



SPECIAL ISSUE ON SIEGFRIED KRACAUER

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Siegfried Kracauer and Meyer Schapiro: A Friendship

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Exile, Memory, and Image in Kracauer's Conception of History

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History as Autobiography: The Last Things Before the Last

Theodor W. Adorno

The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer

Leo Lowenthal

The Adorno Prize Address

Thomas Y. Levin

A Kracauer Bibliography



an interdisciplinary journal of german studies

**NEW
GERMAN
CRITIQUE**

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Published three times a year by TELOS PRESS, 431 E. 12th St., New York, NY 10009. *New German Critique* No. 54 corresponds to Vol. 18, No. 3. © New German Critique Inc. 1991. All rights reserved. New German Critique is a non-profit, educational organization supported by the Department of German Studies of Cornell University.

All editorial correspondence should be addressed to: NEW GERMAN CRITIQUE, Department of German Studies, 183 Goldwin Smith Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York 14853.

The annual subscription rate is \$22.00 personal; \$50.00 institutions. All foreign subscribers 15% extra. Back issues are available at \$8.50 copy for individuals and \$17.00 a copy for institutions. For subscriptions and back issues, write to: NEW GERMAN CRITIQUE, Telos Press Ltd., 431 East 12th Street, New York, NY 10009.

Articles appearing in this journal are annotated and indexed in *Historical Abstracts* and *American History and Life*.

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NEW GERMAN CRITIQUE

Number 54

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Introduction

Mark M. Anderson
Andreas Huyssen

In 1989 the Deutsches Literaturarchiv and the Schiller National Museum in Marbach am Neckar organized a documentary exhibition for the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Siegfried Kracauer, one of the leading intellectual and literary figures in Weimar Germany during the 1920s and the author of important film studies in American exile after the war. Following its inauguration in the bucolic setting of the Marbach Archive (where Kracauer's *Nachlaß* is held), the exhibition traveled to Frankfurt, Kracauer's native city and residence until 1930, and then to Berlin, where he lived and worked until 1933. The exhibition was scheduled to be dismantled, but at the last minute the present authors persuaded the Archive to extend Kracauer's symbolic journey to Columbia University in New York, where Kracauer found refuge from National Socialism in 1941 and where he wrote his two epoch-making studies, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947) and *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960).

Kracauer worked at Columbia in various capacities in the 1950s, frequenting its academic and social events until his death in 1966; its campus, we felt, should be the site of the Marbach exhibition as well as an academic symposium on his work. Enthusiasm on both sides of the Atlantic was immediate, and both projects were realized in March 1990. With the magnanimous support of the Schiller Museum in Marbach and the Goethe House in New York, the documentary exhibition was put on display in the Rotunda of the Low Library. And with the equally magnanimous contributions of the German Academic Exchange Service and the Max Kade Foundation, Deutsches Haus hosted



Siegfried Kracauer in 1930.

a symposium entitled “Siegfried Kracauer: The Critic in Exile” that brought together leading specialists in Europe and the United States for two days of spirited public debate. The editors would like to thank all those individuals and institutions without whose help this tribute to Kracauer would not have been possible, especially Friedrich Pfäfflin and Ingrid Belke (Marbach am Neckar), Peter Seel (Goethe House, New York), Wedigo de Vivanco and Heidrun Suhr (German Academic Exchange Service, New York), Erich Markel (Max Kade Foundation), and Sarah Weiner (Columbia University).

Almost all of the articles in the present issue of *New German Critique* were first presented at the Columbia symposium, including Leo Lowenthal’s moving address, “As I Remember Friedel,” which he delivered to a packed and wildly appreciative audience at Deutsches Haus. None of these pieces has appeared in English previously, and all can claim to break new ground in a number of different fields. Taken as a whole, they cover virtually all periods and subjects in Kracauer’s wide-ranging career, from his early architectural studies and essays on mass culture to his literary criticism, film theory, and philosophy of history. With the notable exception of an essay by Martin Jay,¹ the issue thus represents the first comprehensive view in English of Kracauer’s work — one that, with translations of his early German texts in the offing, the editors can only hope will be followed by others.

Because this issue has both a critical and a commemorative function, the editors have decided to include Theodor Adorno’s essay “The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer,” originally written in 1964 to commemorate his friend’s seventy-fifth birthday, as well as Leo Lowenthal’s acceptance speech for the Theodor W. Adorno Prize of the City of Frankfurt, delivered on 1 October 1989; both appear for the first time in English here. Finally, the editors would like to extend the symbolic symmetry of these various tributes by dedicating this issue to our friend Leo Lowenthal as a belated but heartfelt gift for his ninetieth birthday.

1. “The Extraterritorial Life of Siegfried Kracauer,” *Salmagundi* 31-32 (Fall 1975-Winter 1976).

*As I Remember Friedel**

Leo Lowenthal

In 1965 Adorno published an essay in honor of Siegfried Kracauer under the title “Der wunderliche Realist”; the translation “The Curious Realist” perhaps does not render all of the German connotations. It is slightly ironic — as some of you may know — that Kracauer did not particularly like this essay. As I stand before you, I feel oddly unreal relating to you my memories of a man who was one of my oldest intimate friends: while you come together here to explore “objectively,” as it were, some of his intellectual achievements, I primarily think of him as part of a circle of more or less close friends with whom I lived through the 20th century and with whom I maintained a continuous personal relationship from my early adulthood until his death.

It is not the first time that I have been called upon, as a survivor, to speak about some of my contemporaries, be it Adorno, Benjamin, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Bloch, or Lukács, and every time I have had the uncanny feeling that I was acting as the historian of my own history. I have to guard against the narcissistic impulse to speak about myself while speaking about the others — a double bind which is hard to avoid — and I apologize beforehand if the “I” seems to loom too large in what I intend to relate to you.

In an interview about our circle, later named the Frankfurt School, I once said we did not expect this fame. It is possible that some of us really waited for it. But now fame has overtaken all of us — you hear

* This essay was originally presented as the keynote address at the Kracauer symposium in March 1990 at Columbia University. Apart from a few minor editorial changes, no attempt has been made to alter the spontaneous character of Professor Lowenthal’s talk. —Ed.

the double bind lurking in the “us” — and in speaking about Siegfried Kracauer, the famous intellectual, I experience the perspective of “fame” oddly in tension with my recollections of “Friedel,” the friend. But here I am about seventy years after I first met Kracauer, and this is how it began.

There was a little café kitty-corner to the Frankfurt opera, the Café Westend (it no longer exists), which became an in-place for Frankfurt intelligentsia around the end of World War I. It was there we met. I forget who introduced me to Friedel, but very quickly a most intensive relationship developed. At that time, I was a student in Heidelberg on vacation in Frankfurt. Whenever we got together in Frankfurt, we would meet almost daily in that little café, only to resume the next morning by telephone the topics — ranging from juicy gossip and personal concerns to sophisticated philosophy — that had been on the agenda the previous day. Very soon (I was only twenty years of age at that time) a personal network began to develop. About a year after my first meeting with Kracauer, he introduced me to Adorno, who was then eighteen years old. I introduced him to my friend Ernst Simon, who, like myself, was studying history, *Germanistik*, and philosophy, and who won me over to a very messianic version of Zionism. Through Ernst Simon, Kracauer met Rabbi Nobel, then a revered figure in our Jewish circle, to whose *Festschrift*, on the occasion of his 50th birthday, Kracauer contributed. Through Nobel, Kracauer first met Martin Buber and later Franz Rosenzweig. In the spring of 1922, I introduced him to Ernst Bloch, and he in turn introduced me to Max Horkheimer, who was already a good friend of Adorno's. This acquaintance with Max Horkheimer, of course, became one of the most significant signposts in my life, leading to my close affiliation with the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt in 1926, and resulting in my later immigration to the United States and my affiliation with Columbia University. Just to complete this picture of closely knit connections: Kracauer's future wife Lili was a librarian at our institute.

In the first year of our relationship, Kracauer's professional existence was rather unsettled. An architect by training, and holding a doctoral degree in engineering from the Technical University of Berlin, he was still working in an architect's office when we met. As a result of his considerable experience and skill as a writer, he was able to secure a full-time position in late 1921 in the cultural department (called the *Feuilleton*) of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, the leading liberal newspaper in Germany. And in

1930 he was appointed Berlin bureau chief of this section, a position he immensely enjoyed and held until he fled Germany in 1933.

I will now devote the better part of my remarks to the early 1920s in Germany, as well as to Kracauer's later years in the United States. My remarks are supported mainly by excerpts from his letters to me, mostly written in German, but for the present purpose translated into English. Our correspondence in no way reflects the entire scope of our exchanges, since, of course, we only resorted to writing when we were not in the same place. He was an inveterate correspondent, and I firmly believe that a publication of his far-flung correspondence between 1920 and early 1933 would document the multiple aspects of intellectual life during the Weimar Republic. In retrospect, I am most grateful for the personal and intellectual messages he sent to me when I was studying in Heidelberg, when I was recovering from tuberculosis in the Black Forest, and when he was on vacation and wrote from there, sometimes together with Adorno. It is with great emotion that I recently reviewed these manifestations of human solidarity covering Kracauer's lifetime and documenting his role change from friend and mentor to friend and peer. Particularly in my youth, I benefitted from his critical comments, which were never condescending.

But let me turn to some of this material now. First, to describe the tone of our correspondence, a few remarks about the personal network which began to form. On November 17, 1921, Kracauer wrote to me: "I speak often of you to Teddie [Theodor Adorno], and he would like you to come soon, so he can meet you and we can perhaps read Hegel as a threesome. He has also studied Bloch now; he does not dispute the eros in the book (*Geist der Utopie* [*Spirit of Utopia*]), but rejects the whole decisively." (You will hear more of this disrespectful tone with which we debunked some of the intellectual heroes of our earlier days.) Or another quotation from Frankfurt in mid-1921: "Sunday, through Ernst Simon, I was invited with Martin Buber to [Rabbi] Nobel's. Buber's personality is truly compelling. It really is a happiness of a very high order to converse intensively with other people who are so worthy. A third 'dimension' arises. But then he's just a very different fellow from good old Rosenzweig, whose book, by the way, he also judged rather condescendingly."¹ (All of these judgments changed considerably a few years later.) He wrote to me often about his thoughts on Bloch, Lukács, and Max Scheler.

1. Franz Rosenzweig, *Stern der Erlösung* (*Star of Redemption*).

Now I would like to emphasize the 1920s a little bit more in substance. We discussed primarily philosophical and religious issues, the problem of friendship, and contemporary writings of Jewish intellectuals. This changed as Kracauer's affiliation with the *Frankfurter Zeitung* directed his thinking increasingly toward "secular" issues. But let me read a letter of December 16, 1921, in which Kracauer writes:

I cannot believe in this Messiah [here Kracauer is thinking primarily of Ernst Bloch, but also of a youthful sin of mine, an essay pompously called "The Demonic," which I included in the *Festschrift* for Rabbi Nobel], and to yearn for something in which I do not believe is impossible for me. My entire animosity toward these new *homines religiosi* is based on their talking about things they have no idea of, *au fond*. Rosenzweig babbles about God and the creation of the world as if he had been there for it all, and Buber too is a gnostic and a mystic. Scheler does it with phenomenology and Bloch becomes perfectly impertinent. Take note of how nobly Lukács behaves here. [Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* was a cult book for us all, which we practically knew by heart.] My catechism sounds very meager in comparison: I believe that a higher being rules over us and that we are creatures and therefore have no access to the secrets of creation. Pronouncements on the beginning of the world, the end of the world, etc., I strictly reject.

On January 14, 1922, he sent another letter, which, by the way, is the last one in which we address each other with "Sie," the second-person formal address. We then changed to the informal "Du," an event which Kracauer commented on with his usual delicacy in such matters and to which I will return below.

