



Volume 6. Weimar Germany, 1918/19–1933

Anita, “Sex Appeal: A New Catchword for an Old Thing” (1928)

In the 1920s, German society and culture were greatly influenced by the United States, then the epitome of modernism. The extent of this influence became evident in the numerous Anglicisms introduced into the German language at the time. In this article, which was published in the magazine *Uhu*, the author points out that not every new term – in this instance, “sex appeal” – described a new phenomenon. The film industry and the stars associated with it had taken the lead in popularizing this term in the German mass media. The author of the piece, Anita Daniel (1893-1978), signed her articles with her first name only. She was a fashion journalist who mainly wrote for another Ullstein publication, *Die Dame*. Whereas her colleague at the magazine, Vicki Baum, eventually became a well-known writer both in Germany and abroad, Anita Daniel, who emigrated to Switzerland in 1933 and then to the United States, is virtually unknown today.

Sex Appeal: A New Catchword for an Old Thing

Every generation has a catchword for the ideal of its time. Once the formula has been found it spreads like wildfire, for then the idea will be discussed, analyzed, and enthusiastically defended—until it is worn out.

This time no German word was found for the new ideal. Apparently there are things between heaven and earth for which only one solitary language can completely capture the deepest meaning and which are therefore taken over into the vocabulary of the world untranslated.

To internationally valid terms like five o'clock, flirt, dancing, and cocktail, a new, extremely important one has been added: sex appeal. For years one called it “that certain something.” What was meant was that magic that emanates from a being that cannot be simply subsumed under the rubric of beauty.

And suddenly it came from America like an illumination—what it was is sex appeal.

Until recently the question about a woman was simply: does she have pretty legs? Now the burning question is: does she have sex appeal?

To give the etymology of this word one can only resort to pictures and show those who have “it.” But what do they have? That is where the difficulty of explanation begins.

“Une belle laide,” say the French. “She’s got something,” in the vernacular. “Not pretty, something more than that.” All of these are rewrites for sex appeal.

It is the perfect incarnation of the sex, whether male or female—for, although one thinks in this connection almost exclusively of women, the idea of sex appeal has to be valid for men too. One simply speaks less of the man—perhaps because successful men by definition have sex appeal. With women other factors, beauty, elegance, gracefulness, etc., still have their special meanings.

Every generation has the ambition to take out a new patent on its catchword. Later, with longer use, it becomes evident that exactly the same meaning has been registered under several other names.

Sex appeal existed, of course, in times when no one yet spoke English. And in the Middle Ages people were simply burned for having too much sex appeal—in those times it was called witchcraft. ...

When a very beautiful woman also has sex appeal—that is when earth-shattering things occur. At the least she will become a film star, the subject of dreams on five continents and the cause of complexes for an entire generation.

Our objective era searches for and finds the technical expression and the objective explanation for everything until it comes upon a point where, for the time being, it can go no further. That point is called atom, radio wave, sex appeal.

Source of English translation: Anita, “Sex Appeal: A New Catchword for an Old Thing” (1928), in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg. © 1994 Regents of the University of California. Published by the University of California Press, pp. 667-68. Reprinted with permission of the University of California Press.

Source of original German text: Anita, “Sex Appeal. Ein neues Schlagwort für eine alte Sache,” *Uhu* 5 (October 1928), pp. 72-77.