Moving picture puzzles: training urban perception in the Weimar 'rebus films'

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Looking over the history of cinema from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, recent research has increasingly highlighted the similarities between the sense of possibility characterizing cinema's early decades and our own digital era, in which the proliferation of interactive media and variable screen formats has loosened the once dominant paradigm of the passive spectator immobilized in the illusory realm of Plato's cave.[1] As Tom Gunning long ago pointed out, however, while the dominance of narrative film and continuity editing might have marginalized other modes of spectatorship after 1910, it did not eliminate them.[2] Much recent work has thus involved an archaeology of those other models for interaction with moving images and the persistence of a more 'mobilized gaze', whether in alternative spaces such as the museum and the planetarium or within the space of the cinema itself.[3] In this essay, I shall focus on one such neglected model of alternative spectatorship from the Weimar era: namely the short-lived genre of the *Rebus-Film*, a series of short animated crossword puzzles by German director Paul Leni, scriptwriter Hans Brennert and cinematographer Guido Seeber, which ran in German theatres as a prelude to the main feature between 1925 and 1927. On one level, one might be tempted to read these filmic puzzles as the precursor to more recent interactive screen media; upon buying their tickets, spectators received puzzle cards which they filled out based on visual clues screened before the feature film and could check against the 'solutions' segment shown a week later (figure 1).[4] Of course, this 'interactive' format, while participational to a certain extent, clearly differed from later varieties by its lack of a two-way interface: unlike input

1 On this tendency, the locus classicus is Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001). See also Thomas Elsaesser, 'Early film history and multi-media: an archeology of possible futures?', in Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Thomas Keenan (eds), *New Media, Old Media: a History and Theory Reader* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), pp. 13–27. For a reading of the connections between early and late modes of film exhibition in terms of their capacity for forge new public spheres, see Miriam Hansen, 'Early cinema, late cinema: transformations of the public sphere', in Linda Williams (ed.), *Viewing Positions. Ways of Seeing Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), pp. 134–52.

2 See Tom Gunning, 'The cinema of attractions: early film, its spectator and the avant-garde', in Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker (eds), *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (London: British Film Institute, 1990), p. 57.

3 A good example of such archaeological work on spectatorship can be seen in Alison Griffiths, *Shivers Down your Spine: Cinema, Museums and the Immersive Gaze* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), particularly the chapters on IMAX (pp. 79–113), the planetarium (pp. 114–58) and the museum (pp. 232–83).

4 See the entry for 'Guido Seeber', in *Cinegraph. Lexikon zum deutschsprachigen Film*, Volume V (Munich: Edition Text und Kritik, 1984), Lieferung 23, F12–F13.

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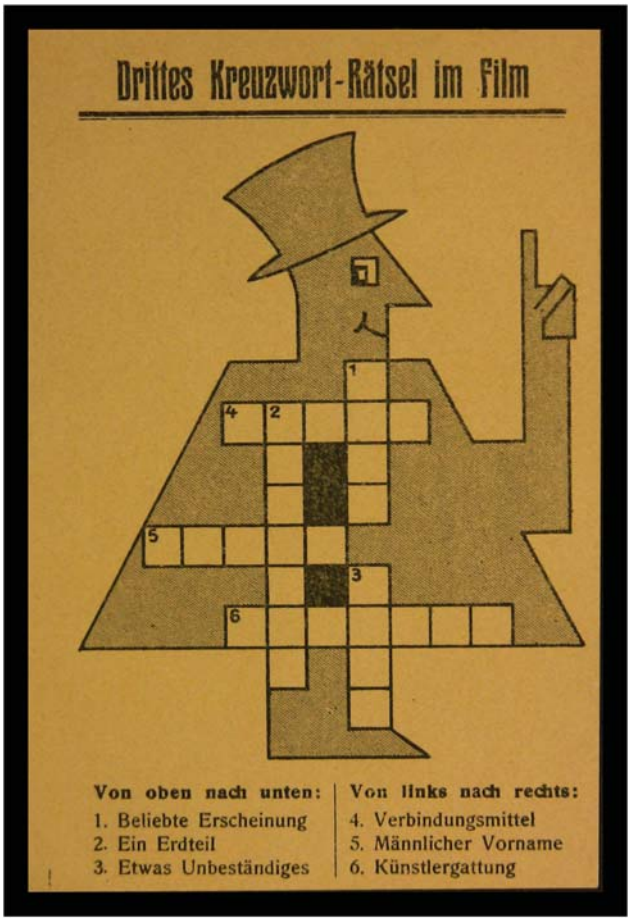

Fig. 1. Card from *Rebus-Film Nr. 3*. Courtesy of the Deutsche Kinemathek.

devices such as joysticks or keypads, the puzzle cards filled out by spectators of the rebus films did not affect what happened on the screen. Rather, in the manner of other educational shorts such as Franz Koebner's series *1000 Schritte Charleston/1000 Steps of the Charleston*, a series of filmic dance lessons shown in German theatres in 1926, the rebus films employed a stimulus-and-response format to solicit prescribed activities (namely puzzle-solving) from spectators.[5]

In constructing such an 'interactive' format, moreover, the rebus films also borrowed heavily from early attractions cinema; not unlike the film lecturer of previous decades, the rebus films' animated presenter, Mr Rebus, addresses the audience directly as he shows them 'views' of various people, places, things and events.[6] Indeed, this assortment of non-narrative attractions made up a good part of these films' appeal. In the months before the first film in the series – *Rebus-Film Nr. 1* – was released, advertisements reported on Seeber's progress in recording footage from around the world and boasted about the limitless possibilities of virtual travel afforded by the films. As one enthusiastic

5 Koebner's film was shown in four parts in 1926. According to one laudatory review, the films consisted mostly of shots of legs dangling from a bench and performing various moves in slow motion, so that spectators in the cinema could imitate the filmic images from their seats. See '1000 Schritte Charleston', *Süddeutsche Filmzeitung*, 14 January 1927, n.p.

6 *Rebus-Film No. 1* (Paul Leni, Hans Brennert and Guido Seeber, 1928). *Avantgarde 2*, disc 2 (DVD, Kino Entertainment, 2007).

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writer describes it in an advertisement printed in the journal *Der Kinematograph*:

> The crossword puzzle films will show everything the world has to offer. In a colourful mosaic of images, audiences will see primeval forests of India, extravagant locales of the modern metropolis and historical figures from bygone times. From the cherry blossoms of Japan to the boxing matches of Hans Breitensträter, from Caesar to Hindenburg, from romantic mediaeval villages to Mount Everest – the crossword puzzles will show *everything* on film.[7]

Although the finished films of the series did not include precisely the list of people and places named here, this description is nonetheless accurate in a general sense; in the first film alone we see images ranging from snake charmers in India to street scenes from Paris and Berlin. More importantly, with its emphasis on *showing* (rather than narrating), the advertisement clearly inscribes the pleasures of the rebus film within a well-founded tradition of attractions cinema stretching back to the Lumières' views of distant locations.

In Weimar, such attractions found their continuation in *Kulturfilme* (cultural and educational films) such as Colin Ross's *Mit dem Kurbelkasten um die Erde*/*Around the World with a Movie Camera* (1925), which took audiences on a virtual world tour through the USA, Japan, China and East Asia, as well as several narrative films that integrated multiple sequences from various exotic settings, such as Fritz Lang's *Der müde Tod*/*Destiny* (1922) or Leni's own *Wachsfigurenkabinett*/*Waxworks* (1924).[8] In the rebus films, such attractions of locale were matched, moreover, by attractions of filmic technology itself; already known for his virtuoso camerawork in films such as *Der Student von Prag*/*The Student of Prague* (1913) and *Lebende Buddhas*/*Living Buddhas* (1922), Seeber used the rebus films to vaunt the wide array of trick effects in use in the mid 1920s, including (in the first film alone) fast and slow motion, animation, rapid camera movement, backward projection, superimposition and split screens.

If the rebus films have received little attention in the secondary literature on Weimar cinema, this is surely due in part to the fragmentary record. Of the eight films screened between 1925 and 1927, only *Rebus-Film Nr. 1* is available for viewing today, and this only in a version reedited by Leni for US audiences in 1927.[9] Judging by the lack of available evidence, moreover, it would appear that this reedited version enjoyed little success in the USA. This can, of course, be attributed in part to problems of translation. With its interlocking grid and overlapping letters, the crossword puzzle form poses an obvious practical challenge to linguistic translation, and a comparison of the available US version with the censor cards for the original German series reveals the extent to which Leni had to reedit parts of the original film to create a puzzle that worked linguistically in English. But alongside these strictly linguistic issues of translation lay a broader cultural problem, as the original films included

7 'Kreuzwort-Rätsel im Film!', *Der Kinematograph*, no. 976 (1925), p. 35.