I want to ask you a question: supposing a person enters the Absolute as a spirit and rushes toward the Messiah; but in life he was no better or kinder than the average person. Another person *knows nothing* of God, the apocalypse, etc., but radiates salvation from his being; he is aglow with kindness. Who is more pleasing to God? Ernst Simon, to whom I posed this question, tends toward the second, although not without some reservations. . . . One senses in the style of Ernst Bloch his lack of purity. . . . My cardinal question to Bloch would be: do you believe literally in the Messiah, in the thousand-year reign? Is that wholly concrete and real to you, or merely an "as-if" ideal?

I cannot end the quotation of this letter without telling an amusing anecdote, an act of intellectual repression on my part. Kracauer notes at the end of the letter, "You write that Heidegger didn't like my article on Scheler.² I couldn't care less." In re-reading Kracauer's letter I noticed with surprise that I had totally forgotten having met and talked to Heidegger.

On August 31, 1923, Kracauer wrote: "I have finished Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*. I despise this kind of philosophy, which makes of the hymn a system, and indulges in the most extravagant constructions. . . . twaddles on about creation, revelation, and redemption in such excited tones it would move a dog to pity."

Now comes the letter which shows both Kracauer's turn to a secular mode of sacred thought, and his (later successful) attempt to wean me from a mere speculative, idealist, and lofty style of philosophy and to make me into a concrete thinker and a student of true scholarship and the social world. He writes to me from Triberg, a town in the Black Forest, on April 12, 1924:

I would find it regrettable if you always remained distant from things that you can approach more closely, and establish yourself as a pure Hebraist disdainful of European philosophy. You are just as much a hybrid as I, and the glow of the actual is not the halo that suits you. Precisely the fact that you are capable of philosophizing like Buber, or even like Scholem, is the danger to you as I see it, or perhaps a threatening temptation. But please believe me: the positive word is not ours; it has been lived out to such an extent that any part of it, whether truly prophetic or that of the martyr, is today unreal or romantic. At bottom you yourself have an aversion to the rosy religiosity of Buber. I know, moreover, that you are full of hesitations in this regard, and actually I fear only that an uncontrolled wave of enthusiasm could sweep you along. We have to remain secret, quietistic, inactive, a thorn in the side of others, preferring to drive them (with us) into despair rather than give them hope — that seems to me the only possible posture. If we want more, then that means, completely literally, to allow ourselves to be burned; but how can we manage that without a commitment to an Absolute?

This was a very decisive letter in my own development, and a significant manifestation of Kracauer's basic beliefs and attitudes.

2. Kracauer refers here to his critical review of Max Scheler's "Vom ewigen Menschen" ("Of the Eternally Human") in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*.

Having quoted this letter, which gives an indication of his overall philosophical outlook, I now want to make some general remarks about Kracauer's lifelong intellectual profile. He wanted to be a "thorn," what you might call today somewhat vulgarly a "debunker," or a "gadfly," as he called it. In a similar spirit, I once applied the term *scandalon* to Adorno. Kracauer was a real irritant to heroes of high culture, as can be seen from his early reviews of Ernst Bloch, Max Scheler, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and others, or from his descriptions of "low" culture (the lifestyle of white-collar employees). He was also a thorn in the side of middle-brow taste, as is documented by the entire corpus of his cinema reviews. He had a good ear for the imminent danger posed by the decomposition of German bourgeois society and the emergence of German fascism in all spheres of public life. And he remained such a thorn (a "debunker," if you will) in the legitimate sense. He continued that role in this country. Good examples are his analysis of Nazi propaganda films in the 1940s, his comments on empirical-research methodology in the 1950s with the Bureau of Applied Social Research, even his challenges to the dominant theories of film as well as history. In short, he was an absolutely incorruptible critic, no matter whether he was dealing with "high" issues like philosophy or "low" issues such as tourism. As a critic he always maintained, I would say, an attitude of extreme commitment and, at the same time, a constant unwillingness to surrender to any absolutes; he always raised doubts, always retained this critical attitude. In this sense, he was really a super-member of our school of critical thinking.

Let me come back to another important characteristic of Kracauer which must already have shone through some of the letters I have quoted: his capacity for lasting friendship. During my long life, I don't remember any other person with whom relations remained so free from ambivalence, as in my friendship with Friedel Kracauer. And I think that this was mutual. He invited solidarity. I want to give you an example. On August 27, 1922, he wrote a very critical review of Ernst Bloch's book *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution* (*Thomas Münzer as Theologian of the Revolution*) for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. And Bloch answered in a very bitter, sarcastic, and almost insulting tone, whereupon I broke off my friendship with Bloch, as Kracauer, of course, did too. It was an almost natural response for me to say: if you insult my friend, you are no longer my friend. The same thing happened a couple of years later when Kracauer was very critical of the stylistic sense and

mentality underlying Buber's and Rosenzweig's Bible translation in a review for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on April 27, 1926. Buber wrote a bitter article berating Kracauer in a tone which was anything but tasteful. Again I did the same thing: I broke off my relationship with Rosenzweig by attacking Buber, to whom I had a very ambivalent relationship, in a letter. It was only toward the tragic end of Rosenzweig's life that we were reconciled.

It was also natural for me to do whatever was in my power to help Friedel come to the United States. Nothing was as difficult. It was not easy to bring threatened people over to America, and Friedel and Lili Kracauer were a difficult case. My file of correspondence was about as tall as I am.

I will tell you a charming anecdote. Kracauer and I never forgot each other's birthday, and we always gave each other books; this was preceded by a long correspondence about what book we wished. Friedel died, as you know, in November 1966. My birthday falls on November third. Some time after Friedel's death I received a letter from a book-dealer in New York — I was at that time in Berkeley — saying he wanted to fulfill the last wish of Friedel Kracauer and was sending me the book I had wanted for my birthday. And so my living friendship with Friedel lasted beyond his death.

I have already mentioned the transformation of our relationship from the more formal "Sie" to the informal "Du," from "You" to "Thou." It was I who had the nerve to propose this change to Friedel, rather than waiting for him to offer it to me, which would have been the proper way since he was, after all, much older than I — and at the time the difference of ten years between us was enormous, although it became less important over the years. He writes on February 12, 1922, these charming lines:

Now you have released the word [the familiar "Du"], this truly wonderful word, from hiding, and my heartfelt thanks to you for having done so. I am happy about it. The familiar thou does not always have meaning between people, but with people like us, it is a gift, fulfillment, promise, full of magic and tenderness.

That was my friend Friedel Kracauer. So finally we — Meyer Schapiro and the Lowenthals — got Friedel to the United States. But it was a long and hard attempt, and I'm glad to be able to mention it. Meyer is not here, but I spoke to him yesterday by telephone and told him that

I would read the following letter. In the fall of 1938, when Schapiro was writing to Kracauer (about arranging his immigration to the United States), I also wrote to him. Here is one of the few instances in which I will allow myself to quote from a letter of mine:

You can be assured that we are not neglecting your cause, and that in Schapiro you have a man who is really taking an interest in your fate. Unfortunately, nothing has yet become definite, but I am not giving up hope. Neither is Schapiro, with whom you are probably in direct contact anyway.

But, as I said, it took three long years before we finally got Friedel into this country. Finally, on April 30, 1941, we were able to welcome him and Lili in the harbor of New York.

Life in the United States (about which Kracauer wrote to Adorno upon his arrival that it was practically the end of the world) was a very productive period in his life, as you know. He wrote his two great books on film (*From Caligari to Hitler* and *Theory of Film*). He wrote the book on the philosophy of history (*History. The Last Things Before the Last*), which was almost finished at his death. At that time he was involved with American institutions: the Museum of Modern Art, and the Bollingen Foundation. When I became research director for the *Voice of America*, he worked for the State Department. Later he worked for the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University. Here, in America, he really was able to live out one of his early ideals: to be a constructive adviser rather than an "actor" (remember his early letter concerning the transition to a secularized style of sacred thought). He once said jokingly to me, using a Yiddish word: What I really want to be is an *Eitzesgeber*, a "man who gives advice." And this is an ideal that he truly fulfilled despite his many struggles in the United States.

What he meant by that was something I emphasized before: commitment. But not absolute commitment, because he wanted to avoid the finality of an absolute commitment. He called himself homeless in a way. In October 1923, to jump back for a moment in history, on the occasion of my wedding to my first wife, I received a letter of congratulations in an envelope decorated by Kracauer and with the return address: "General Headquarters of the Welfare Bureau for the Transcendentally Homeless"; and below, again in Teddie's handwriting: "Kracauer and Wiesengrund. Agents of the Transcendentally Homeless. General Management in Frankfurt Oberrad." That, of course, was an allusion to Lukács's

Theory of the Novel. But “transcendentally homeless” is the true category for Siegfried Kracauer.

As I held a position in the State Department at the *Voice of America*, Friedel Kracauer was able to do some valuable work for my office, which brought him into contact with the great men in the sociology department at Columbia University, with my close friends Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton (Paul unfortunately died all too early), and finally with “youngsters” like Charles Y. Glock, who later became director of the Bureau of Applied Social Research and my colleague and friend at Berkeley. At the Bureau, Kracauer wrote a book with Paul Berkman called *Satellite Mentality*. The book proposed a new method of analyzing interviews with refugees from the east-European “satellite” countries — interviews that I originally organized for the State Department in the 1950s and that Kracauer was re-analyzing. If you read that book, which was published in 1958, today, in 1990, you can see Kracauer’s ingenuity in bringing to the fore the same ideological element of dissent that we have since learned to take cognizance of in the events which have shaped eastern Europe during the last few months. A few years later, at the suggestion of the research managers at the Bureau of Applied Social Research, with whom he had long discussions, Kracauer wrote an essay that criticized their research enterprise as lacking a historical or truly political foundation. It had the title *On the Relation of Analysis to the Situational Factors in Case Studies*. Here Friedel tried to stay as close as possible to what he believed was the research jargon of sociological empirical research. But what he really meant was: you have to watch out that you don’t do research in a vacuum but in a concrete political and cultural context.

Let me now quote from a few letters about his life in America. He says, for instance, just before beginning a job for the government:

I am glad that I can give you a brief hint of my situation before you depart for such a long time. (How horrible to have to talk about such things.) Of course, I know that you, even if you don’t say a word about it, are doing everything in your power [to help me], but, on the other hand, you will understand that the necessity of my securing an existence here by the end of the year forces me to speak. What would seem to me the best solution, for myself as well as for the *Voice [of America]* (and for the social sciences in general), would be if I got the chance to work with you on the qualitative analysis of your research problems.

In part he was able to do so. What is more important is that from the mid-1950s on he was finishing his book on film. He wrote to me on March 15, 1957:

My book is progressing very well and I am free as a bird until the end of April, aside from the work for [the] Bollingen [Foundation]. To the extent that the manuscript is here, I am reasonably satisfied. What will happen in the summer, we do not yet know. We would love, God knows, to see you in July, but whether we will be here? I just don't know. Meanwhile, I read Marcuse's Freud-book [*Eros and Civilization*] and was pleased with the attacks on [Erich] Fromm and others. Otherwise, it's nothing special. Still, I do wish that his utopia with Orpheus and Narcissus were already here and that the pleasure principle had triumphed.

This last sentence is a relapse into the refreshingly abrasive style of the young Friedel Kracauer. Ten months later, on January 26, 1958, he writes:

My own work on the manuscript is proceeding very nicely. I now have somewhat more than two-thirds of the final draft, with all the footnotes already in order. Unfortunately, I have to break for about fourteen days in February for a report on the Bureau. Well, you have to take these things in your stride.

In reality he loved his work for the Bureau very much. And he loved the meetings with Lazarsfeld, with Robert Merton, with Glock and the others. For example, he writes to me on May 3, 1958:

I would have written you one of these days in any case, because I had the Bureau send you a copy of the paper that I had to write toward the end of my year of consulting work there. It is, I think, an important paper, with a detailed insider critique on the usual research procedures. (Teddie sent me months ago an essay he wrote, "Sociology and Empirical Research," which, naturally, makes the same critique in general. But it can't have any influence because he: 1. is completely unfamiliar with the methods here, and, 2. is allegedly too "philosophical.") I think you will agree. My paper, entitled "On the Relation of Analysis to the Situational Factors in Case Studies," will serve as a basis for discussion and thus perhaps effect a small change in training and research design. Your biography paper is mentioned in it too (in praise, of course).

