exhibition of German movie posters noted this change of direction: “With the coming of sound and the onset of the worldwide depression at the end of the decade, however, a more conservative romantic realism became the dominant artistic mode, sometimes with a nationalist

(fig. 54) or racial (fig. 55) emphasis.”²¹

19. Paul Monaco, *Cinema and Society: France and Germany During the Twenties* (New York: Elsevier, 1976), 28.

20. Peter Kobel and The Library of Congress, *Silent Movies: The Birth of Film and the Triumph of Movie Culture* (New York: Little Brown, 2007), 158.

21. Museum of Modern Art, “Gallery Exhibition Of Rare And Original Film Posters at the Museum of Modern Art Spotlights Legendary German Movie Studio,” Press Release (September 1, 1998), 3.

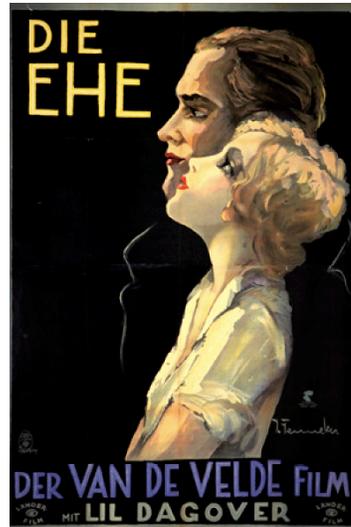


Fig. 52
Josef Fenneker
Die Ehe, 1928



Fig. 53
Josef Fenneker
Gitta entdeckt ihr Herz, 1932



Fig. 54
Josef Fenneker
Leise flehen meine Lieder, 1933



Fig. 55
Josef Fenneker
Mit dem Auto ins Morgenland, 1926

The trend to a more conservative, less distinctive mode was further exacerbated after the industrialist Alfred Hugenberg—who was a committed follower of Adolf Hitler—regained German control of UFA in 1927. An immediate consequence was a change in the types of images used on posters: post-1927, a romanticized, *Heimat*, and über-Deutsche visual vernacular became the stylistic norm (fig. 56). Perhaps not surprisingly, in light of his aesthetic tendencies, Fenneker created increasingly less film posters during this period, with his main body of work ceasing in 1933.



Fig. 56
Josef Fenneker
Hochzeit am Wolfgangsee, 1933

In considering Fenneker's total *oeuvre* of over 315 posters, though, what is remarkable is his parallel and equally successful applications of both Expressionism and realism, as well as a variety of intermediary styles and artistic genres; possibly the one aspect of his work that can be said to have remained constant is his signature (fig. 57), with which he marked all his poster designs. Few of his contemporary artists displayed his aesthetic range, and it was a talent that was of tremendous use in the economically fractured and distracted society of



Fig. 57
Signature, Joseph Fenneker

1920s Berlin. The crowded streets and socially heterogeneous neighborhoods created a demand for film posters that caught the eye, engaged the imagination, and were culturally appropriate to the diverse population of the city. The fact that so many posters were required of all types is testament to the popularity of the cinema across the city, regardless of class. No one was more versatile in addressing this sociological and aesthetic disparity than Josef Fenneker.

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