8 Ross's film was popular enough to merit an additional release in book form. See Colin Ross, *Mit dem Kurbelkasten um die Erde* (Berlin: Bild und Buch Verlag, 1926).

9 The reedited version can be seen on Kino Video's *Avant Garde* compilation cited above. A copy of *Rebus-Film Nr. 3* has also survived and can be seen at the Filmarchiv/Bundesarchiv in Berlin. However, it has not been released commercially.

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many clues that revolved around the knowledge of things, places and personalities specific to Germany. That Leni assumed such clues would have little appeal for US audiences can be deduced from the fact that he specifically removed all German references from the English version of *Rebus-Film Nr. 1*, including not only 'Isar' (a German river) but even the last name of Emil Jannings (who in fact made his first Hollywood film in 1927), which he replaced, borrowing footage from a later film, with the more widely recognizable term 'jazzband'.[10]

Despite such translational difficulties, however, Leni, Brennert and Seeber's German rebus films should, I shall argue, be seen as an important part of another transnational media history: namely, the history of puzzles – and of thinking about the activity of puzzle-solving with regard to changing forms of subjectivity – in the modern period. Riding the wave of 'crossword mania' that swept the USA and Europe in the 1920s, the rebus films enlisted both the crossword form and that of traditional rebus picture puzzles. But they did so, as I shall show below, in order to adapt these forms to a new medium of *moving* images and a corresponding understanding of modernity and modern subjectivity. Specifically, these films harnessed the properties of time and movement inherent to the filmic medium in order to transform the print puzzle into a forum for testing new modes of distracted perception and divided attention particularly appropriate to the urban environment.

Before turning to that cultural argument, however, I shall begin by situating the rebus films in terms of media history, and more specifically by asking how these filmic puzzles positioned themselves *vis-à-vis* their older print counterparts. The very choice of the title *Rebus-Film* suggests that the filmmakers saw their experiments in filmic puzzles as part of a much older tradition, and one fundamentally concerned with the relation between word and image. Emerging in the Renaissance largely as a pendant to the new European fascination with ancient hieroglyphics, the term 'rebus', derived from the Latin term *res* (thing), refers to a kind of picture writing – and more specifically a genre of cryptic image riddle – in which readers deciphered encoded phrases using pictorial clues to guess (in most cases) individual phonemes and phonetic units. While early rebuses generally circulated among courtly audiences and were used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for encrypting political messages, the practice of rebus solving had, by the late nineteenth century, become widespread and particularly popular among readers of magazines and newspapers such as *L'Illustration* in France, the *Leipziger Illustrierte Zeitung* in Germany and *Il Gondoliere* in Italy. Nonetheless, even in this popularized form, the puzzles retained an aura of hermeticism and could still attain mind-boggling levels of difficulty.[11]

Given the status of the rebus puzzle as a form of 'picture writing', it might hardly seem surprising that early filmmakers would be attracted to the genre. After all, among the many forms of 'remediation' that characterized film practice and film theory in the early decades, the topos

10 It would appear that this is the only footage Leni added to the US version of *Rebus-Film No. 1*. Otherwise, the majority of the changes consisted of subtractions: in addition to 'Jannings' and 'Isar', Leni also subtracted the clues for *Nashorn* (rhinoceros), bringing the total number of clues down from eight to six. Besides the addition of 'jazzband', all of the other clues – 'arena', 'ice', 'India', 'nine' and 'Paris' – are retained in the English translation, with their original visual clues using a new puzzle grid.

11 For a good overview of the history of rebus puzzles, see in particular Eva Maria Schenck, *Das Bilderrätsel* (New York, NY: Hildesheim, 1973).

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of a return to hieroglyphs or picture writing represented one of the most prominent, often serving to articulate fantasies attached to the new medium: fantasies of a return to sensuous immediacy, the revival of ritual community life, or – particularly after World War I – the restoration of a universal (visual) language.[12] Yet the form of picture writing cultivated in rebus puzzles differed radically from the cinematic fantasies of visual legibility; for the pictures of the print rebus, far from embodying any sensuous immediacy, presented as much of a hindrance to comprehension as an aide. Indeed, the very trick of the rebus puzzle consists precisely in *overcoming* the evidentiary, iconic dimension of the image in favour of a search for a hidden, generally homophonic, link. Thus in one rebus published in 1878 in the American children's magazine *St Nicholas*, Walter Scott's famous dictum 'O, what a tangled web we weave, When first we practice to deceive!' from his epic poem *Marmion* is transformed into images of a hat, a spider's web, a chicken, a fur cape, blocks of ice and a sieve (figure 2). It is only by exchanging the iconic referents of these images for homophonic equivalents that puzzle solvers can transform what appears to be a motley collection of fragments into a continuous and coherent semantic and syntactical unit. In other words, whereas the dream of film as a new form of picture writing involved the desire to regain a sense of sensuous immediacy in reaction to the abstractions of a rationalist epoch, rebus puzzles reinforced abstract thought by asking readers to subordinate sensuous images to phonetics.

Far from visual immediacy, then, the rebus puzzle demanded a concentrated effort to *suppress* the surface images in favour of a hidden textual message underneath. If this cryptic quality made the rebus an attractive genre for courtly games or political activity, it also made it an ideal metaphor for modern sciences laying claim to a privileged interpretative expertise. In the introduction to *Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud thus famously took rebus solving as the very model of a hermeneutic procedure which sees beyond the disguises and deceptions of surface appearances to detect a latent text beneath. Like an expert rebus solver, the dream interpreter tames the motley images of the manifest dream content, transforming them back into a latent linear text:

> If we attempted to read these characters according to their pictorial value instead of according to their symbolic relation, we should clearly be led into error. Suppose I have a picture-puzzle, a rebus, in front of me. It depicts a house with a boat on its roof, a single letter of the alphabet, the figure of a running man whose head has been conjured away, and so on. Now I might be misled into raising objections and declaring that the picture as a whole and its component parts are nonsensical. … But obviously we can only form a proper judgement of the rebus if we put aside criticisms such as these of the whole composition and its parts and if, instead, we try to replace each separate element by a syllable or word that can be represented by that element in some way or other. The words which are put together in this way are no

12 See, in particular, Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1922) (New York, NY: Liveright, 1970), pp. 199–216. In a letter from 1915, Lindsay described the new medium as follows: '[Movies] are as revolutionary in our age as the invention of Hieroglyphics was to the cave-man. And they can be built up into a great pictorial art . . . .We now have Hieroglyphics in motion – and they can be made as lovely as the Egyptian if we once understand what we are doing.' Marc Chénetier (ed.), *Letters of Vachel Lindsay* (New York, NY: Burt Franklin, 1979), pp. 120–1. For Béla Balázs, film's pictorial language promised to 'overcome the curse of Babel'. Béla Balász, *Der sichtbare Mensch oder die Kultur des Films* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), pp. 22. Similarly, Fritz Lang wrote in 1927: 'With the silent eloquence of its moving images, whose language is understood equally well in all latitudes, film can make an honest contribution to repairing the chaos which, since the Tower of Babel, has prevented peoples from seeing each other as they really are.' Fritz Lang, 'Ausblick auf Morgen. Zum Pariser Kongress', *Lichtbild-Bühne* vol. 19, no. 229 (1926), pp. 9–10.

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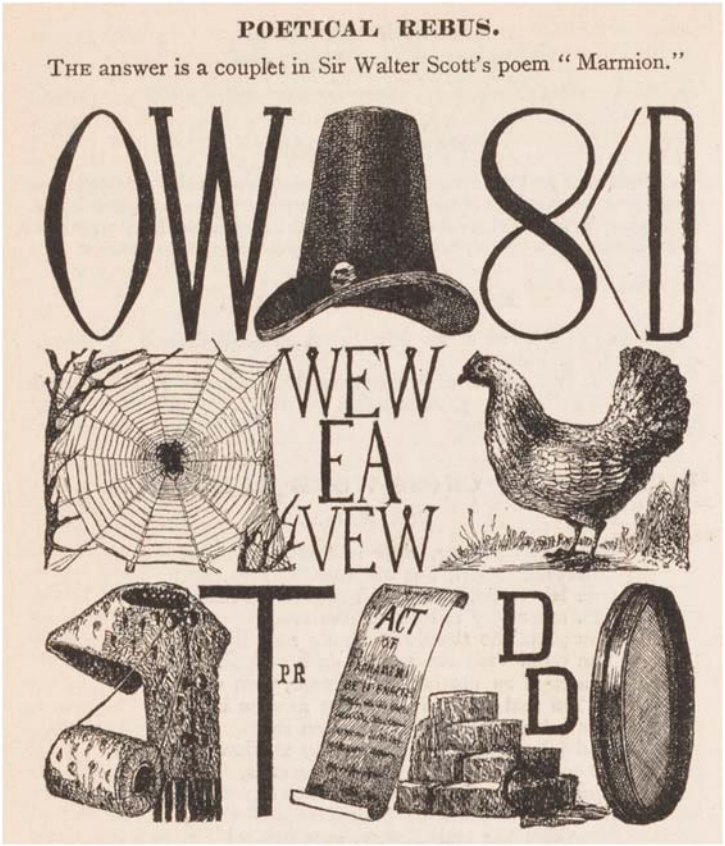