Well, that was comforting to me. A few weeks later, on June 29, 1958, he wrote: "We had a special meeting on my paper, with Merton attending, and the upshot is that in the fall an attempt will be made to try out what I'm suggesting in a concrete case."

I asked Charles Y. Glock, who later founded an institute at Berkeley similar to the one at Columbia University, about the Bureau's relations with Kracauer, and he responded just two weeks ago. Let me quote briefly from his letter; it is quite interesting.

Friedel was not especially hard up for money, as I recall, but he was lonely and longing for something to do which would give him an opportunity to exercise his intellect. Presumably, he reported to me, and probably also arranged for me to meet him. . . . *Satellite Mentality* was conceived by you to get Friedel involved in a Bureau project.

In the midst of all this, Friedel and I became friends. Margret and I would have dinner with him and Lili. I also took Friedel as an informal advisor. We would meet privately for lunch and I would consult with him about Bureau problems. . . .

Just when the idea was conceived for Friedel to do a think piece on the Bureau, I cannot say for sure. It could possibly have been before *Satellite Mentality*, but I am more inclined to think that it was after. In any case, he was commissioned, probably by me, to do participant observation on Bureau projects and the Bureau's management and to write down his reflections and suggestions for possible changes in the Bureau's course. He did sit in on at least one meeting with the Bureau's board of governors. He also sat in on the meetings which I had with the Associate Directors — De Brunner, Lazarsfeld, Merton, and Hyman.

So much for Friedel's relationship with the Bureau of Applied Social Research. Now we move closer to the last phase, the phase in which he conceived and wrote his last book on the philosophy of history. He wrote me on October 29, 1960:

On the trip I meditated extensively on history, but nothing has yet been put on paper. My new ideas need time, and I have to read a great deal as well. I feel very passionate about my attempt to break into this field. What might come of it, I don't yet know; perhaps a series of interconnected essays.

In the early 1960s, the Kracaues often vacationed in Rome. In October 1964 he wrote me:

We spent a couple of weeks, the last ones, in Rome again — the third time. This time it was nicer than ever before — perhaps because we approached it reasonably. We limited sightseeing to the mornings and stayed afternoons in the hotel, where I made notes for my book in the spacious bar. . . .

(By the way, I cannot remember a single thing I wrote in my Frankfurt period for which I didn't make notes sitting at a table in a café.) Kra-cauer continued:

There is much to say about the tourists — many French, Japanese, and Indian, not to mention the American groups. One gets a strong sense of the rise of a new stratum, not yet subject to sociological definition — something between worker and the middle class of old — a nondescript mass that now wants to have its share in culture too, but doesn't yet know how. The social changes now underway are truly enormous.

Here we see Friedel's unerring instinct for what is in the air. And again a year later he wrote about another Italian sojourn in October 1965:

Our three months in Europe were nice and full, even if the weather wasn't exactly the best — it has become Americanized too — and the hordes of buses and tours make traveling increasingly impossible for private persons like ourselves. Another couple of years and individuals won't be able to travel at all. Or one has to look for new ways to squeeze through. For example, you are in Florence and want to have another look at a couple of pictures in the Uffizi: no dice. Fortunately, a few other things there — like the Masaccios in St. Carmine — aren't yet on the travel agencies' listings. But I have no doubt they will be soon.

And we all know they are!

I come to the end. I will read to you the last letter Friedel ever wrote to me, and one of his first letters, and you will see that this was a man of character who never changed in his basic attitudes toward the lived life of the spirit. On October 29, 1966, he wrote:

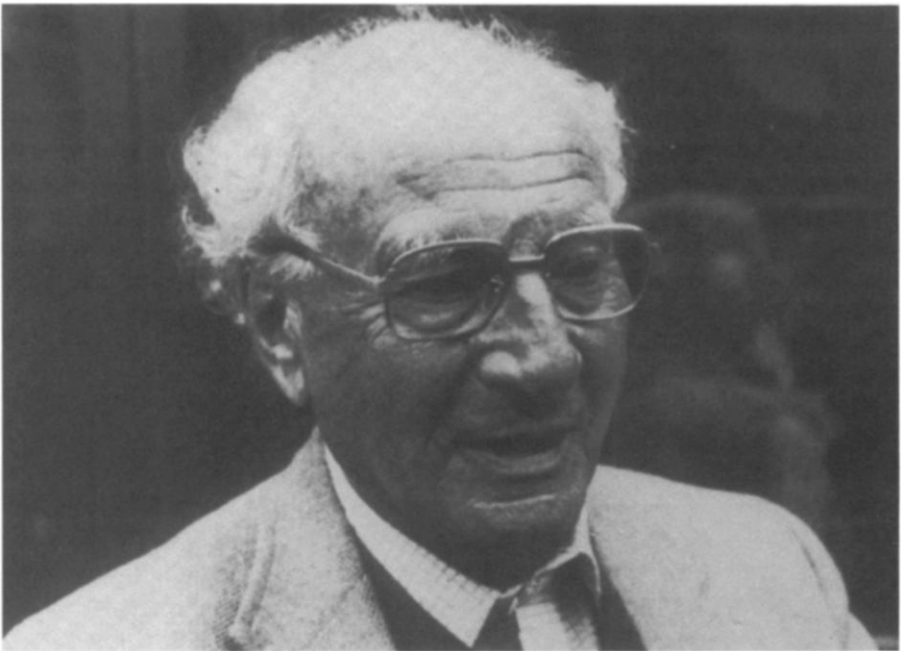
The last three weeks before our return (October 4) we spent in Rome, which we especially enjoyed this time — not the least because of a few interesting conversations. It was a nice summer, all in all. I think we are now well rested, and I even worked a bit on

my book, which is coming slowly along. "Steady does it," a taxi driver once told me. I am not yet out of the tunnel, but way off in the distance something like a dim light is already visible. . . .

This "steady does it," this tenacity, this uncompromising commitment to his work and his convictions, is the same Friedel Kracauer who in one of his earliest letters to me, on October 2, 1921, wrote:

When there is no unconditional "must" behind work, it is ultimately senseless. Heaven spare me the futile exertion. I really am in a very critical phase: either nothing will come, or the great, necessary word will. There is nothing at all one can do about it, one simply must wait, whether it comes or whether it doesn't.

The other day somebody asked me, "Who was the most interesting man you ever met?" And without wanting to diminish any of my other friends, I have to say that I answered without hesitation: "Friedel Kracauer."



Leo Lowenthal.

Siegfried Kracauer and Meyer Schapiro: A Friendship

Mark M. Anderson

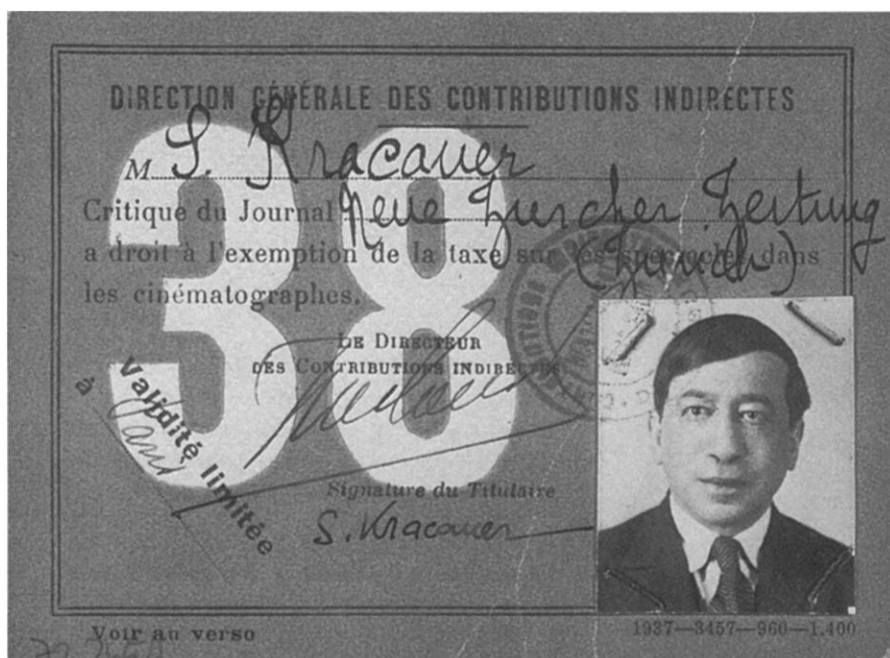
While traveling in Germany in the early 1930s, Meyer Schapiro* came across the name Siegfried Kracauer as the author of an article about Greta Garbo in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. What struck Schapiro, he told me, was Kracauer's unusual approach — his use of a philosophical, phenomenological vocabulary to talk sensitively about this beautiful woman and exploited film star. He was also impressed by Kracauer's early sociological study *Die Angestellten* (*The White-Collar Workers*):

In the first place, I'm very happy that there is this celebration for Kracauer. He should become better known, not only because of his actual gifts as a writer and as a man with important interests in sociology and theory and philosophy . . . but also [because] he's an example of the type of nonacademic man who is saturated with

* Emeritus Professor of Art History at Columbia University, Meyer Schapiro played a crucial (and generally unrecognized) role in the late 1930s in bringing Siegfried Kracauer and his wife to the United States. Poor health prevented Professor Schapiro from participating in the Kracauer conference at Columbia in March 1990, but from conversations with him as well as from his thirty-year correspondence with Kracauer, I was able to piece together the remarkable story of human solidarity that initiated their friendship. The following remarks are taken from the talk I gave in Professor Schapiro's place at the Columbia conference; in a few places they have been expanded to include important letters not available to me at the time. Apart from some light editing and the addition of the notes, no attempt has been made to alter the spoken character of the talk. My thanks go to Professor Schapiro and the Deutsches Literaturarchiv (Marbach am Neckar) for permission to quote from the Kracauer *Nachlaß*. I also gratefully acknowledge the support of the Marbacher Wilhelm-Merton-Stipendium der Frankfurter Metallgesellschaft AG— M. M. A.



Kracauer with his mother, Rosette Kracauer, around 1900.



Kracauer's press-card for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* in 1938.

the standards of German scholarship without belonging to one of the professions. [His work is] nearer to journalism in one sense but not news gathering, rather news analysis, which isn't typical of news gathering. . . . This impressed me very much, especially in reading *Die Angestellten* and the effort to understand what was going on in Germany, in which he already foresaw the victory of Hitler through a cultural analysis of the leisure habits of the lower-middle classes. I thought that was a splendid approach, far beyond anything that I came upon in American sociological writing.

Schapiro was so impressed, in fact, that at the suggestion of a mutual friend, the art historian Richard Krautheimer, he wrote to Kracauer, and the two began a correspondence that would last more than thirty years until Kracauer's death in 1966. In the late 1930s, when Kracauer's position in France had become imperiled, Schapiro began contacting institutions, wealthy friends, patrons, and immigration officials to help bring him and his wife Lili to this country. Responding to a suggestion by Max Horkheimer, then director of the Institute for Social Research that had taken up quarters at Columbia University, Schapiro convinced the Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art to commission Kracauer with the study of German propaganda and the Nazi war film that would later be part of his most famous "American" work, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*. Let me quote from a letter of July 1938 in order to give some idea of the kind of activity Schapiro was engaged in, at great cost to his own work, on behalf of a man whose work he admired but whom he had still not yet met personally:

Dear Mr. Kracauer, . . . I had given up hope of anything from the Film Library [of the Museum of Modern Art] in the immediate future, since their arrangements are made seasonally. . . . But I hope, through McIlhenny [curator of Decorative Arts at the Philadelphia Museum] or others, to push the plan again during the winter. . . . I am glad you have met Iris Barry [curator of the Film Library]; it is much easier to help someone you have met face to face than a stranger recommended by friends, and I know that Miss Barry is very responsive to personal impressions. If you can meet Alfred Barr through her or through Krautheimer (the Barrs are in Paris), that would help even more. As for McIlhenny, my relations with him have always been cordial, but I am not really a friend of his, and I hesitate to make to him the kind of suggestions that I would make without second thought to some others. He is a terribly rich young

man, naive about all social and economic matters, but redeemed by his enthusiasm for art and his respect for creative minds, whatever their tendency. If I knew him better, I would simply shake him down and force him to subsidize you and a half dozen others; but I haven't reached that stage with anyone, unfortunately, and must depend on delicate hints and all kinds of devious manoeuvres. . . . Even if he doesn't seem to respond at once, do not give up all hope. Undoubtedly, he will be approached again about you, and perhaps he will give something to the film-library for your other book. Cordially, Meyer Schapiro.¹

Most of their correspondence from this period is dominated by the urgent necessity of arranging for immigration papers and money to travel to America. Occasionally, however, they engaged each other on substantive cultural matters that brought out their different backgrounds and perspectives. Kracauer was older and already famous, though humbled by the poverty and isolation of exile in Paris. He came from a well-to-do, assimilated Jewish family, was steeped in German philosophy and art, and although interested in American mass culture, felt himself to be deeply European. Schapiro was a so-called *Ostjude* (Eastern Jew) — born in Russia, his first language Yiddish — whom fate had brought to the United States at age three. But by the time he began corresponding with Kracauer, Schapiro was an American, imbued with the democratic, populist beliefs of his teacher John Dewey.

