

## WILHELM STAPEL

## Homo Cinematicus

First published as “Der homo cinematicus,” in *Deutsches Volkstum*, no. 10 (October 1919), 319–20. Translated by Eric Ames.

A political commentator known for his conservative, nationalistic, and anti-Semitic views, Stapel became editor in chief of the monthly journal *Deutsches Volkstum* in January 1919. Much as Richard Guttman invoked a “cinematic mankind” (no. 101), Wilhelm Stapel (1882–1954) postulates the existence of a “new psychic type”: the flighty, distracted “homo cinematicus,” to whom he attributes recent social unrest. (In the American context, Barton W. Currie had famously invoked “nickel madness” a decade prior.) Stapel’s critique was directed less against certain programs than against the very medium of film, which he wanted to extirpate. He is thus one of the few cultural critics in this volume for whom cinema did not hold any promise; he calls for abstinence from film per se for the sake of “our entire culture.” Stapel’s text was cited at length in Konrad Lange’s *Das Kino in Gegenwart and Zukunft* (Cinema’s present and future) the following year. See also a similar diatribe by Aurel Wolfram (no. 106) in the same journal toward the end of the Weimar era.

The sins of the cinema have been repeated ad nauseam. Everyone knows that, next to alcohol, there is nothing more harmful to the health and morality of the people than the cinema. It is now only necessary, it seems, to translate this knowledge into reality against the dogged resistance of cinema capital. However, the most profound and serious danger of the cinema has been seen only recently by just a few observers—namely, when someone goes to the cinema one, two, or three times a week, he suffers psychic damage from the *form* of the presentations alone, regardless of their content. The cinema may be quite decent; it may show a program that has no doubt been censored for content. But the sheer fact that the viewer becomes habituated to the flashing, fluttering, and twitching images

of the flickering screen slowly but surely destroys his psychic and, ultimately, his moral stability.

First, one acquires the habit of being jerked from idea to idea in an abrupt and unmediated fashion; one loses all constancy within the chain of ideas, that ability to remain steady, which is the precondition of any thorough judgment. Second, one becomes habituated to the random sequences of images, succumbing to them and following them involuntarily; one no longer misses the logical succession of a continuous thought, that continuity which alone is able to combine individual ideas into what we tend to call a “thought.” The mere recording of pictorial ideas—which have no logically or psychologically necessary relation to one another (as they do in a real drama, story, or scientific argument), but only a coincidental one—amounts to nothing more than a passive self-abandonment and surrender of the soul. Autonomous psychic activity can take place only by *thinking*, by forming necessary relations. Without this autonomous activity, one can never gain mastery over things; at best, one remains stuck in the murky enjoyment of one’s affects. Thus, cinema leads to psychic atony. Third, in the flow of images swiftly passing by, one acquires the habit of perceiving only the approximation of an impression; one does not gain a clear and conscious understanding of the image down to its details. Thus, the only impressions to remain in one’s mind are the rough, surprising, and sensational ones. Lost is any sense for the intimate, the exact, and the refined. Regulars of the cinema think only in garish, approximate ideas. Any image that catches their inner eye captures their entire attention. They no longer contemplate or rethink it; they no longer attend to its details and foundations. It suffices for the show to be dazzling and affectively charged, and they fall helplessly victim to it. They have turned into catchword people.

The consequence of all of this is the following: under the influence of cinema, a new psychic type is emerging among the people. A human type, which only flutteringly “thinks” in rough, general ideas, which allows itself to be ceaselessly carried from impression to impression, which is no longer *capable* of making clear and convincing judgments. A human type that already did enough damage during the revolution, and that, with every new generation exposed to the psychic attrition caused by the cinema, will grow and make its mark on culture (including political culture). *The cinema is constructing a new human type, inferior in both its intellectual and moral capacities: the homo cinematicus.*

Herein lies the enormous danger of cinema for our entire culture, which is grounded in higher intellectual faculties. From generation to generation, men’s brains and souls continue to be mangled, losing their capacity for nobler culture. And neither censorship nor model cinemas can help; against the cinema (as against the devastations of alcohol) only *abstinence* can help. There is no salvation, except to stifle the cinema as a mass phenomenon and to replace it with more worthwhile pleasures. Either cinema capital or our culture must go bankrupt. I would rather see cinema capital go broke. With every cinema insolvency, we ought to hold a thanksgiving service.