Fig. 2. Rebus puzzle from *St Nicholas* magazine (1878).

longer nonsensical but may form a poetical phrase of the greatest beauty and significance.[13]

Focusing on the random assortment of images described by Freud, Friedrich Kittler would later see rebus picture writing – alongside the performance tests based around meaningless syllables popular in nineteenth-century physiology – as the embodiment of a new regime of media reception in a post-Romantic era preoccupied with the materiality of the signifier and its effects; but the passage from Freud also makes clear that the psychoanalytic imaginary was largely defined by the analyst's perceived ability to transform such excessive material back into signified sense ('symbolic value') and narrative coherence.[14] It was precisely these values, moreover, that were inculcated into a much wider public, and particularly children, by the increasing dissemination of rebus puzzles in popular illustrated journals and newspapers in the nineteenth century. Freud's contention that dream interpretation could produce 'a poetical phrase of the greatest beauty and significance' reads like a description of the Walter Scott rebus for children cited above.

13 Sigmund Freud, 'The interpretation of dreams', in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume IV (London: Hogarth, 1953), pp. 277–78.

14 See Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 273–4.

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Certainly, this model of rebus solving as the containment or suppression of the image was not incompatible with the filmic medium. For example, G. W. Pabst's 1926 film *Geheimnisse einer Seele*/*Secrets of a Soul* – made in consultation with Freud's associates Hans Sachs and Karl Abraham and for which Seeber himself designed the expressionist dream sequences – performs a similar interpretative operation on the screen. Telling the story of a troubled protagonist cured by a psychoanalyst, the film stages the cure by literally replaying the protagonist's fragmentary dream images bit by bit as the psychoanalyst's words explain them in intertitles on the screen, thus replacing the dream's excessive pictorial content with coherent text. More generally, one could point to the genre of the detective film, in which the detective sees through visual disguises and masks to decipher the text of criminal intentions beneath.

Yet this was hardly the sort of pictorial writing that proponents of film as a 'universal language' had in mind. Examining Leni, Brennert and Seeber's film series, moreover, one is struck right away by the *lack* of such visual 'enigmas'. Asking for the most part easy questions, the films operated in a much more straightforward fashion, generally showing several images of the same referent and asking viewers to guess at a concept. In one sequence of clues for the word *Eis* (ice), for example, we see images of a frozen river, blocks of ice, drinks on ice and spinning ice cakes. In their very evidentiary quality, these visual clues offer a useful point of comparison with the image of ice blocks in the Walter Scott rebus puzzle cited above, where readers have to place 'ice' together with the letters 'pr' and an 'act' to form a semantically unrelated word (practice); in the rebus films, by contrast, Seeber showed viewers several images of the same referent, often showing them simultaneously on the screen by means of masking and superimposition (as in the image of ice cakes).

In his 1927 book *Der Trickfilm in seinen grundsätzlichen Möglichkeiten*/*The Trick Film in its Fundamental Possibilities*, Seeber refers to such simultaneous collage shots – first developed for his *Kipho* advertisement film of 1925 – as a mode of conceptual representation (*Begriffsdarstellung*) in which the viewer is asked to compare several related images to form a concept.[15] There, in a chapter entitled 'The trick film of tomorrow', he describes such conceptual representations specifically as a continuation of the formal experiments undertaken in such works as Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy's *Images mobiles* (*Ballét mécanique* [1924]) or René Clair and Francis Picabia's *Entr'acte* (1924), both of which had recently been screened in the famous matinee *Der absolute Film* organized by the Novembergruppe and the Kulturabteilung of Berlin's Ufa Studio in May 1925.[16] Seeber clearly saw both the *Kipho* film and the rebus films as efforts to adapt recent techniques of abstract and experimental filmmaking to more 'industrial' ends – a project we also find formulated in an advertisement for the rebus films printed in Hans Richter's avant-garde journal *G. Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung* in 1926. Printed adjacent to articles on films from

15 See Guido Seeber, *Der Trickfilm in seinen grundsätzlichen Möglichkeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsches Filmmuseum, 1979), pp. 241, 244. On the techniques of masking and superimposition, see pp. 40–67.

16 Ibid., p. 241.

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Der absolute Film screening, including *Ballet mécanique, Entr'acte* and Richter's own *Rhythmus 1925*, the advertisement displays a conceptual collage of hands followed by a caption reading: 'New expressive means in film adapted for the first time to industrial uses – the crossword puzzle film'.[17]

But if Seeber's 'conceptual' collages looked back, as he saw it, to the tradition of absolute film, they also recalled other experiments and ideas of the 1920s, most notably Sergei Eisenstein's model of 'intellectual montage', which would first be presented in German in an essay entitled 'The cinematography of concepts' ('Der Kinematograph der Begriffe') in 1930.[18] Like Eisenstein's intellectual montage, Seeber's visual concepts occupied a middle ground between sensuous image and abstract thought. There were, however, significant differences between the two. Where Eisenstein understood his model *dialectally* as a means of producing, through the clash of visual elements, a third element that was, in his words, 'graphically undepictable',[19] Seeber employed a logic of *similarity*, where the concept emerged from the images' shared evidentiary, iconic quality. This aesthetic difference also corresponds to different understandings of the social function of cinema: where Eisenstein saw cinema as an instrument in the transformation of consciousness and society through dialectical struggle, thus creating something new, Leni, Brennert and Seeber's rebus films are more concerned with *adapting* viewers to the conditions of urban society as they emerged in the 1920s.

But if Seeber's concepts demanded a different sort of cognition on the part of spectators than Eisenstein's intellectual montage, they also differed from the cryptic rebus puzzle, which as we have seen demanded a difficult translational operation involving the exchange of visual literacy for auditory associations. In contrast to such sensory acrobatics, Seeber's conceptual images elicited something much more akin to the process of visual cognition as described by the popular Weimar science writer Fritz Kahn in his famous handbook *Mensch als Industriepalast/ Man in Structure and Function*, published between 1922 and 1931. There, Kahn presents cognition through a mass-media allegory precisely as the effort to supply the correct word for forms perceived visually. In one illustration, we see a head perceiving a key (*Schlüssel*), which is then recorded on a film camera, sent through a developing station, and projected by a film projector onto the wall of the brain. Meanwhile, an organist watching the projection screen plays out the word 'S-C-H-L-Ü-S-S-E-L' on a kind of letter organ.[20] A similar illustration for the English edition shows the same process of identification of a car (A-U-T-O) (figure 3). If Kahn's letter organ is reminiscent of the many colour organs used for synaesthetic experiments in light and sound combinations in the 1920s, it also resonates, in the present context, with the mental operations elicited by the rebus films.[21] Like the organist, spectators of the 'interactive' rebus films were called on to identify the concepts shown on the screen and to provide the letters of their words. In

17 See *G. Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, nos V–VI (1926), p. 122 (my translation).

18 See Sergei Eisenstein, 'Der Kinematograph der Begriffe' (1930), in Christan Ferber (ed.), *Der Querschnitt: Das Magazin der aktuellen Ewigkeitswerte 1924–1933* (Berlin: Ullstein Verlag, 1981), pp. 367–69.

19 Sergei Eisenstein, 'The cinematographic principle and the ideogram', in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. Jay Leda (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1977), p. 30.

20 For more on Kahn's illustrations and their importance in Weimar culture, see Cornelius Borck, 'Communicating the modern body: Fritz Kahn's popular images of human physiology as an industrialized world', *Canadian Journal of Communications*, no. 32 (2007), pp. 495–520.

21 On the prevalence of light organs, see Laurent Guido, *L'Age du rythme: Cinéma, musicalité et culture du corps dans les théories françaises des années 1910–1930* (Lausanne: Payot, 2007), pp. 148–51.