Kracauer's review of the exhibition "Trois siècles d'Art aux Etats-Unis" in the Jeu de Paume museum in Paris provided an ideal opportunity for them to confront these differences in a friendly spirit. Kracauer had singled out the tendency among American artists toward rectilinear, unadorned forms — whether in a painting by Edward Hopper, an architectural sketch by Frank Lloyd Wright, or anonymous gravestone inscriptions, signs, and wood carvings — and interpreted this tendency as the will "to free oneself from the pressure of religious and political mythologies." In his reading, "mythology" becomes a peculiarly European phenomenon, "geometry" (by which he means not only rectilinear forms, but also a dispassionate, objective manner

1. Unless otherwise noted, quotations are from the Kracauer-Schapiro correspondence now located in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach. Schapiro's letters are all in English; Kracauer's early letters are in German, those written in France during the war are in French, and all subsequent letters are in English. All translations are my own; spelling, punctuation, and occasional grammatical errors in the English letters have been left unchanged.

of rendering them) an expression of modern American democratic impulses as well as, more ambivalently, of the “ice-cold” reality of “rational capitalism.” Kracauer writes:

Edward Hopper observes a lighthouse in the pitiless light of morning; Preston Dickinson depicts and immobilizes a chaotic conglomeration of New York rooftops with (a familiar reproach) scientific objectivity. . . . [Here] geometry has a thoroughly anti-mythological intention. . . . This is what the world looks like, the paintings appear to say, so cruel and ice-cold is its nature when the veil is stripped off.²

When Kracauer sent Schapiro a copy of this review, the young Columbia professor of art history responded:

It is interesting for me, as it would be for any American, to read your European response to American art, especially what you say about the demythologized vision of Americans. . . . Your article, if it were known to [our critics], would excite them very much; the importance you give in painting to our urban folk-artists and to the recent cold realism, and the general optimistic tone, would be welcome here.

But here Schapiro registers an “American” objection:

It is true that we lack a traditional mythology in the European sense, but we have gradually created another one, full of illusions and rationalizations, which plays a profound role . . . in American life. In the last few years, terms like “The American Dream,” “The Forgotten Man,” “The New Deal,” the “Folklore of Capitalism” have become standard names for a rich body of mythical beliefs, some of them typically American, others common to the lower middle class all over the world. . . . There is . . . in this American mythology a genuine core of popular poetry and folk wisdom, which I think you will like very much. Carl Sandburg published two years [ago] a beautiful book of popular sayings and ideas which he wove into free verse, without losing the everyday flavor. It is called “The People.

2. First published in *Das Werk* in 1938, the review has been recently reprinted in the three-volume edition of Kracauer's essays, *Schriften* 5, ed. Inka Mülder-Bach (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1990) 304-12, which is the edition quoted here. It is worth noting that the exhibition included a section on film organized by John Abbot and Iris Barry of the Museum of Modern Art. Kracauer was thus reviewing the work of potential patrons, whose Film Library he praises at the end of his analysis as “performing pioneer work” and “destined to become the center of research” in America.

Yes." If you are interested, I should be glad to send it to you. I know of nothing, beside Walt Whitman and Mark Twain, which gives so true and rich an account of the traditional middle class sensibility. . . . [But] this is too much already, I'm afraid. I hope we can continue this in New York. Cordially, Meyer Schapiro.

Two weeks later Kracauer wrote back, mixing the polite and familiar salutations in response to Schapiro's engaging letter: "Sehr geehrter lieber Herr Schapiro, I thank you most gratefully for your letter of August 23 and for your insightful remarks about American mythologies. What you write in this regard is infinitely valuable to me and naturally makes my article appear completely as that of a European outsider." Kracauer then turns this shortcoming around, implicitly invoking his notion of "extraterritoriality"³ as partial justification of his method:

Of course, since I had to be an outsider in this exhibition in the Jeu de Paume because of my actual lack of knowledge about America, I consciously took on this role and treated the exhibition with the reserve and politeness that one uses with a foreigner [einem Fremden]. . . . Your letter has made me double aware that I would have written quite differently from within a perspective of American life.

It was in part because Americans like Meyer Schapiro were in contact with Kracauer when he was in Paris, assisting him not only with the bureaucratic aspects of emigration but also with the intellectual and cultural transition that a move to America would require, that he did not give up hope in the following desperate years. Walter Benjamin, whom Kracauer saw regularly in Paris in this period and whom Schapiro met in 1940, did not share this hope. "[Benjamin] expressed great uncertainty about how he would like America," Schapiro told me. He asked Benjamin at the time, "What will happen to you with all these bastards around?" He [Benjamin] didn't know. He left, and we didn't see each other again. And of course you know what happened." In June 1940, Kracauer and his wife left Paris for Marseille in the hope of obtaining transit visas through Spain and Portugal for the United States. There they saw Benjamin and his wife almost daily and endured the same misery and frustration as

3. For an illuminating and thorough discussion of this notion, see Martin Jay, "The Extraterritorial Life of Siegfried Kracauer," *Salmagundi* 31-32 (Fall 1975-Winter 1976), repr. in *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 152-97.

they did — conditions that would culminate in Benjamin's suicide in late September. In a letter to the Schapiros of 17 October 1940, written in French for the benefit of the government censor, Kracauer gives a detailed portrait of their bureaucratic and emotional plight:

Chers amis, We have left you without news for months [which] have been extremely severe for us. . . . After resolving numerous difficulties which I will refrain from recounting, we finally had our [immigration] papers together. But right at that moment Spain declared it would no longer recognize American travel permits. That was at the end of September. Henceforth one can only cross Spain to Lisbon if one possesses a valid national passport; travel permits like ours which give us the status of stateless persons are rejected. . . . You have probably learned through our common friends at the Institute that Walter Benjamin killed himself (inadvertently or deliberately) on 26 September at Port-Bou; this is a fact which characterizes our situation, illuminates our legitimate despair. Benjamin, who had the same stateless papers that we have, surely wasn't able to cross the border; and without doubt he foresaw, as we do, the horrible consequences.

Seven months later, after countless appeals by Schapiro and Leo Lowenthal to American immigration officials, Kracauer and his wife obtained the necessary transit visas to Portugal and arrived safely in New York on 25 April 1941. There Schapiro and Kracauer met and developed a personal relationship, this time in English, the younger professor of art history supporting the older European's determination to adapt to a new language and a new life in this country. "Dear friends," Kracauer wrote later that August in his new (and still imperfectly mastered) language, "I am so worried about myself that I didn't write to you much earlier, and even now that I start on I feel rather unable to compose the big letter I wanted to send you. English writing yet means hard work to me, and I only hope you will not be too sensible with respect to my funny style." Kracauer could have written in German or French, of course, but he realized that if he were to make his way he needed to master the new language as quickly as possible. "What a pity! Each little step forward, formerly performed without any pain, is now the result of a tremendous effort. I have got to train myself again."

Schapiro continued to be of assistance in the following years: he provided introductions to many people, wrote letters of recommendation for grants, and, because Kracauer's speech impediment prevented him

from teaching, assisted him in getting a consultant position at the Bollingen Foundation. Their correspondence is understandably thinner in this period, since they could see each other regularly and talk about their work over a meal. However, during the summer the Schapiros lived on a farm in Vermont, and this gave the two friends an occasion to correspond at length about substantive issues. In June 1942 Kracauer finished his first American work, the study of propaganda and the Nazi war film commissioned by the Film Library that would later be included as an appendix to *From Caligari to Hitler*. Schapiro had already read portions of the manuscript, and on August 12 he responded to the printed version with a four-page, single-spaced letter that bears extensive quotation:

Dear Friedel, I was very happy to receive your book, the first fruits of your year in America, and the promise of work to come. It reads very well, with a smoothness that I envy you, and is full of fine metaphors and insights. . . . It is hard to believe that a German has written this in English. It gives me the greatest confidence in your future as a writer in this country.

However, after praising the analysis of *Triumph of the Will* as well as the theoretical method in the appendix, Schapiro passes quickly to an extensive criticism of Kracauer's political statements. "I think [your book] contains too much anti-Nazi propaganda," he begins. "Doesn't everyone know that the Nazis lie and that they try to cover up their real aims? . . . I should like to have read more analysis and comparison with other war films, of other countries and other wars, or a more detailed account of the effects of newsreels in general; and above all, more reference to the effects or intended effects of the Nazi war films on the audiences, rather than on critical, informed people like yourself." Schapiro, the editor of *Marxist Quarterly*, was less inclined to let bourgeois democracy off the hook than was Kracauer, the recent beneficiary of American hospitality and, like other Jewish-German refugees, a willing participant in American defense programs. (Indeed, Kracauer filed a version of his study of Nazi propaganda with the State Department.) For Schapiro the continuities between Nazi and bourgeois manipulation of information through aesthetic spectacle were more striking than the discrepancies:

[A]lmost everything you say about [Nazi] pseudo-reality and propaganda vs. information seems to me to describe a fully developed or extreme case of situations which we see clearly enough already in our own society. . . . When I read your beautiful account of the

Nuremberg film and the congress [in Leni Riefensthal's *Triumph of the Will*], I imagine that the same thing might happen here, that a big parade of festivity might be staged and designed partly for reproduction in a film; the Catholic Church has done this in a film of its liturgy and ceremonies; to say that life has been converted into a pseudo-reality for filming is to overlook that the occasion was itself a "spectacle," consisting of a vast show and an audience, in other words was an "artistic" moment in life itself.

Kracauer's description of the abstract patterns in the mass rallies in Riefensthal's film allows Schapiro an interesting art-historical digression on "despotic" arts, "arts of power." Repetition, he notes, "is notoriously a device of absolute power," as in "the endless rows of columns in Egypt, India, baroque Italy, Versailles. . . ." This same device, he adds, is used by contemporary newspapers and war documentaries: "We have the same feeling when we see photos of the interior of a factory with hundreds of planes or trucks lined up on the floor." Interestingly, Schapiro sees modern art as fundamentally antagonistic to this despotic organization of images:

Such repetition is fundamentally opposed to the character of modern abstract art, of which the first principle is randomness, irreducibility of the pattern to a repeated motif, maximum freedom, unpredictable relations, contrasted units: anything but ornament (modern architecture, sister of abstract painting, absolutely forbids ornaments; the Nazis revive ornament; the Americans and British preserve its decadent forms).

