

ONE

A NEW SENSORIUM

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HANNS HEINZ EWERS

The *Kientopp*

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Early attempts to assess cinema’s power and potential varied widely, but perhaps no issue was more central than sense perception, particularly vision. With its kaleidoscopic presentations, often strung together pell-mell, the cinematograph seemed to offer an aesthetic counterpart to the urban experience of hyperstimulation and sensory fragmentation described by Georg Simmel and others. It could also dazzle the senses with impossible spectacles such as fast motion and backward projection. Indeed, as early psychological theories such as Karl Marbe’s *Theorie der kinematographischen Projektion* (1910) emphasized, the fundamental cinematographic operation of making still images appear as continuous movement presupposed the *fallibility* of spectators’ senses, too sluggish to perceive the trick and hence susceptible to further illusions (Jonathan Crary). This power over the senses formed the focal point of intense debates; while reformers decried cinema’s alleged “damage to the eyes and the nerves” (see chapter 7, no. 99), as well as its suggestive power over young minds, other observers extolled its ability to generate thrills and to extend the human senses (chapter 3, no. 33).

This chapter brings together several prewar writings that sought to come to grips with the new “sensorium” of cinematographic projection: to understand its pleasures, situate it with respect to previous forms of entertainment, articulate its relationship to modern life, probe its interactions with spectatorial imagination, and assess the challenge it posed to aesthetic criticism. In the first text, which is also one of the first published articles on cinema by a well-known intellectual, Hanns Heinz Ewers marvels at the medium’s “curious pleasures” for the senses in an exploratory tone that will be evident in several subsequent articles in this chapter. Ewers (1871–1943), best known as an author of horror and fantastic literature, also became one of the first literati to pen screenplays: *Der Verführte* (The seduced one, 1913), *Der Student von Prag* (The Student of Prague, 1913), and other productions. This essay appeared in *Morgen* (1907–09), a short-lived weekly cultural journal published in Berlin.

Whenever I leaf through the newspapers in a café, and see how much is printed about all kinds of art, day after day, I can’t believe my eyes. There are articles on theater, variety shows, art exhibitions, concerts, lectures, and books, but who speaks of the *Kientopp*?¹

Are all of these press people blind? Don't they know that the Kientopp is a cultural factor beyond comparison in its priority and power? Don't they realize that it can be placed beside Gutenberg's invention, for which we writers have our livelihoods to thank? An equal measure of vitality, please.

The Kientopp! I heard this word for the first time when I returned to Berlin and instantly fell in love with it. For four years, on three continents, in the most forsaken holes, I have been going to "cinematographic theaters" (what a dreadful term!); from now on, I am only going to Kientopps.² I love the Berliners for inventing this word, a national word, which convincingly demonstrates their love of a good cause.

There is no point of view from which we should not welcome the Kientopp with resounding applause!

In terms of education, where else do you learn so easily, so playfully, thousands of things lying far, far off on the horizon? What book can offer you such a concept of foreign lands? Father, send your kids to the Kientopp! It's better than Sunday school! And you should go in yourself!

In terms of amusement, these are the *circenses* of the twentieth century! The Kientopp costs ten pfennig to enter. Not even bad sideshows are that cheap. And even the best are not nearly as amusing. What philistine has become so hardened that he cannot enjoy the delightful Parisian burlesque.

In terms of hygiene, no one smokes or drinks in the Kientopp. And the bad air is still much better than that of the beer cellars and schnapps bars. The Kientopp is as beneficial to the lungs as it is for the purse.

And so on! But what good is it if I blow my horn for the Kientopp in this paper and appeal to classes who don't even read it? Hence I wish to trade my floppy hat for a top hat, and now preach to the intellectuals. Go to the Kientopp!

It's not as if intellectuals could not learn a lot in the Kientopp, something new every week. But they could also, as an added bonus, gather rather curious pleasures here. Quite exquisite is, for example, the pleasure of suspended causality. It is not very easy to identify with it, since our stupid rational mind always stands under the tyrannical influence of cause and effect. Then comes along Mr. Kientopp and inserts his film backwards into the projector. A little sleight of hand—and it turns the history of the world upside down; the effect becomes the cause, the cause, effect.

Allow me to offer a simple example. I take a cigarette, stick it in my mouth, light it with a match, and smoke. The cigarette smolders and grows smaller, the ashes fall down, the paper burns up, and finally I throw away the butt. Now roll the film backwards. From the earth a burning cigarette butt flies up into my mouth. I smoke, the cigarette becomes longer and longer, and the ashes fly up from the ashtray and into the cigarette, turning themselves into paper, until my cigarette is whole again. Then I hold an already burned-down match, which also becomes whole again, and whose flame extinguishes at the moment when I strike it on the box.

Michel eats, and the noodles come out of his mouth; his child crawls out of the midwife's arms and back into the body of its mother! Who says that the prophets are all dead? Wasn't the magnificent August Kopisch a great prophet when he wrote his poem about a giant crab?³ And, if you will, let us fantasize a bit. Take whatever situations, plots, or events you wish and mix them together using inductive and deductive methods. With a little practice, one would become the greatest sophist who ever turned himself on his head.

At first, like all new art, the Kientopp mainly copies from nature. So far, this is the best it has had to offer. Up to now, what people have created for it has been partly dreadful, such as those silly magic scenes, and partly amusing, such as Parisian burlesque

scenes, but mostly unsatisfactory for a refined taste. Where are the poets and painters who will create for the Kientopp? Many have already done so unconsciously. The best among them is Shakespeare; his *Richard III* would receive a better and more comprehensible treatment in the Kientopp than on many a theater stage. Or take Hogarth;⁴ string some of his scenes together and let them whirl through the film projector, and you will see this artist coming to life.

Today, however, we are familiar with the Kientopp and can consciously create for it. Here lies a new terrain for art, an unplowed field. Who will help to cultivate it? And you, dear Mr. Censor, who have done so many foolish things and continue to do them, for once do something for which one may thank you. Now that you have absolute control, hire an artistic adviser, and a good one at that—for nobody expects you to understand anything about art yourself! And if the artists then come and hand you their Kientopp plays—and they will come!—separate the chaff from the wheat; stamp out the kitsch and foster the art! If you will do that, then I will write you the first Kientopp play and make you the hero.

Notes

1. *Kientopp* (or *Kintopp*) was a common colloquial term for *Kinematograph* (or *Kinematographentheater*) in Berlin in the decade before World War I. Since *Kientopp* has no equivalent in English, we have opted to retain it. We also maintain the variations in spelling in subsequent selections.

2. In the four years prior to this article, Ewers and his wife had spent time on the island of Capri and in Spain, Central America, and the Caribbean.

3. Ewers refers to a popular poem, “Der große Krebs im Mohriner See,” by the German poet August Kopisch (1799–1853). Alluding to the crab’s backward movement, the poem also envisions other phenomena going backwards (e.g., from bread to grain, from hen to egg).

4. A reference to the English artist William Hogarth (1697–1764), famous for his series of paintings of “modern moral subjects.”