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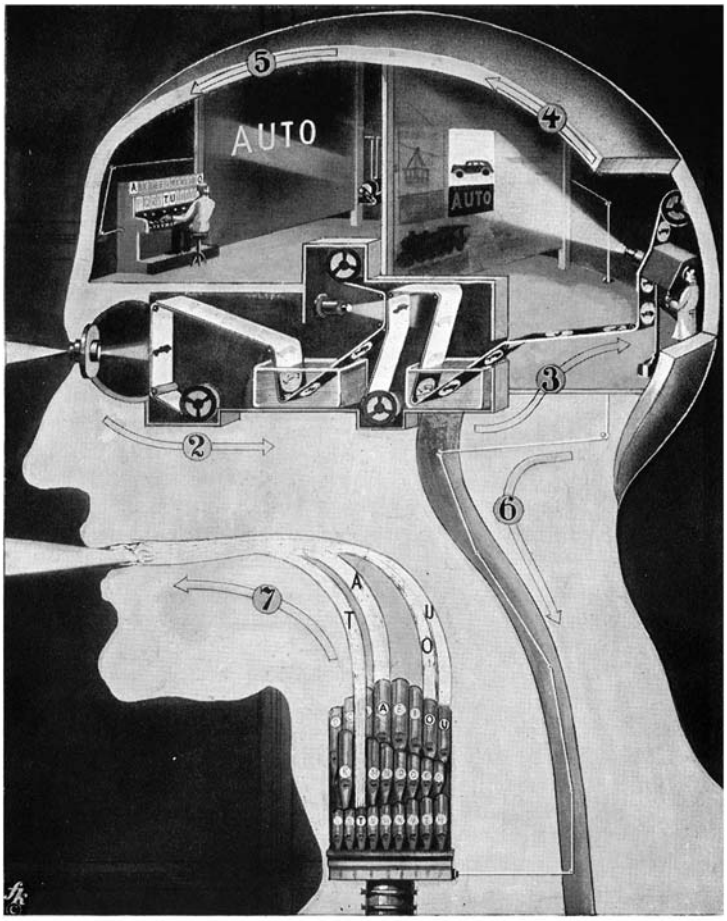

309. This is what occurs in our head when we see an auto and say "Auto."

Fig. 3. Illustration from Fritz Kahn, *Man in Structure and Function.*

this way, these films constructed not a latent text in opposition to the image, but rather a textual level *in parallel* with the image, a unity of sound, thought and vision largely prefiguring the dominant operations of sound film itself.[22]

Given the lack of difficulty in these filmic puzzles, one might wonder what questions the rebus film genre was responding to and what kinds of pleasures these films put into play for 1920s audiences. A hint as to the films' appeal, I think, can be found in another advertisement for the *Rebus-Film* series that appeared in the journal *Der Kinematograph* in late 1925, one that attaches the films not to the rebus tradition but rather to the much more recent phenomenon of crossword puzzles:

> According to American reports, a man was recently run over by a car in Boston because he was so absorbed in his newspaper crossword puzzle that he didn't notice the vehicle in time. While no one disputes the usefulness of crosswords, we should still do everything possible to

22 There were, of course, many theorists in the mid-1920s who sought to create a sound film in which the soundtrack would stand in tension or counterpoint to the image, including Walter Ruttmann (in *Melodie der Welt*) and, more famously, Eisenstein. Seeber, however, appears to have been much more interested in synchronization. Already in 1904, he had unveiled his so-called 'Seeberophon', an apparatus for synchronizing projected images and gramophone recordings.

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discourage such extreme behaviour. For this reason, one should welcome the new crossword puzzle films by Rebus-Film Inc., which will soon allow everyone to solve his crosswords in the space of the cinema.[23]

Here, the filmic puzzle is described as a solution to particular problems of urban traffic and urban perception, suggesting in the process that the rebus films were intended largely for urban audiences. By now, it is a commonplace to say that the early twentieth century's rise in motorized traffic was one of the central factors in the transformation of urban psychology and perception. To cite the most familiar example, Walter Benjamin understood city traffic as the very embodiment of modern shocks and a central motivation for the transition he sought to document so thoroughly from a contemplative psychology of absorption to a strategically distracted one, a psychic disposition attentive to the sudden dangers emanating from outside the immediate visual field.[24] As Ben Singer has shown, moreover, Benjamin's analyses were undergirded by an entire mythology of the traffic accident in the popular press, where inattentive or overly-absorbed spectators were constantly warned about the need to be vigilant on city streets.[25] In Germany the preoccupation with traffic and its dangers, though already present in prewar films such as Max Mack's *Zweimal gelebt/Second Life* (1911) or the Deutsche Bioscop production *Weihnachtsträume/Christmas Wishes* (1911), would become a central part of the Weimar filmic imaginary, which would associate them again and again with the *urban* street.[26] In Karl Grune's *Die Strasse/The Street* (1924), for example, the omnipresent flow of traffic, which almost kills a three-year-old girl in one scene and knocks down a blind man in another, comes to embody all of the criminal dangers threatening the unsuspecting protagonist as his attention is absorbed by the city's marvellous window displays.[27] The staging of the protagonist's first meeting with the prostitute who will eventually ensnare him in a murder plot is paradigmatic here; as the protagonist stands transfixed by the animated display of a travel agency window, the prostitute's reflection appears to emerge from the traffic headlights that can be seen traversing the protagonist's body in its reflection in the window.

In his own genealogy of modern spectatorship, Tom Gunning has argued that filmic spectacles forged various alliances between two nineteenth-century modes of spectatorship that had emerged to replace the *flâneur* in the wake of mass urbanization: the detective and the gawker (*badaud*). Whereas the detective sees beyond surface appearances to the hidden realities beneath, the gawker loses himself in the kaleidoscopic world of urban impressions created in particular by advertising, commodities and street displays.[28] While print rebus puzzles clearly offered the pleasures of detective work – here one might recall Edgar Allan Poe's passion for cryptography – this hardly seems like a plausible explanation for the rebus films, given their distinct lack of depth and their appeal to a one-to-one correspondence between images and their

23 'Das "unheilvolle" Kreuzwort-Rätsel', *Der Kinematograph*, no. 976 (1925), p. 36.

24 'Film,' Benjamin famously wrote, 'corresponds to profound changes in the apperceptive apparatus – changes experienced on an individual scale by the man in the street in big-city traffic, on a historical scale by every present-day citizen'. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. and trans. Hannah Arendt (New York, NY: Schocken, 1969), p. 250, fn. 19.

25 See Ben Singer, 'Modernity, hyperstimulus, and the rise of popular sensationalism', in Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz (eds), *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 72–99.

26 On the history of the automobile and traffic in early German film, see Dorit Müller, *Gefährliche Fahrten: das Automobil in Literatur und Film um 1900* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2001).

27 Grune's critics were particularly impressed by the film's (artificial) urban street settings and reserved special praise for a scene in which the little girl Sascha is caught in the middle of the traffic, the entire sequence shot from below so as to emphasize the menacing countenance of the cars. 'Suddenly, we saw a tiny helpless little girl on the square – the three-year-old Sascha – who had presumably let go of the maid's hand and now stood on the street pavement, threatened by a thousand dangers: automobiles, motorcycles, bicycles and throngs of people'. Albert Sander, 'Carl Grunes *Die Straße*', *Film-Kurier*, no. 154, 15 August 1923, p. 3.

28 See Tom Gunning, 'From the kaleidoscope to the X-ray: urban spectatorship, Poe, Benjamin, and *Traffic in Souls* (1913)', *Wide Angle*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1997), pp. 25–61.

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referents.[29] As a forum for visual attractions promising to show audiences everything, the rebus films had more in common with the tradition of the gawker. Yet, as films such as *Die Strasse* and the advertisement for the rebus films themselves suggest, they also came at a historical moment when gawking itself had come to be seen as a potentially dangerous mode of perception. If the advertisements for the crossword films evoked these new dangers, however, this also suggests a specific set of questions about the role of mass-media *puzzles* and games within this context of changing modes of perception. When Leni, Brennert and Seeber set out to make their filmic crosswords in 1925, the crossword puzzle genre was still relatively new (the first crossword having been printed by the *New York World* in 1913) and was the object of the kind of pathologizing warnings about new media familiar both then and now. Indeed, the story of the absorbed crossword puzzle solver in the advertisement cited above echoes numerous warnings about the effects of crossword puzzles in the early 1920s, from both the USA and Germany.[30] The editors of the *New York Times*, for example, famously warned in an editorial from 1924 – the same year in which Simon and Schuster published the first crossword puzzle book – of an epidemic of 'crossword madness', and described obsessive scenes of people stealing dictionaries from libraries and (in a foreshadowing of more recent concerns with portable technologies from walkmans to mobile phones) losing all awareness of public space as they became absorbed in their puzzles. 'All ages', the editorialists explained, 'both sexes, highbrows and lowbrows, at all times and in all places, even in restaurants and in subways, pore over the diagrams.'[31] A year later, such concerns would receive humorous treatment on Broadway in the hit musical *Puzzles of 1925*, which featured a 'Crossword Puzzler's Sanatorium' for obsessive puzzle solvers.[32]