Whether Schapiro knew it or not, his comments came close to Kracauer's own understanding of certain types of film (such as American slapstick) capable of exposing the random, contingent, indeterminate "flow of life itself," an idea Kracauer would later use as the basis for his *Theory of Film*.⁴

Schapiro's main objection to Kracauer's study concerns his characterization of the German people. "I am shocked," he declares, "to

4. For instance, in the review of American art mentioned in note 2, Kracauer writes: "Especially slapstick, that pure American genre, systematically pits chance [*Zufall*] against destiny, reduces unjust tyranny to absurdity, strips reality of its disguises with a few movements of the hand" (311). Schapiro's notion of a non-ornamental, random abstraction in modern painting bears interestingly on Kracauer's concept of realism in *Theory of Film* (1960), which, contrary to a frequent critical misunderstanding, does not concern mimetic reproduction of surface reality but rather the random, "unshaped" contingency of existence, a concept close to the *Lebensphilosophien* of Simmel and Scheler.

read of the ‘*natural* inclination of Germans for thinking in anti-rational mythological terms.’” “[F]or me, habits of thought are cultural and historical, not ‘*natural*.’” What about German technology, organization, Helmholtz and Co.? he asks. Ethnopsychological characterizations of the Germans as “inherently irrational” reproduce the Nazis’ own racist thinking and veil the fact that “the German economy is the most powerful in the world next to the USA, and that the German worker is probably the most skilled in the whole world.” More seriously, however, such characterizations can lead to the practical error of confusing political passivity with “the true energies of the German people,” which already informs political discussions of how Germany is to be treated after the war. There are basically two types of “planners,” Schapiro writes, those who believe that the German people are “too active and expansive and have to be chained forever,” and those who think they are “always yearning for discipline and authority,” so that another absolute rule will have to be given them to replace Nazi dictatorship.

Here we come across a difference beyond contemporary politics to questions of origin, temperament, education — the difference (in part) between the Russian-Jewish immigrant community in New York and the Western Jewish bourgeoisie in Frankfurt. At the root of Schapiro’s objection is his firm belief in democracy and “the people,” no matter what political horrors are perpetrated in its name: “The conception of the ‘people’ implied in all these notions is to me a most distasteful, undemocratic and cynical one,” he protests. “The nation is divided into two groups, the people, usually passive, irrational, ignorant, easily led, and an élite, which is noble in the good countries and diabolical in the bad.” Similarly, Kracauer’s use of the term nihilist for the Nazis provokes Schapiro’s evocation of Kropotkin’s memoirs and the claim that the original nihilists “were the noblest, the most progressive elements in Russia in their day! The word ‘nihilist’ is a bogey, like ‘anarchist’ and ‘bolshevik’ some years ago; it conceals from us the real meaning and program of the specter.”

Kracauer, on the other hand, though intellectually influenced by Marx, remained an “extraterritorial” individualist his entire life, averse to all political organizations and without Schapiro’s faith in the people; if anything, he considered himself an “anarchist,” as he once wrote to Ernst Bloch, although he was, he felt, “skeptical enough to consider anarchism as it exists as a distortion of its intentions.”⁵ Moreover, Kracauer’s

5. As quoted in Jay 163. For a discussion of Kracauer’s politics, see Jay 160-65, and Adorno’s “The Curious Realist,” in this issue.

expulsion from Germany as a Jew naturally strengthened his estrangement from German traditions and his identification with bourgeois Enlightenment. His study of Nazi propaganda thus marks a turning point in his political sympathies, the Nazi idea of the German *Volk* coming to replace bourgeois capitalism as the primary target of critique. As he would later write in his book on expressionist cinema: "Irretrievably sunk into retrogression, the bulk of the German people could not help submitting to Hitler."⁶

For Schapiro, such characterizations represent "the devil theory of history all over again," which educated people especially have an obligation to resist: "At the present moment there is a tremendous pressure on all intellectuals to become propagandists," he notes. "To defeat Nazism, cold thinking is more urgent than enthusiasms and imprecations." Hence his final bracing criticism, which must have weighed heavily on Kracauer's thoughts in the next few years:

I look forward to your book on the pre-Nazi German film because I am convinced that it will tell us more about the Nazis than your present account of their film propaganda. The "secret" of the Nazis is to be found in the Weimar republic, I think, but in its full internal and international contexts.

Tell me what you think of these remarks, which I write down in unremitting friendship and in the hope that I can win you over. Cordially, Meyer.

Schapiro's response to Kracauer's first American work, which brings out so clearly their different characters and backgrounds, could easily have soured their relationship, especially given Kracauer's personal situation at the time. Schapiro could not have known that his response would reach Kracauer just as the latter learned that his mother and aunt had been deported to a concentration camp. But although exceptionally sensitive (Adorno described him as being "without skin"), Kracauer was always willing to accept criticism that would help him with his work. Indeed, he sent Schapiro two postcards thanking him for his letter and promising to respond in substance once he had recuperated from "personal worries." Whatever this response was, it has not survived in the correspondence; apparently it took place orally when Schapiro returned to New York.

6. *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947) 272.

In later years, once Kracauer had established himself as a "foreign guest" in the United States, one who could write about American film from "within a perspective of American life" without giving up the perspective of extraterritoriality, his intellectual relations with Schapiro subsided. Their correspondence becomes more personal — greetings from a European trip, the exchange of news at holidays, an occasional invitation to dinner, a note of thanks. As the years passed, Schapiro told me, Kracauer withdrew into his solitude, the *Einsamkeit* with which this shy and proud man, keenly conscious of his physical shortcomings, had always protected himself and which was so necessary to his work. Meyer Schapiro did the same. But for twenty-five more years, a third of his life, Kracauer was able to continue his work, which was what mattered to both of them.

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Agoraphobia: Spatial Estrangement in Georg Simmel and Siegfried Kracauer

Anthony Vidler

The street in the extended sense of the word is not only the arena of fleeting impressions and chance encounters but a place where the flow of life is bound to assert itself. Again one will have to think mainly of the city street with its ever-moving anonymous crowds. The kaleidoscopic sights mingle with unidentified shapes and fragmentary visual complexes and cancel each other out, thereby preventing the onlooker from following up any of the innumerable suggestions they offer. What appears to him are not so much sharp-contoured individuals engaged in this or that definable pursuit as loose throngs of sketchy, indeterminate figures. Each has a story, yet the story is not given. Instead, an incessant flow of possibilities and near-intangible meanings appears. This flow casts its spell over the *flâneur* or even creates him. The *flâneur* is intoxicated with life in the street — life eternally dissolving the patterns which it is about to form.

Siegfried Kracauer, "Once Again the Street"¹

It is well known that the rapid growth of big European cities toward the end of the 19th century, the transformation of the traditional city into what became known as *die Großstadt*, or metropolis, engendered not only a vital culture of modernism and avant-garde experiments but

1. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York and London: Oxford UP, 1960) 72.

also a culture of interpretation dedicated to the study and explanation of these new urban phenomena and their social effects. The disciplines of urban sociology and social psychology were only two academic results of this effort, which concentrated its attention on the radically new spatial and temporal conditions presented by the big cities. "Metropolis" by the First World War had become a word that implied both a physical site and a pathological state, which, for better or for worse (Carl Schorske, echoing Nietzsche, has characterized the sentiment "beyond good and evil"), epitomized modern life.²

In this essay, I am concerned with one aspect of this metropolitan discourse, the spatial and the architectural, in the context of a developing psychopathology of *Großstadt* in the writings of Georg Simmel and Siegfried Kracauer as they search in related but different ways for physical clues for understanding the social conditions of modernity. It will be my argument that, starting with the spatial sociology of Simmel, and developing in the paradigmatic spaces identified and described by his student, Kracauer, a unique sensibility of urban space is worked out, one that is neither used as an illustration of social history nor seen as a mechanical cause of social change, but rather a conception of space as reciprocally interdependent with society. This sensibility was by its very nature attached to certain kinds of social spaces that were, for social critics, inherently related to the social estrangement that seemed to permeate the metropolitan realm. In this sense, the critical strength of spatial paradigms was derived from their intimate association, if not complicity, with the material and psychological conditions of what Georg Lukács dubbed the "transcendental homelessness" of the modern world. For our writers, indeed, they existed as the tangible and residual forms of such alienation.

On one level, of course, it is already a commonplace of intellectual history to note the fundamental role of spatial form in the cultural analyses of social critics like Theodor Adorno, Siegfried Kracauer, and Walter Benjamin. The *intérieur* of Adorno, the site of his critique of Kierkegaard; the *Hotelhalle* of Kracauer, key to his reading of the detective novel as itself a reading of modern society; Benjamin's Parisian *passage*, the central figure of his interpretation of the 19th century as the prehistory of the 20th century: these emblematic spaces haunt

2. Carl E. Schorske, "The Idea of the City in European Thought," *The Historian and the City*, eds. Oscar Handlin and John Burchard (Cambridge: M.I.T., 1966) 95-114.

their texts as symbolizing every aspect of the nomadism, the consumer fetishism, and the displaced individualism of modern life in the great cities. Kracauer's often-cited observation, that "spatial images [*Raumbilder*] are the dreams of society. Wherever the hieroglyphics of these images can be deciphered, one finds the basis of social reality,"³ accurately captures the special nature of these spatial evocations: like hieroglyphs and their modern counterparts, dreams, these spaces stand ready to be deciphered. Neither simple illustrations nor fully analyzed examples, they seem to hover in a deliberately maintained state of half-reality, now glimpsed clearly, now lost in a cloud of metaphor.

And yet it is true that the central position of these spatial paradigms in the development of critical theory has more often than not been obscured by the equal and sometimes opposite role of temporality, of these theorists' concern with historical dialectics. Thus, Adorno's own critique of Benjamin's tendencies toward spatial reification, together with a tendency on the part of critics to follow Benjamin's preoccupation with memory and post-Bergsonian philosophy, has worked itself against the nuanced interpretation of any dominant spatial images. Perhaps, also, these images are themselves almost too self-evident, too overdetermined to be noticed as particular "constructions" in their own right. When Benjamin refers to arcades, or Kracauer to a hotel lobby, we tend to associate these forms immediately with their historical and physical referents, ignoring the degree of artifice and careful articulation that distinguishes Benjamin's *passage* or Kracauer's lobby from any that we might ourselves have known. For in a real sense these are purely textual spaces, designed, so to speak, by their authors; they possess an architectonics of their own, all the more particular for its ambiguous status between textual and social domains; they are buildings that themselves serve as analytical instruments. Here the appellation "Kracauer architect" both derives from and exceeds his actual career as a designer.

Agoraphobia

If we were to search for a common, explicit theme underlying the responses of writers and social critics to the big cities of the 19th century,

3. "Über Arbeitsnachweise," *Frankfurter Zeitung* 17 June 1930, ctd. in Karsten Witte, "Introduction to Siegfried Kracauer's 'The Mass Ornament,'" *New German Critique* 5 (Spring 1975): 63.

it would perhaps be found in the general concept of “estrangement”: the estrangement of the inhabitant of a city too rapidly changing and enlarging to comprehend in traditional terms; the estrangement of classes from each other, of individual from individual, of individual from self, of workers from work. These refrains are constant from Rousseau to Marx, Baudelaire to Benjamin. The commonplace of romantic irony and self-inquiry, as well as the leitmotif of the marxist critique of capital, the idea of estrangement, together with its cognate, alienation, were seen as both a psychological and a spatial condition. From Baudelaire’s laments over the disappearance of old Paris (“the form of a city changes, alas, more rapidly than a man’s heart”) to Engels’s wholesale critique of what he called “Haussmannization,” the physical fabric of the city was identified as the instrument of a systematized and enforced alienation. Here the political critique of urban redevelopment forced by the growth of cities came together with the nostalgia of cultural conservatives lamenting the loss of their familiar quarters, creating a general sense of distantness, of individual isolation, from the mechanical, mass-oriented, rapidly moving, and crowded metropolis.

This “spatial pathology” of the city, already fully present in the organicist metaphors of romantic, realist, and naturalist novelists alike, gained new and apparently scientific support in the last quarter of the 19th century with the gradual emergence of the disciplines of sociology, psychology, and psychoanalysis. The space of the new city was now subjected to scrutiny as a possible cause of an increasingly identified psychological alienation — the Vienna circle was to call it “de-realization” — of the metropolitan individual, and further, as an instrument favoring the potentially dangerous behavior of the crowd.

In this context, we might well begin a sociopsychological history of metropolitan space in the year 1871, not so much with the events of the Commune (although as the first political uprising against Haussmannization, this event is hardly without significance) but rather with the publication in that year of a short article by the Berlin psychologist Carl Otto Westphal, one which identified for the first time a condition of urban anxiety that he named *agoraphobia*.⁴ This psychological condition,

4. Carl Friedrich Otto Westphal, “Die Agoraphobie, eine neuropathische Erscheinung,” *Archiv für Psychiatrie und Nervenkrankheiten* 3 (1871): 138-61. Trans. in Westphal’s “*Die Agoraphobie*” (Lanham, Maryland: UP of America, 1988); see intro., “The Beginnings of Agoraphobia,” by Terry J. Knapp and Michael T. Schumacher. All subsequent references refer to this translation.

the symptoms of which included palpitations, sensations of heat, blushing, trembling, petrifying fear of dying, and extreme shyness, occurred when Westphal's patients were walking across open spaces or through empty streets, or anticipated such an experience with a dread of ensuing anxiety. Patients' fears were to a certain extent alleviated by companionship but were seriously exacerbated by the dimensions of the space, especially when there seemed to be no boundary to the visual field. Agoraphobia was, so to speak, an essentially spatial disease — indeed, only a year before, Benedikt had dubbed it *Platzschwindel*, or dizziness in public places. In later years it was variously to be called *Platzangst*, *peur d'espace*, *horreur de vide*, topophobia, and street fear.

Now the identification of such a phobia in the early 1870s would be significant enough in the history of urban pathologies, but its role in the spatial description of metropolitan ills was to prove even more interesting. For at the same time as the doctors were inquiring into its etiology and writing its pathographies, urbanists saw it as uniquely characterizing the psychological condition of the modern city as a whole, a disease, that is, endemic to urbanism and its effects. Thus, no more than eighteen years after the publication of Westphal's paper, agoraphobia was identified not simply as an affliction of the modern city dweller but as proof that contemporary cities were in their very form bad for health. This contention occurs in one of the seminal attacks on 19th-century urbanism, Camillo Sitte's *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*, published in Vienna in 1898. Sitte's well-known broadside against the development of the Ringstraße, couched in terms of an aesthetic analysis of the compositional qualities of traditional public spaces, found common cause with the psychologist in seeing the wide-open spaces created by modern functional and monumental demands as essentially anti-human:

Recently a unique nervous disorder has been diagnosed — “agoraphobia.” Numerous people are said to suffer from it, always experiencing a certain anxiety or discomfort whenever they have to walk across a vast empty place. Agoraphobia is a very new and modern ailment. One naturally feels very cozy in small, old plazas. . . . On our modern gigantic plazas, with their yawning emptiness and oppressive ennui, the inhabitants of snug old towns suffer attacks of this fashionable agoraphobia.⁵

5. Camillo Sitte, *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*, trans. George Collins and Christiane Crasemann Collins (New York: Random House, 1965) 45.

Underlining this point by couching it in the form of an aesthetic principle of monumental scale, Sitte proposed wittily that even statues might suffer from this disease, “that also some people formed out of stone and metal, on their monumental pedestals, are attacked by this malady and thus always prefer to choose a little old plaza rather than a large empty one for their permanent location.” The “universal trend of the time,” concluded Sitte, was the fear of open spaces.⁶

Sitte would, no doubt, have been happy to read the report of a lifelong sufferer of this modern disorder some twenty years later, one who, while managing to work through his fear of crowds, nevertheless continued to be adversely affected by spaces and their surrounding buildings: “An immense building or a high rocky bluff fills me with dread. However, the architecture of the building has much to do with the sort of sensation produced. Ugly architecture greatly intensifies the fear.” The author of this account, writing sixteen years after Sitte’s death, had evidently incorporated the lessons of the Viennese planner into his own self-analysis: “I would remark that I have come to wonder if there is real art in many of the so-called ‘improvements’ in some of our cities, for, judging from the effect they produce on me, they constitute bad art.”⁷

Sitte was, of course, ironically using the new psychology to “prove” an observation that had become commonplace in the aesthetic critique of urbanism since the brothers Goncourt had complained of the “American deserts” created by the cutting of the modern boulevards. But such a merging of aesthetic and psychological criteria in order to judge the qualities of modern urban space was, by the end of the 19th century, a serious preoccupation of philosophers and psychologists concerned with the apparently deleterious effects of scale, movement, and density on the population of the metropolis.

Spatial Estrangement

Writing in *The Philosophy of Money*, Georg Simmel saw such nervous diseases as pathological characteristics of modern cities; as David Frisby has observed, he staged the “sensitive and nervous modern person” in front of the backdrop of “jostling crowdedness and motley disorder,” and argued that an inner psychological barrier, a *distance* was essential

6. Sitte 45.

7. “Vincent: Confessions of an Agoraphobic Victim,” *American Journal of Psychology* 30 (1919): 297.

for protection against despair and unbearable intrusion. The “pathological deformation of such an inner boundary and reserve,” Simmel noted, “was called agoraphobia: the fear of coming into too close a contact with objects, a consequence of hyperaesthesia, for which every direct and energetic disturbance causes pain.”⁸ Simmel’s diagnosis was at once spatial and mental: the real cause of the neurosis was not, as Westphal and Sitte had implied, solely spatial. Rather, he argued, it was a product of the rapid oscillation between two characteristic moods of urban life: the over-close identification with things, and, alternately, too great a distance from them. In both cases, as well as with the symptoms of agoraphobia, the question was spatial at root, the result of the open spaces of the city, those very large expanses in which the crowds of the metropolis find their “impulsiveness and enthusiasm.”⁹

For Simmel, however, agoraphobia was only one of the new and profoundly disturbing illnesses to beset the inhabitant of the metropolis, exacerbated by its spatial and temporal conditions. In “Metropolis and Mental Life” (“Die Großstadt und das Geistesleben,”), he characterizes the “psychological foundation, upon which the metropolitan individuality is erected . . . the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli” as formed by the very space of the city:

To the extent that the metropolis creates these psychological conditions — with every crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational, and social life — it creates in the sensory foundations of mental life, and in the degree of awareness necessitated by our organization as creatures dependent upon differences, a deep contrast with the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory-mental phase of small town and rural existence. Thereby the essentially intellectualistic character of the mental life of the metropolis becomes intelligible as over against that of the small town, which rests more on feelings and emotional relationships.¹⁰

8. Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) 474.

9. Simmel, “Soziologie des Raumes,” *Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft* 27 (1903) 27–71, ctd. in Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer, and Benjamin* (Cambridge: M.I.T., 1986) 77.

10. Simmel, “Die Großstadt und das Geistesleben,” *Die Großstadt. Jahrbuch der Gehe-Stiftung* 9 (1903); trans. Edward A. Shils, *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1971) 325.

Thus the metropolitan inhabitant will be visual and intellectual as opposed to the oral and emotional country-dweller; reason will take the place of emotion; the conscious will dominate the unconscious; habits will be adaptable and shifting, rather than rooted and apparently eternal; the impersonal will overtake the personal; and objective distance will replace subjective empathy.

What Simmel sees as the characteristic stance of "slight aversion, mutual strangeness and repulsion" of one to another, the attempt to display difference in a setting that promotes only leveling, leads to "the strangest eccentricities, to specifically metropolitan extravagances of self-distanciation, of caprice, of fastidiousness," those "forms of 'being different' — of making oneself noticeable," later to be noted by Benjamin in the figure of the dandy and the *flâneur*. Again, Simmel insists that

the metropolis is the proper arena for this type of culture which has outgrown every personal element. Here in buildings and educational institutions, in the wonders and comforts of space-conquering technique, in the formations of social life and in the concrete institutions of the State is to be found such a tremendous richness of crystallizing, depersonalized cultural accomplishments that the personality can, so to speak, scarcely maintain itself in the face of it.¹¹

Simmel identified a fundamental cause of these differences in the nature of metropolitan temporality, the speeded-up tempo of life itself and its regulation according to the standards of "punctuality, calculability, and exactness." But this shift in lived time took place in space, and it was through the reading of urban space that Simmel proposed to comprehend the relationships between individuals and groups in the *Großstadt*.

In the last section of his *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* [*Sociology. Studies of the Forms of Societalization* (Leipzig, 1908)], entitled "Der Raum und die räumlichen Ordnungen der Gesellschaft" ("Space and the Spatial Organization of Society"), Simmel outlines his theory of spatial reading. Overturning a century of belief in the formative character of space, he asserted: "What creates the characteristic phenomena of neighborliness or strangeness is not spatial proximity or spatial distance but a specific psychological content."¹²

11. Simmel, "Die Großstadt" 338.

12. Simmel, *Soziologie*, chap. 9, cited in Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Social Theory of Georg Simmel* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1925) 144.

Space as the *expression* of social conditions is, then, open to the sociological gaze, as he noted in his excursus on "The Stranger": "Spatial relations are only the condition, on the one hand, and the symbol, on the other, of human relations."¹³

As effects of human activities, spaces are thus important indications of social processes, of the interaction of human beings conceived of and experienced as *space-filling*. The space between individuals, conceived as *empty space*, becomes immediately filled and animated by the reciprocal relations between individuals. In this way a concept such as "between" becomes both a spatial and a functional concept. As Nicholas Spykman has noted, Simmel's understanding of the functional reciprocity between two individuals was itself spatial, located between the two points in space occupied by the elements or individuals themselves: "it manifests itself in space, and the spatial form becomes therefore characteristic of the reciprocity as a whole."¹⁴

Simmel elaborates this notion by examining the mutual concepts of spatial exclusivity and spatial nonexclusivity. Some social forms, such as the state, manifest themselves in a unique and localized space that excludes the possibility of other forms inhabiting the same space. Other institutions, such as the church, are not so dependent upon locational fixity, allowing for the possibility of other churches operating on the same territory. Such an analysis provided Simmel with the means of characterizing social elements on a scale from socially exclusive to supraspatial.

In this context, the nature of sociological boundaries becomes important, the boundaries that define the limits of such territorial groupings; spatial unities may be identified that are framed by borders coincident with the locations of particular social groups. The spatial expression of sociological and functional unity alike, these borders were conceived by Simmel as intersecting social space like a network of imaginary boundary lines. As summarized by Spykman, Simmel's argument runs thus:

This border line has for the group a significance similar to that which a frame has for a picture. It fulfills the double function of separating it from the outside world and of closing it within itself. The frame announces that within the border line is a world subject to

13. Simmel, "The Stranger," *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans, ed., intro. Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1950) 402.

14. Spykman 145.

its own norms entirely divorced from the world outside. It symbolizes the self-sufficiency of the picture. A group is similarly characterized as an internal unity if its spatial extension is conceived of as bordered by a boundary line. On the other hand, the functional unity resulting from the reciprocities between the elements finds its spatial expression in that surrounding frame.¹⁵

Such frames or sociological boundaries, as they shift and change, are then indicative of the character of social relationships at any moment between, say, parents and children, members and nonmembers of clubs, diplomats and their host countries, states and their territory. A city like Venice, for example, circumscribed by an extremely narrow frame, finds release through its wide-flung expansion of trade and conquest. Whether or not a specific social group is tied to a fixed location then becomes important in analyzing the difference between nomadic and sedentary peoples, the operations of mobile as opposed to fixed capital, the relation between those who are truly "homeless" and those who are rooted in a "home." "Home" then emerges less as a concept of property than as a social and psychological locality that expresses the unity of the group and that also strengthens and preserves it. Simmel gives the example of the "men's house" in tribal communities, which is both expression and objectification of one group formation in the tribe.