It was thus with a particular reputation that the crossword puzzle form was first introduced into Germany by the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* in March 1925, just after the stabilization of the Reichsmark,[33] and it would quickly become one of the icons – next to jazz instruments, chorus lines and the Fordist factory – of the 'Americanist' culture during the later Weimar years (figure 4). Recalling the US debates about crosswords and urban modernity, the advertisement from the *Kinematograph* cited above presented the new filmic version of the crossword as something of a solution to the madness associated with print puzzles, the space of the cinema offering a safe haven in which to indulge the otherwise dangerous pleasures of obsessive absorption in visual and linguistic riddles. In this, the advertisement in fact takes up a common strategy for the defence of the filmic medium, one most familiar from German debates on the relation between cinema and crime. Whereas the so-called *Kinoreformer*, or cinema reformers, of the 1910s argued that cinema would exert a suggestive effect over naive viewers, inciting them to imitate the crimes shown on the screen, defenders of cinema presented it repeatedly as a kind of surrogate space for the release of fantasies, providing a less harmful outlet for primal drives.[34] Writing in 1922, the expressionist author Kurt Pinthus summarized these

29 On Poe and the cryptographic tradition, see Shawn James Rosenheim, *The Cryptographic Imagination: Secret Writing from Edgar Poe to the Internet* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Marcel Danesi, *The Puzzle Instinct: the Meaning of Puzzles in Human Life* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), p. 59.

30 A good media history of the crossword puzzle has yet to be written. On the history of crosswords mostly in the USA, see Coral Amende and Frances Hansen, *Crossword Obsession: the History and Lore of the World's Most Popular Pastime* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2001); Danesi, *The Puzzle Instinct*, pp. 62–68.

31 'The crossword puzzle', *New York Times*, 22 December 1924, p. 16.

32 See Danesi, *The Puzzle Instinct*, p. 64.

33 See Christoph Drösser, 'Eine kurze Geschichte des Grübelns', *Folio: die Zeitschrift der Neuen Zürcher Zeitung*, no. 12 (2007) <http://www.nzzfolio.ch/www/d80bd71b-b264-4db4-afd0-277884b93470/showarticle/95e0d2de-08fe-4b79-afa0-d3e59683cca1.aspx> [accessed 29 May 2009].

34 On the history of the cinema reform, see Stefan Andriopoulos, *Possessed: Hypnotic Crimes, Corporate Fiction and the Invention of the cinema*, trans. Peter Jansen (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 91–128.

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Fig. 4. Image from *Der Querschnitt* (1925), exemplifying Germany's crossword craze.

arguments succinctly when he described such surrogate abreactions as one of cinema's primary 'ethical' functions:

> Many people believe that intense, adventurous and fantastic actions shown on film have a suggestive effect on spectators, inciting them to imitation. Many crimes have supposedly been inspired by examples shown on film. I hold just the opposite view; for many spectators, the sight of foreign environments and intense events works to abreact and thus eliminate the excess desire for experience and adventure so often at the root of crime.[35]

The defence of cinema as a surrogate space for dangerous obsessions was thus a well-established precedent by the time Leni, Brennert and Seeber made their crossword puzzle films in the mid 1920s.

But although such a defence might have made for good advertising, the relation between the rebus film and urban psychology was somewhat different. For rather than offering a haven from the dangerous world of urban traffic or indulging outmoded forms of perception, these films functioned precisely as a forum for testing new modes of perception and attention particularly appropriate to the urban environment. In this, they constructed an 'interactive' filmic puzzle not as a palliative to urban modernity, but rather as an urban aesthetic in the Benjaminian sense: a training ground for the modes of distracted and divided attention adapted to the conditions of the urban milieu.

That new milieu is everywhere on display in the surviving *Rebus-Film Nr. 1*, for example in visual clues for 'Paris', which show scenes of people weaving through traffic reminiscent of Grune's *Die Strasse* or Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: die Sinfonie der Großstadt*/*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927). Indeed, looking through the censor cards for all eight

35 Kurt Pinthus, 'Ethische Möglichkeiten im Film', in Hugo Zehder (ed.), *Der Film von Morgen* (Berlin: Rudolf Kaemmerer, 1923), p. 123. Pinthus's text had a forerunner, of sorts, in Walter Serner's famous essay from 1913, in which he explained that the cinema spectator found 'satisfaction for his rudimentary primal drives in an image'. Walter Serner, 'Kino und Schaulust', *Die Schaubühne*, vol. 9 (1913), pp. 807–11.

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rebus films, one can chart a distinct preoccupation – alongside a tendency towards exoticism and virtual travel – with the characteristic phenomena of 1920s urban modernity. In addition to cities such as 'Berlin',[36] 'Paris'[37] and 'Rom',[38] some of the most recurrent semantic categories in the series include modern forms of technology and transportation such as 'Maschine',[39] 'Motor',[40] 'Automobile'[41] and 'Zeppelin';[42] modern media such as 'Zeitung' (newspaper)[43] and 'Radio'[44]; and mass spectacles such as 'Variété' (variety show),[45] 'Girl' (chorus girl),[46] 'Jazzband'[47] and 'Reklame' (advertising).[48]

Anyone familiar with Weimar culture will identify these concepts as phenomena typically associated – like the crossword puzzle itself – with Americanism and the culture of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (new objectivity) that emerged in the mid 1920s. For Leni, Brennert and Seeber's audiences, such terms and phenomena would have constituted a veritable catalogue of things one needed to know for life in the new Fordist era. In his own reading of Ruttmann's *Berlin*, Anton Kaes has argued that the city films which flourished in the 1920s had particular relevance for the masses of recently arrived Berlin immigrants – who made up the bulk of cinema audiences – as a kind of affective rehearsal for city life, a virtual training ground for coming to terms with the anonymity, speed and vertigo of urban experience.[49] Something similar, I think, could be said of the *Rebus-Film* series, which used the onscreen game format, and the affective experience of play, precisely in order to facilitate the assimilation of that new milieu.

Indeed, the films sought to train audiences for urban life not only through their content (the concepts to be guessed), but also through their formal strategies. As one can see from the surviving copy of *Rebus-Film Nr. 1*, the aesthetics of these films demanded a form of distracted attention diametrically opposed to the absorption of traditional rebus puzzles. First, whereas print rebuses called for extended concentration, the rebus film used the time-based quality of motion pictures to test the player's capacity for rapid reaction. As we have seen, unlike the classical rebus, which required readers to go beyond the evidentiary level, the rebus film assumed a one-to-one correspondence between images and their referents, which the audience had to identify quickly. At times, the narrator even comments on the lack of difficulty, asking the audience 'That was really easy, wasn't it?', or hurrying them along with questions such as 'Haven't you got it yet?'[50]

In their demand for rapid recognition, the fleeting images of *Rebus-Film Nr. 1* correspond less to the hermetic picture writing of traditional rebus puzzles than to the images and texts of tachistoscopes and other stimuli–response testing devices prevalent in professional training in the 1920s, in which psychotechnicians gauged subjects' aptitude for work in the urban environment by testing their capacity for rapid identification of fleeting words and image (figure 5). Train companies, for example, often employed tachistoscopes to flash fragments of city names in order to test potential train conductors or station employees for their ability to

36 Censor Card, *Rebus-Film Nr. 2*, Bundesarchiv/Filmarchiv.
37 Censor Card, *Rebus-Film Nr. 1*, Bundesarchiv/Filmarchiv.
38 Censor Card, *Rebus-Film Nr. 4*, Bundesarchiv/Filmarchiv.
39 Censor Card, *Rebus-Film Nr. 6*, Bundesarchiv/Filmarchiv.
40 Censor Card, *Rebus-Film Nr. 7*, Bundesarchiv/Filmarchiv.
41 Censor Card, *Rebus-Film Nr. 4*.
42 Censor Card, *Rebus-Film Nr. 2*.
43 Censor Card, *Rebus-Film Nr. 2*.
44 Censor Card, *Rebus-Film Nr. 3*, Bundesarchiv/Filmarchiv.
45 Censor Card, *Rebus-Film Nr. 5*, Bundesarchiv/Filmarchiv.
46 Censor Card, *Rebus-Film Nr. 3*.
47 Censor Card, *Rebus-Film Nr. 2*.
48 Censor Card, *Rebus-Film Nr. 5*.

49 See Anton Kaes, 'Leaving home: film, migration, and the urban experience,' *New German Critique*, no. 74 (1998), pp. 179–92.