Out of this understanding of the spatial dimensions of social order, Simmel goes on to construct a theory of estrangement that is closely tied to the space of metropolis. Defining the place and role of individuals in society as seen in their spatial relations of proximity and distance, Simmel treats a number of characteristic "types" — the poor, the adventurer, the stranger — as indicative of the power of space to determine role. Of these, the last, the stranger, is most exemplary. If, Simmel states, wandering equals the *liberation* from every given point in space and is hence the conceptual opposite of *fixation*, then the sociological form of the stranger combines these two characteristics in one: that is, the stranger is not the "wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow but the person who comes today and stays tomorrow." Fixed within a particular spatial group, the stranger is one who has not belonged from the beginning. "In the stranger," Simmel concludes, "are organized the unity of nearness and remoteness of every human relation," in such a way that in relation to the stranger, "distance means that he who is close by is far,

15. Spykman 147.

and strangeness means that he who also is far is actually near.”¹⁶ Here Simmel anticipates Freud’s reflections on that form of estrangement known as the uncanny, where relations of the familiar and the unfamiliar — *heimlich* and *unheimlich* — become ambiguous and merge with one another. Simmel, the epitome of the stranger, cultivated, urban, and Jewish, who was for this reason excluded from the normal academic career of his contemporaries Weber and Dilthey, thus defines the role of being at once strange and estranged in the money economy of capitalism.

But estrangement is not confined to the strangers in the metropolis. For Simmel, the very nature of social relations forces distance and thus alienation, for reasons of everyday functioning and self-defense. Distance is first and foremost a product of the omnipotence of sight in the city; as opposed to the knowledge of individuals based on intimacy and oral communication in a small community, metropolitan connections are rapid, glancing, ocular:

Social life in the large city as compared with the towns shows a great preponderance of occasions to *see* rather than to *hear* people. . . . Before the appearance of omnibuses, railroads and streetcars in the nineteenth century, men were not in a situation where for periods of minutes or hours they could or must look at each other without talking to one another.

The greater perplexity which characterizes the person who only sees, as contrasted to the one who only hears, brings us to problems of the emotions of modern life; the lack of orientation in the collective life, the sense of utter lonesomeness, and the feeling that the individual is surrounded on all sides by closed doors.¹⁷

Here the agoraphobia of the public realm becomes transformed into its natural complement, claustrophobia, now no longer confined to the private realm: the metropolitan dweller is equally a prisoner of both.

The Hotel Lobby

Of all Simmel’s students and followers, it was Siegfried Kracauer who, himself an architect, most profoundly absorbed the lessons of

16. Simmel, “The Stranger” 402.

17. Simmel, “Sociology of the Senses [Exkurs über die Soziologie der Sinnen],” *Soziologie* 646–51; *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, eds. Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1921) 360.

spatial sociology and especially of the analysis of spatial formations applied to the understanding of estrangement. From his student experience in Berlin in 1907, when he had attended Simmel's lecture on "The Problem of Style in Art," taking detailed notes, to the completion of his still unpublished monograph on Simmel in 1917, Kracauer found in Simmel a methodological guide to the present. And while, as we shall see, his architectural designs between 1916 and 1918 were by no means infused with a direct sociological "distance," certainly when recounted in the context of the autobiographical *Ginster*, they took on the character of moments in a slow development toward what Ernst Bloch would recognize as the personality of "the detached hero concerned about nothing and entirely without pathos."¹⁸

Thus, the celebrated Military Memorial Cemetery, designed in Frankfurt in 1916, was, in Kracauer's recollection, a moment of transition between a reliance on traditional models — the cemetery of Genoa and the cathedral of Milan — with their implications of mystery and the labyrinthine picturesque, toward an ironic and distanced vision of the character appropriate to modernity, and a modernity deeply implicated in the forms of war:

To hide the tombs like Easter eggs, this project seemed too soft for these times of general war. Such times called for a cemetery where their horror would be reflected. In place of using sketches he had developed until then, Ginster . . . elaborated a system of a cemetery that was similar to a project of military organization.

Hence Ginster designed the "scientifically lined up," rectilinear tombs set at right angles along allées lined up by geometrically cut foliage, surrounding a funerary monument that took the form of an elevated cube with a stepped-back quasipyramidal top that served to display the names of the dead: "during these years of war, the key word for the ruling classes," so Kracauer observed, "was simplicity." His cemetery would follow the precepts of the military strategist Hay: "Victory is a question of organization." Accordingly, "his cemetery also fulfilled Hay's requirements in that it prevented any sort of secrecy."¹⁹

Similarly, the homely "prettiness" of the *Siedlung* at Osnabrück, designed in November 1918, with its "little detached houses and gardens

18. Siegfried Kracauer, *Ginster. Von ihm selbst geschrieben* (1928; Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1973).

19. Kracauer, *Ginster* 106.

with pitched roofs," seemed to "Ginster-Kracauer" to be premature at the very least: in the present conditions of war, he observed, "they would inevitably be destroyed," and if not, these pretty houses would become the objects of destruction in a new war, attaching the workers to their defense. Kracauer concluded: "Certainly one could not house workers in holes, but it would be perhaps more suitable to place tombstones in the gardens."²⁰ Similar transformations from symbolism to rationalism were to be traced in the projects of the Swiss architect Hannes Meyer for *Siedlungen* and cemeteries between 1919 and 1923: the Freidorf Housing estate near Basel, 1919-21, with its "Palladian," almost neoclassical layout, albeit with pitched roofs; and the project for the central cemetery in Basel, 1923, which seems to echo the contemporary interest in the "revolutionary" architecture of the late 18th century, apparently to mirror the projects of Kracauer, even though Meyer's later move toward the "new objectivity" would have been condemned by Kracauer.

Kracauer's account of his self-distancing from architectural practice seems to have been accompanied by a growing awareness of the distancing powers of architectural space itself, or rather, by an awareness of the potential of space to act as a powerful emblem of social estrangement. Kracauer in 1919 had characterized his essay on Simmel as an "existential topography," comparing it to those of Simmel himself. In his subsequent writings the concept of an inhabited topography was extended literally, with the aid of Simmel's sociology, to the spaces of modern life: the hotel lobby, which became the focus of another essay on the detective novel in 1922-25; the "pleasure barracks" of the cafés and music halls, described in his study on the white collar workers of 1930, with their despondent counterparts, the unemployment exchanges; and the boulevards or "homes for the homeless," which form the setting of his life of Offenbach published in 1937. Of these, the hotel lobby (*Hotelhalle*), seen by Kracauer as the paradigmatic space of the modern detective novel, and thus as epitomizing the conditions of modern life in their anonymity and fragmentation, is perhaps the most Simmelian in its formulation. Kracauer compares the modern hotel lobby to the traditional church — the one a shelter for the transient and disconnected, the other for the community of the faithful. Using Simmel's categories of spatial description, Kracauer elaborates the

20. Kracauer, *Ginster* 197.

distinction between what he terms *erfüllter Raum*, or the “inhabited space” of *Verknüpfung* (communion), and the void or empty space of physics, the abstract sciences, and of course of the *ratio*, or rationalized modern life. Shut out of the religiously bonded community, the modern urban dweller can rely only on spaces “which bear witness to his nonexistence.” Detached from everyday life, individual atoms with no connection save their absolute anonymity, the hotel guests are scattered like atoms in a void, confronted with “nothing” (*vis-à-vis de rien*); stranded in their armchairs, the guests can do no more than find a “disinterested pleasure in contemplating the world.” In this way, “the civilization which tends toward rationalization loses itself in the elegant club chair,” in the ultimate space of indifference. The silence of the setting again parodies that of the church. Kracauer quotes Thomas Mann from *Death in Venice*: “In this room there reigned a religious silence which is one of the distinctive marks of grand hotels. The waiters serve with muffled steps. One hardly hears the noise of a cup or teapot, or a whispered word.” Kracauer continues:

Rudiments of individuals slide in the nirvana of relaxation, faces are lost behind the newspaper, and the uninterrupted artificial light illumines only mannequins. It is a coming and going of unknowns who are changed into empty forms by forgetting their passwords, and who parade, imperceptible, like Chinese shadows. If they had an interiority, it would have no windows.

The privileged site of the detective novel, the mystery of the lobby, is no longer religious but base, a mystery among the masks; Kracauer cites the detective novel by Sven Elvestad, *Der Tod kehrt ins Hotel ein* (*Death Enters the Hotel*): “One sees thus once again that a grand hotel is a world apart, and this world resembles the rest of the big world. The clients wander here in their light and carefree summer life, without suspecting what strange mysteries evolve among them.”²¹ The “pseudo-individuals” that are guests spread themselves like molecules in “a spatial desert without limits,” never destined to come together, even when compressed within the *Großstadt*. Their only link, he writes, is indifferent enough — what he calls, suggestively, the strategic grand

21. Kracauer, “Die Hotelhalle,” *Das Ornament der Masse* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1963) 157-70, esp. 168, 169. This is an excerpted chapter from *Der Detektiv-Roman [1922-1925]*, publ. in Kracauer, *Schriften I* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1971).

routes of convention. Elsewhere he will speak ubiquitously of these “spaces of passage” as “highways through the void” or, more precisely, as “boulevards for the homeless.”

Some twenty years later, Kracauer was in New York, writing his analysis of the filmic history that, in technique and substance, had in his eyes given rise to the birth of the Nazi propaganda film. One of these films, depicting the visit of Hitler and his architect Speer to the conquered city of Paris, seemed uncannily to fulfill Sitte’s original prophecy that agoraphobia would become the modern disease par excellence:

The Führer is visiting the conquered European capital — but is he really its guest? Paris is as quiet as a grave. . . . While he inspects Paris, Paris itself shuts its eyes and withdraws. The touching site of this deserted ghost city that once pulsed with feverish life mirrors the vacuum at the core of the Nazi system. Nazi propaganda built up a pseudo-reality iridescent with many colors, but at the same time it emptied Paris, the sanctuary of civilization. These colors scarcely veiled its own emptiness.²²

In this vision of a vast, empty Paris, and in the very image of the “void” behind the propaganda, we sense the destiny of metropolitan modernism in general, as it ineluctably transformed the traditional city into Kracauer’s nightmare of rationalism triumphant: a gigantic hotel atrium.

22. Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947) 307.

Decentric Perspectives: Kracauer's Early Writings on Film and Mass Culture

Miriam Hansen

Reviewing Karl Grune's *The Street* for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in February 1924, Kracauer describes the introductory sequence of the film. The protagonist (Eugen Klöpfer) is lying on the sofa "in a petty-bourgeois living-room which is supposed to be home [*Heimat*] yet fails to be just that." Fascinated with the play of light and shadow on the ceiling, the dreamer gets up to look out of the window. While his wife only sees the street as it is, his look "unveils to him the senselessly tempting jumble of reeling life which, alas, is no more a home [*Heimat*] than the living-room but, instead, adventure and untasted possibility."¹

The configuration of a double homelessness — between the sham of the bourgeois interior and the anonymous otherness of the modern street — was to become emblematic of Kracauer's own position, of his self-definition as an intellectual. As a number of critics have noted, his exile did not begin in 1933, and his later plea for a personal "extra-territoriality" (in a letter to Adorno on November 8, 1963) merely made explicit a persistent motif in his writings from the beginning.² In

* My thanks to Karsten Witte, Hauke Brunkhorst, Heide Schlüppmann, Mary Douglas, and especially to Albrecht Wellmer for inspiring discussions and critical comments. The research and writing of this essay was made possible by the generous support of the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung.

1. [rac.], "Die Straße," *Frankfurter Zeitung, Stadtblatt* 3 Feb. 1924. Unless otherwise noted, translations are mine.

2. Martin Jay, "The Extraterritorial Life of Siegfried Kracauer," *Salmagundi* 31-32 (Fall/Winter 1975-76), reprinted in *Permanent Exiles* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 152-197; Inka Mülder-Bach, "'Mancherlei Fremde': Paris, Berlin und die Extraterritorialität Siegfried Kracauers," *Juni: Magazin für Kultur & Politik* (Mönchengladbach) 3.1 (1989): 61-72.

the following, I will trace configurations of exile in two overlapping aspects of Kracauer's work: (1) the constitution of mass culture as an *object*, from the intersecting perspectives of a philosophy of history and the critique of ideology; and (2) the writer's *relation* to that object, the construction of mass-cultural phenomena in the tension between critical distance and personal experience. This discussion will have implications for an understanding of his later writings on film, especially *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960), by revising the narrow reading of Kracauer's concept of "reality" that has produced in English-language criticism the prevailing reception of Kracauer as a "naïve realist." Beyond restoring Kracauer's complexity as an intellectual figure, a complexity that has been reduced by the vicissitudes of exile and the academic marketplace, I also hope to elucidate the relevance of Kracauer's early writings for current debates. For in their very historicity, their contradictions and ambivalences, they raise questions that touch on the dilemmas of mass culture in a postmodern age.