50 These two examples are taken from Leni's reedited version of *Rebus-Film Nr. 1*, but a glance at the censor cards reveals that such comments formed a pattern throughout the series. This lack of difficulty was also noticed by reviewers. As one writer for the journal *Lichtbild-Bühne* described it, 'The concepts making up each puzzle grid are chosen to be as simple and obvious as possible so that spectators need not wrack their brains too much'. 'Beim Altmeister der "schwarzen Kunst"', reprinted in Hans-Michael Bock (ed.), *Paul Leni: Grafik, Theater, Film* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsches Filmmuseum, 1986), p. 184.

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erfaßten Zeichen auf getrennten Elektrozählern additiv, kann γ) auch Bremswege für Reaktionshandlungen bei Sonderzeichen (Bedienen einer Bremstaste) erkennen lassen[1]). (S. Fig. 34.)

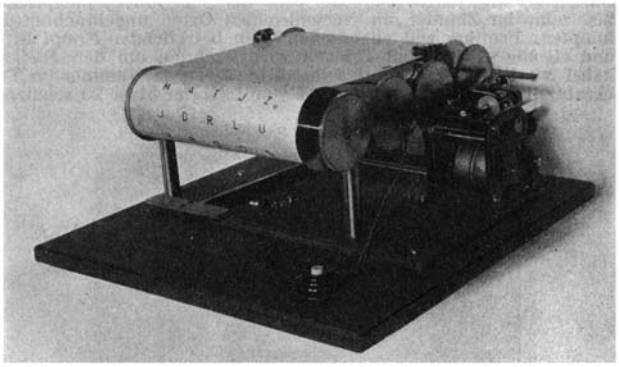

Fig. 34. Aufmerksamkeitsprüfer (geöffnet).

Fig. 35. Aufmerksamkeitsprüfer bei der Post.
Fig. 35 zeigt den Apparat im Dienste der Reichspost in einfacher

Fig. 5. Attention training devices from Fritz Giese, *Methoden der Wirtschaftspsychologie* (1927).

recognize destinations in the blink of an eye and make split-second decisions.[51] Such tests offer a crucial point of reference for any effort to understand what it meant to 'read the city' in the early twentieth century. Indeed, the forms of fleeting recognition they demand were precisely the forms of cognition deemed necessary for survival on the new motorized streets. As Richard Hamann describes it in a text from 1907:

> Crossing Potsdamerplatz or Friedrichstrasse on a busy day requires that presence of mind which makes do with only imprecise impressions and vaguely seen pictures to make adjustments. … The prerequisite to walking across a busy metropolitan street is the ability to make quick judgments on the basis of minimal signals.[52]

It is precisely this capacity of rapid recognition that was being 'tested' by the rebus films, in which players were asked not to decode carefully

51 On this point, see Frederic Schwartz, 'The eye of the expert: Walter Benjamin and the avant-garde', *Art History*, vol. 24, no. 3 (2001), pp. 412–14.

52 Richard Hamann, *Der Impressionismus in Leben und Kunst* (Cologne: Dumont-Schauberg, 1907), p. 204.

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encrypted messages or reconstruct poetic dictums, but rather to *identify* images – people, places and things – in a limited timespan.[53]

At the level of film aesthetics, this sense of speed is supported by the use of accelerated montage and destabilized perspectives to underscore the omnipresence of urban *movement.* Made just after the introduction of the 'unchained camera' in German films such as Murnau's *Der letzte Mann*/*The Last Laugh* from 1924, the rebus films revel in mobile perspectives, whether filmed from omnibuses, subway trains, the elevator of the Eiffel Tower, or simply from the point of view of a strapped-on camera performing pirouettes on the street. This infatuation with rapid movement is evident from the opening sequence of the first rebus film. Following images of flowing water shot from different angles, the film then shows us a series of mobile perspectives of Berlin: an angular swooping shot of the inside of a subway station; a fast-motion shot looking out from the rear of a moving train; a rapid upward tilt of the subway steps; several handheld shots of animals running on the city streets; a rapid swirling shot of a car; a swooping pan over the facade of the Ufa Palast am Zoo (Berlin's main film theatre); more swirling shots of coffee shops and display windows; and rapid pan shots sweeping past city buildings and monuments. Interspersed with introductory titles reading 'I am the first crossword puzzle filmed', these shots suggest that the real object of identification in *Rebus-Film Nr. 1* would consist less in any hermetic words or phrases than in the urban environment itself, an environment marked by rapid motion, fleeting glimpses and constantly shifting perspectives. In a manner reminiscent of the 'New Vision' of the constructivist movement or of Dziga Vertov's 'Kino-Eye' filming from atop the city's structures, the first-person narrator of Seeber's film shows us all sorts of views of Berlin from perspectives that seem to defy the capacities of a single human body. Indeed, the opening sequence declares its own debt to the filmic tradition of destabilized perspectives when, in the shot of the Ufa theatre, the camera glides past an advertisement for one of the most famous 'unchained camera' films of 1925: Ewald André Dupont's *Variété*/*Variety*, in which Karl Freund had taken the camera onto a circus trapeze in order to render the destabilized world from the dizzying perspective of Emil Jannings's overwhelmed acrobat. By including this shot of the *Variété* poster, as well as a clue for Jannings in the puzzle itself (in the original German version), Seeber associated his own camerawork for the *Rebus-Film* series with Freund's vertiginous unchained camera and its ability to implicate the body of the spectator in the filmic experience.[54]

Such dizzying shots reveal a lot, moreover, about the function of play in the rebus films. In his study *Les jeux et les hommes*/*Man, Play and Games* (1958), the anthropologist Roger Caillois famously divides human play into four structural categories with differing anthropological functions: competition (*agôn*), chance (*alea*), simulation (*mimicry*) and what he describes as vertigo (*ilinx*). Each category, Caillois adds, could tend more towards fantasy (which he terms *paideia)* or skill (*ludus*). Although one

53 Even the film's use of animation underscores this point. In the sequence illustrating the number nine we see a series of animated figures – candlesticks, cards, dice, and so on – shown in rapid motion representing that number.

54 For a contemporary discussion of the unchained camera as a means of heightening the bodily sensations of the spectator, see Lotar Holland, 'Subjektive Bewegung', *Filmtechnik*, no. 23 (1927), pp. 407–8.

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would generally associate puzzle-solving with the *ludus* tradition – as Caillois himself does in his study – Leni, Brennert and Seeber's filmic puzzles, as we have seen, require little intellectual skill on the part of the audiences. But with their dizzying perspectives and montages, the films did tap heavily into the *ilinx* category. Significantly, this category was unique for Caillois in constituting the only type of play specific to the modern world in its reliance on the presence of rapid transport:

> In order to give this kind of sensation the intensity and brutality capable of shocking adults, powerful machines have had to be invented. Thus it is not surprising that the Industrial Revolution had to take place before vertigo could really become a kind of game. It is now provided for the avid masses by thousands of stimulating contraptions installed at fairs and amusement parks.[55]

If vertigo could become a game only with the industrial revolution, however, this is also because games of vertigo largely served to acclimatize people to the experiences brought about by the very industrial apparatuses that made such play possible. Indeed, this was precisely the function of amusement parks such as Coney Island or the Viennese Prater, which, as Rem Koolhaas and other recent critics remind us, largely served as gathering places for immigrants to assimilate the experience of cities like New York, Berlin and Vienna.[56] It should hardly be surprising if the amusement park appears in so many archetypal city films from 1920s cinema, from the fairground of Jean Epstein's *Coeur fidèle* (1923) to the vision of the hapless husband in Grune's *Die Strasse* to the rollercoaster sequence in Ruttmann's *Berlin*; in each instance, the vertiginous sensations of the fairground rides offer a metaphor for the delirium of urban existence, embodying, moreover, the 'mobilized virtual gaze' of cinema itself, which similarly serves to mediate urban experience for new city-dwellers.[57] While employing the crossword form, the rebus film explicitly incorporates such vertiginous elements into the experience of play, thus transforming games of intellectual skill into games of identification amidst the bewildering conditions of urban experience.

Finally, along with the cultivation of speed and movement, the rebus film also speaks to an environment characterized by the need to divide attention among simultaneous perceptions. Indeed, Seeber's use of simultaneous visual fields serves not only to illustrate concepts but to visualize the perceptual conditions of mass modernity, an aesthetic quality visible right from the opening sequence of the surviving film. Just after the appearance of the intertitle 'crossword' we see an animated collage of crossword puzzles followed by a collage of hands engaged in various leisure activities such as smoking, puzzle solving and card playing. Inserting the act of crossword puzzle solving into a whole array of mass leisure activities, this image is the first in a series of filmic collages that serve to portray individual objects or people – and particularly the film's spectators themselves – as part of a coexistent mass. Just after the collage of leisure activities, the animated Mr Rebus tells the audience to 'grasp

55 Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), pp. 125–26.

56 See Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York* (New York, NY: Monacelli Press, 1994), pp. 31–32. Recently, scholars have made a similar argument about the famous Prater amusement park in Vienna. See Siegfried Mattl and Werner Schwarz, 'Delirious Wien? Die Wiener Prater und die Assimilierung der Moderne', in Christian Dewald and Werner Schwarz (eds), *Prater Kino Welt: Der Wiener Prater und die Geschichte des Kinos* (Vienna: Filmarchiv Austria, 2005), pp. 87–101.

57 On the 'mobilized virtual gaze', see Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

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that little card' and a pencil, and the film accordingly shows us a collage of hands all searching for the crossword puzzle and writing implement (the same image reproduced in the advertisement in Richter's journal *G*). But if such concurrent images serve to insert spectators into the masses, they also expand the limit of spectators' visual attention. In *Der Trickfilm*, Seeber describes his use of the split-screen technique in his *Kipho* film of 1925 – in which he created collages of up to five simultaneous fields showing images of the film industry that alternate in a counterpoint-like rhythm – as an appeal to rapid identification.[58] Combining the effects of collage and montage, such animated counterpoint functioned, Seeber argues, to 'incite viewers in an entertaining way to identify rapidly the objects on the screen'.[59] Indeed, in language reminiscent of attention tests in psychophysics, he states at one point: 'One soon reaches the shortest period of visibility during which the eye can still identify and comprehend the objects shown'.[60]

Like a tachistoscope with multiple windows, Seeber's animated collages sought to push the faculties of perception to their limit, dividing attention between multiple phenomena and testing players' capacity for rapid recognition. No wonder, then, that Seeber's critics would see his rhythmical collages as an ideal device for filming urban life. As one writer put it in an article for the *Berliner Tageblatt* on the *Kipho* film, 'I believe that the simultaneous film image [developed by Seeber] is exceptionally well suited to representing the big city [*Großstadt*]'.[61] In making such a statement, the writer could have drawn on a number of avant-garde movements, from futurism to dadaist collage, which placed simultaneous perception and divided attention at the centre of urban aesthetics.

Taking up this modernist preoccupation with simultaneity, the rebus films also inscribe the demand for divided attention into their game format, not only through the collages on the screen but also through the medial division of screen and puzzle card. Unlike print rebuses and crosswords, the filmic puzzles demanded a form of spectatorial attention to be operating in two places at once. In order to solve the puzzle, the spectator's gaze was required to travel continuously from the screen to the card (where viewers wrote their response) and back again without missing an essential clue, and thus to perform both actions in a state of continuous distraction. Thus the rebus films demanded a form of distracted reception not unlike the one described by Benjamin in the case of architecture: a reception characterized by a simultaneous optical and tactile appropriation of its object through a play of glances and bodily movement.[62]

According to Seeber's own account in *Der Trickfilm*, his technique of the 'simultaneous image' used in the *Kipho* film and the *Rebus-Film* series was in fact a development of his famous *Doppelgänger* sequences from *Der Student von Prag* (1913), in which Paul Wegener appears simultaneously on different halves of the screen in the roles of Balduin and his malevolent double.[63] But what began as a device for representing a crisis in bourgeois individuality had become, by the 1920s, a means of playfully reproducing the conditions of urban vision and testing players'

58 See Seeber, *Der Trickfilm*, pp. 240–51. The rebus films were largely understood as a continuation of the technique developed for the *Kipho* film. See 'Beim Altmeister der "schwarzen Kunst",' p. 184.

59 Ibid., p. 251

60 Ibid., p, 248.

61 'Der absolute Film', *Berliner Tageblatt*, vol. 24 (September 1925), reprinted in *Das wandernde Bild: der Filmpionier Guido Seeber*, ed. Stiftung deutsche Kinemathek (Berlin: Elefanten Press Verlag, 1979), p. 95.

62 On architecture and distraction, see Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 241.

63 See Seeber, *Der Trickfilm*, pp. 54–55.

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capacity for 'reading' the urban environment. Seeber himself suggests the relevance of his animated collages to urban aesthetics when he refers to them as a means of providing a *Querschnitt* or 'cross-section' through a particular phenomenon.[64] A key term of 1920s aesthetics, the 'cross-section' designated precisely the effect of simultaneity attained not only in the famous cross-section montage films such as Ruttmann's *Berlin* and sections of the collective film *Menschen am Sontag* (while not literally dividing the screen, such films did use parallel editing to show audiences numerous phenomena occurring *simultaneously* at the diegetic level), but also in the photo-layouts of illustrated journals such as the aptly titled *Der Querschnitt*, which had become Weimar's best-selling periodical by 1925.[65] Like the illustrations of *Der Querschnitt*, the rebus film sought to show audiences the random and simultaneous crossings of the various people, things, places and attractions that made up the modern world.

It was, paradoxically, precisely this project that made the textual crossword puzzle – unlike its picture-puzzle predecessor, the rebus – an appropriate model for cross-section aesthetics. In his book *The Puzzle Instinct*, puzzle historian Marcel Danesi has argued that puzzles form a universal part of human culture, responding to an inherent need to make sense of things. But Danesi notes that the crossword represents the only puzzle form 'that does not have ancient origins. It is a 20th-century invention, devised not for some mystical or occult reason but for the sole purpose of providing intellectual entertainment.'[66] Taking Danesi's observation a step further, we might say that, like the *ilinx* category of vertiginous play examined by Caillois, the crossword form responded not only to a consumerist desire for entertainment, but also to a specifically modern need: the need to assimilate an increasingly fragmented and changing urban spectacle. Unlike the rebus puzzle, which demanded that readers restore linear coherence to what appeared on the surface as a motley collection of fragments, the crossword puzzle in fact assumed its fragmentary status, revelling in the chance encounters and crossings of heterogeneous phenomena on the puzzle grid. While early crossword puzzles attempted to be achieve a more systematic appearance – Arthur Wynne's first printed puzzle from 1913 appeared as a diamond with symmetrical numbering ordered from left to right and down the page (figure 6) – subsequent crossword layouts assumed an increasing emphasis on chance crossings. Indeed, there is nothing systematic about the grid used for the *Rebus-Film* series, in which words of different lengths criss-cross one another in a haphazard fashion, dictated by the luck of shared letters. While print crosswords might have lacked images, such layouts themselves offered a visual model for a cross-section aesthetic that attempted to juxtapose the simultaneous sites and attractions of the modern world.

Thus if the rebus films trained audiences in the art of visual reading, such literacy involved not so much the ability to restore a hidden linearity (the operation at the heart of rebus solving) as learning to enjoy exactly the kinds of heterogeneous and ephemeral constellations familiar from the crossword puzzle. This form of literacy is suggested by another

64 The reference comes in Seeber's discussion of the *Kipho* film, which he describes as a 'Querschnitt durch den Film'. Ibid., p. 246.

65 On the history of the journal *Der Querschnitt*, see Kai Sicks, '"Der Querschnitt" oder: Die Kunst des Sporttreibens', in Michael Cowan and Kai Sicks (eds), *Leibhaftige Moderne. Körper in Kunst und Massenmedien 1918 bis 1933* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2005), pp. 30–48.

66 Danesi, *The Puzzle Instinct*, p. 62.

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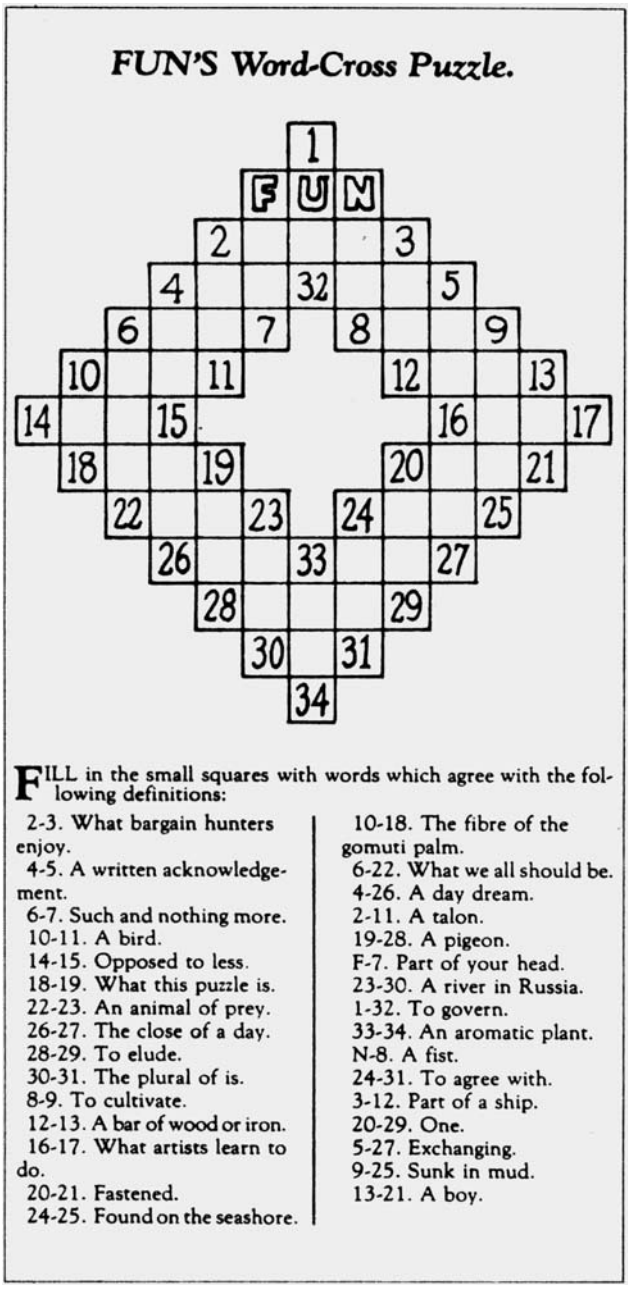

Fig. 6. The first crossword puzzle in *New York World* (1913).

advertisement for the films in the journal *Lichtbild-Bühne*, in which the letters of the crossword puzzle are now replaced by images that surround the gaze of a smiling puzzle solver and (presumably) transform with each movement of the sprocket holes on either side (figure 7). As Peter Fritzsche has shown, such a 'reading' operation also found a model in

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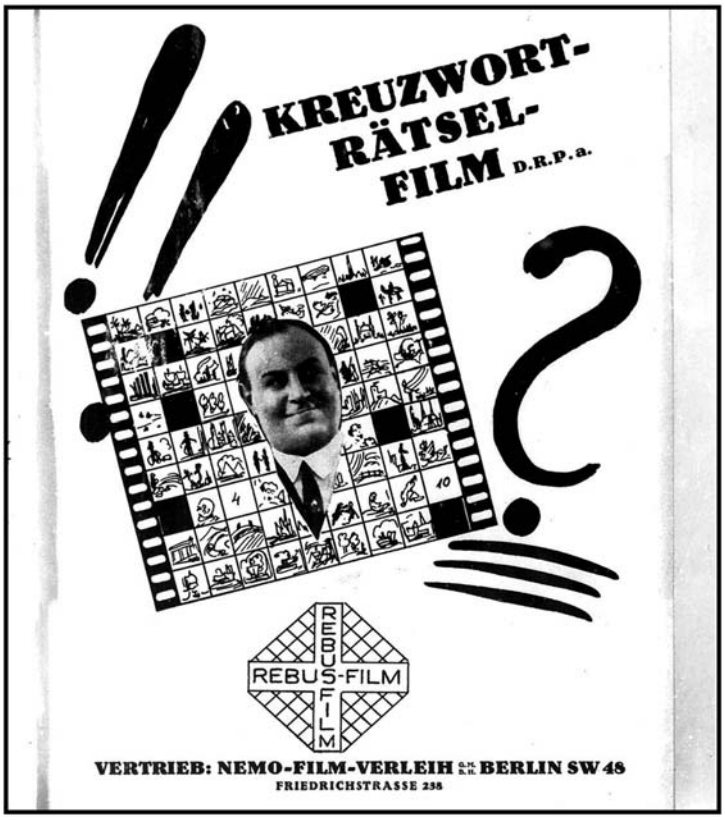

Fig. 7. Advertisement in *Lichtbild-Bühne* (1925).

early twentieth-century print media, and particularly the daily newspapers that flooded Berlin in that period, to offer a constantly changing 'mosaic of unrelated events' from around the world.[67] Newspapers themselves, of course, served as a forum for daily crosswords, and the appeal of both media lay in their ability to generate constantly new and seemingly endless combinations of criss-crossing words and themes – a quality imitated in the serial character of the German rebus films. Certainly, these films were not the only ones to transpose the heterogeneous experience of newspaper reading to the filmic medium; indeed, in addition to the presence of the virtual lecturer, the emphasis on ephemeral constellations of disparate phenomena is one of the principal aesthetic devices that the rebus films borrowed from early attractions cinema, where projections consisted of heterogeneous combinations – often changing daily – of actualities, trick sequences and lectures. In Weimar, such a non-linear juxtaposition of disparate phenomena informed not only the cross-section film, but also experimental films such as Hans Richter's *Zweigroschenzauber*/*Two Pence Magic* (1929), an advertisement for the *Kölner Illustrierte Zeitung* which, through a montage of serial match dissolves, brings the most disparate phenomena into formal juxtaposition:

67 Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 180.

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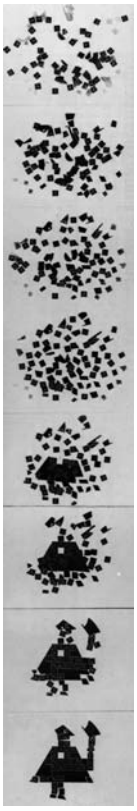

Fig. 8. Mr Rebus exploding in *Rebus Film Nr. 1.*

the moon seen through a telescope and a bald head, a high-diver and an airplane, a kiss and a handshake before a boxing match. Like the newspaper and the the crossword puzzle, Richter's film thus highlights the aleatory formal connections between phenomena (in this case their graphic similarity rather than shared letters) in order to underscore all the more forcefully the utter heterogeneity of the items brought into such ephemeral and fortuitous contiguity. It was precisely such chance constellations and crossings that Franz Hessel had in mind when, in a much-cited passage from his *feuilleton* text *Ein Flaneur in Berlin* (1929), he proposed a model of urban literacy far removed from the penetrating gaze of the detective:

> Strolling [*Flanieren*] is a way of reading the street whereby faces, displays, show windows, cafe terraces, cars, tram tracks and trees all turn into an entire series of equivalent letters, which together form words, sentences and pages of an always changing book.[68]

As a series of constantly changing and ephemeral combinations of letters, Hessel's 'sentences' are a far cry from the 'poetical phrases' admired by the solvers of rebus puzzles or interpreters of Freudian dreams, resembling much more the letters and images of a dadaist collage. This same aleatory, combinatory quality is emphasized at the end of the solutions section of *Rebus Film Nr. 1* when we see Mr Rebus, now solved, explode into a cloud of letters which will recondense into another chance constellation in the next filmic puzzle (figure 8). Like Hessel's ever-transforming collage of letters, or Baudelaire's famous 'kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness', the crossword film thus serves to generate ever new and ephemeral constellations of visual attractions, the 'reading' of which lies not in decrypting a secret code, but rather in the rapid identification of simultaneous phenomena in movement.[69]

In adding an iconic dimension to the print crossword, then, the 'rebus films' of the 1920s did not, in fact, effect a return to the nineteenth-century tradition of the rebus picture puzzle, but rather adapted the assemblage aesthetics of the crossword puzzle itself to the medium of moving images. In the process, their films used the film theatre not as a safe haven for dangerous forms of absorptive perception, but rather as a training ground for precisely the kinds of perceptual faculties required for life in an urban environment characterized by simultaneous impressions, rapid alternations and destabilized perspectives. In this, the rebus film's picture puzzles diverged sharply from the picture writing of its nineteenth-century predecessor. Whereas print rebuses challenged readers to transform a collection of apparently unrelated images into a semantically cohesive, linear unit, the rebus films revelled in its heterogeneity. And whereas print rebuses subordinated images to discursive thought, the rebus films trained spectators in a particular art of seeing. Above all, where print rebuses demanded a concentration of attention, the rebus films called for a rapid response and an ability to divide attention between simultaneous perceptions. But if these films rejected the mechanisms of

68 Franz Hessel, *Spazieren in Berlin. Sämtliche Werke III: Städte und Portraits* (Oldenburg: Igel, 1999), p. 103.

69 See Charles Baudelaire, *Curiosités esthétiques, L'Art romantique et autres Oeuvres critiques* (Paris: Garnier, 1962), pp. 463–64.

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the rebus picture puzzle, they found a more appropriate model, paradoxically enough, in the verbal crossword. Precisely on account of its non-linear structure and its emphasis on aleatory combinations, the crossword puzzle offered an ideal metaphor for the kaleidoscopic perception of the modern city. Transforming that puzzle format into an 'interactive' film, Leni, Brennert and Seeber's films constructed a virtual testing ground for perception in this new kaleidoscopic world.

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