As Kracauer returned to *The Street* repeatedly in the course of his career, his commentaries on the film mark something of a red thread through the critic's own theoretical itinerary. He began reviewing films for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1921 and in subsequent years wrote close to a thousand reviews, covering just about every film that was shown in German (and, later, in French) theaters.³ Although *The Street* was not the first film that moved him to develop what he then called "an as yet unwritten metaphysics of film" (efforts in this direction crop up in his reviews beginning in the fall of 1923), the film became something of a proof-text in subsequent years.

Kracauer's first reviews of *The Street* bear witness to the birth of his film theory from the spirit of a philosophy of history or, more precisely, a theology of history. While his review of *The Street* on February 3, 1924, largely consists of an enthusiastic paraphrase through the eyes of the film's wandering protagonist, the review in the evening edition of February 4 assumes a more general tone, introducing Grune's film as

3. See Thomas Y. Levin, *Siegfried Kracauer: Eine Bibliographie seiner Schriften* (Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 1989). The majority of Kracauer's articles in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, many of which were published under pseudonyms or even anonymously, can be found in his own scrapbooks, Kracauer Papers, Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar. All subsequent references to the *Frankfurter Zeitung* will appear in the text with the abbreviation FZ. Since completion of this essay, the majority of Kracauer's writings for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, except his film reviews, have been reprinted in *Schriften* 5. 1-3, ed. Inka Mülder-Bach (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1990).

“one of the few works of modern film production in which an object is shaped in a manner of which only film is capable and which realizes possibilities that only film can realize.” The affinity between the medium and its presumed object is grounded not only in film’s photographic capability to render an external reality, but also in its syntactic procedures, in the possibilities of montage.

Film patches together shot after shot and from these successively unfurling images mechanically recomposes the world — a mute world in which no word passes between human beings, in which the incomplete speech of optical impressions is the only language. The more the represented object can be rendered in the succession of mere images, the more it corresponds to the filmic technique of association.

The process of filmic representation thus captures something of the essence of modern life — “a life deprived of substance, empty as a tin can, a life which instead of internal connections [*statt des innerlichen Zusammenhangs*] knows nothing but isolated events forming ever new series of images in the manner of a kaleidoscope.” Kracauer conceives of film as a material expression — not just a representation — of a particular historical experience. The solitude of the individual in a fragmented, empty world that the critic finds evoked in Grune’s film rings with the pathos of personal experience; the film lends this pathos an allegorical significance, a collective resonance.

What intrudes upon the lonesome wanderer in the voracious streets of the night is expressed by the film in a vertiginous sequence of futurist images, and the film is free to express it this way because the pining inner life releases nothing but fragmentary ideas. The events get entangled and disentangled again, and just as the human beings are living dead, inanimate things participate in the play as a matter of course. A lime wall announces a murder, an electric sign flickers like a blinking eye: everything a confused side-by-side [*Nebeneinander*], a chaos [*Tohuwabohu*] of reified souls and seemingly waking things.⁴

4. In the review published the previous day, the figure of “the lonesome wanderer” is referred to as “*den Sehnsüchtigen*,” the subject of longing. Also, it is no coincidence that in the last phrase of the quotation Kracauer uses the Hebrew word *Tohuwabohu*, a prominent image in Genesis used in German as a vernacular term for chaos.

Such imagery is familiar to the reader of Kracauer's early prose, such as his epistemological inquiry *Soziologie als Wissenschaft* (*Sociology as Science*), his philosophical treatise on the detective novel, or his programmatic essay of 1922, "Die Wartenden" ("Those Who Wait").⁵ Kracauer sees the historical process which culminates in modernity as an increased withdrawal of meaning from life, a dissociation of truth and existence; the world is disintegrating into a chaotic multiplicity of phenomena. This process is synonymous, in the economic and social realm, with capitalist rationalization and the concomitant alienation of human life, labor, and interpersonal relations. The subject is "thrown into the cold infinity of empty space and empty time," a state summed up in Lukács's phrase of a "transcendental homelessness."⁶ For a large number of individuals living in the "loneliness of the big cities" — Kracauer includes among "those who wait" scholars, businessmen, doctors, lawyers and intellectuals of any kind — this state, to the extent they are aware of it, results in a sense of isolation, of exile from the world in which they live and act.

While still resonating with the rhetoric of "transcendental homelessness," "Those Who Wait" also marks a turning point away from the cultural pessimism and nostalgia of Kracauer's earliest writings. Directed against premature attempts to restore meaning (from anthropology through religious mysticism to the George circle, but also against the "desperado" skepticism of someone like Max Weber), the essay advocates an alternative attitude of self-conscious, active "waiting," a "hesitant openness" (*zögerndes Geöffnetsein*) (*OdM* 116). The rejection of panaceas for the modern malaise is accompanied by a shift of focus from the "theoretical I" to the "I of the entire human being,"

5. *Soziologie als Wissenschaft: Eine erkenntnistheoretische Untersuchung* (1922), reprinted in Siegfried Kracauer, *Schriften I*, ed. Karsten Witte (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1971); *Der Detektivroman: Ein philosophischer Traktat* (1922-1925), first published in *Schriften I*; "Die Wartenden," *FZ* 12 Mar. 1922, reprinted in Kracauer, *Das Ornament der Masse* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1963). Citations from *Ornament der Masse* will appear in the text with the abbreviation *OdM*.

6. Kracauer, *Soziologie als Wissenschaft* 13. Georg Lukács's notion of transcendental homelessness (*transzendente Obdachlosigkeit*) is elaborated in *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968). Kracauer reviewed *The Theory of the Novel* in *Neue Blätter für Kunst und Literatur* 4.1 (4 Oct. 1921): 1-5. Also see Inka Mülder, *Siegfried Kracauer — Grenzgänge zwischen Theorie und Literatur: Seine frühen Schriften 1913-1933* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1985) 19ff. On the notion of *Weltzerfall* (disintegration of the world), see Michael Schröter, "Weltzerfall und Rekonstruktion: Zur Physiognomik Siegfried Kracauers," *Text + Kritik* 68 (issue on Kracauer) (Munich: Beck, 1980): 18-40.

from “the unreal world of formless forces and high values depleted of meaning” to “the world of *reality* and its domains.” Because of the onesidedness of theoretical thinking, Kracauer warns, a “terrifying” gap has opened up between thinking and a contemporary reality which is “filled with corporeal things and people and therefore demands to be seen concretely” (*OdM* 118).

Kracauer’s cautious opening toward the untheorized domains of modern experience entails a simultaneous shift in attitude towards that “surface” (*Oberfläche*) which has taken the place of any “real” substance. As Inka Mülder-Bach has shown, by 1924/25 the metaphor of the surface takes on a new meaning in Kracauer’s writings, marking a turn or switch (*Umschlag*) from a locus of sheer negativity, the atomized world of mere appearances, to a site in which contemporary reality manifests itself in an iridescent multiplicity of phenomena.⁷ Although the very trope of the surface still implies the vertical topography of idealist philosophy (essence/appearance, the hierarchy of truth and empirical reality), in Kracauer’s critical practice the *Oberfläche* increasingly loses its prefix and becomes a *Fläche*, a plane of preliminary configurations that require investigation and interpretation. No longer merely tokens of metaphysical decline, such configurations offer crucial insights into the historical dynamics of the present, that is, into the present as part of history. As Kracauer says in the often-cited methodological preface of the essay “The Mass as Ornament” (*FZ* 9 June 1927), “an analysis of the inconspicuous surface manifestations of a period can contribute more to determining its place in the historical process than judgments of the period about itself.”⁸ Hence Kracauer’s shift in theoretical focus from the great metaphysical questions of the age to the phenomena of daily life, to the ephemeral, culturally marginal and despised spaces, media, and rituals of an emerging mass culture.

Yet I think that Kracauer’s theoretical interest in film, as it takes shape in the reviews of 1923/24, to some extent precedes this shift in tone, focus, and attitude; that it has rather specific roots in Kracauer’s earlier, theological construction of history and the peculiar form of

7. Inka Mülder-Bach, “Der Umschlag der Negativität: Zur Verschränkung von Phaenomenologie, Geschichtsphilosophie und Filmaesthetik in Siegfried Kracauers Metaphorik der ‘Oberfläche,’” *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift* 61.2 (1987): 359–373; also see Mülder, *Kracauer* 86–95.

8. “The Mass Ornament” trans. Barbara Correll and Jack Zipes, *New German Critique* 5 (Spring 1975): 67; translation modified.

materialism that construction ordains. If we take the essay "Those Who Wait" as typical of that construction, it is not difficult to recognize in it a variant of the modern, secular Jewish Messianism which Anson Rabinbach has traced in the writings of Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin. Kracauer's relation to Jewish Messianism is a complex issue, all the more so since that tradition persisted in a variety of radical sensibilities, hermeneutical motifs, and combinations with other discourses (psychoanalysis, Marxism, libertarian anarchism, Zionism, etc.).⁹ Raised in a consciously Jewish environment and briefly active in the *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus* (a Frankfurt circle of learning and debate surrounding Rabbi Nehemiah Nobel), Kracauer began to criticize vehemently the revival of Messianic thought. He rejected the "Messianic enthusiasts of communist coloring" (*messianische Sturm- und Dranggeister kommunistischer Färbung*), along with other movements of religious renewal, as irrational, romantic, and ultimately idealist because they eclipsed the real world as well as the divine world they presumed to know so well (*OdM* 110).¹⁰ What clearly set Kracauer off from a writer like Bloch was his attempt to salvage concepts of "truth" and "reason," and his belief in the possibility of a "gentle" transfiguration of nature in the name of reason (although he recognized the complicity of the Enlightenment with the devastating changes wrought by capitalist forms of rationality).¹¹

9. Anson Rabinbach, "Between Enlightenment and the Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism," *New German Critique* 34 (Winter 1985): 78-124; Leo Löwenthal, *Mitmachen wollte ich nie: Ein autobiographisches Gespräch mit Helmut Dubiel* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1980) 19ff., 27, 59, 156; Martin Jay, "Politics of Translation: Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin on the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 21 (1976), reprinted in *Permanent Exiles* 198-216. On Jewish Messianism in general, see Gershom Scholem's canonical essay, "The Messianic Idea in Judaism," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1972).

10. Also see Kracauer's polemical review of Ernst Bloch's book *Thomas Münzer*, "Prophetentum," *FZ* 27 Aug. 1922; and his letters to Leo Löwenthal from 1921 to 1924. The letter of 4 Dec. 1921 is reprinted in Löwenthal, *Mitmachen* 244-47; the letters of 19 Dec. 1921, 31 Aug. 1923, and 12 Apr. 1924 are partially reprinted in Ingrid Belke and Irina Renz, eds., *Siegfried Kracauer 1889-1966*, *Marbacher Magazin* 47 (1988): 36, 39, 40. Kracauer also resented Benjamin's version of Messianism, though he responded to it far less violently than he did to Bloch's; see Kracauer's letter to Adorno, 7 June 1931, and the letter he wrote to Löwenthal (6 Jan. 1957) upon reading the first collection of Benjamin's writings: "Much has paled and suffers from a Messianic dogmatism which on the level that I dwell on appears abstruse and arbitrary" (Kracauer Papers, Marbach). Also see Mülder, *Kracauer* 45ff.

11. Kracauer elaborates on the link between Jewish Messianism and the tradition of Enlightenment in a (to my knowledge) unpublished essay entitled "Conclusions"

Nonetheless, Kracauer participates in the discourse of modern Jewish Messianism in significant ways. Even as he replaced metaphysical categories with concepts indebted to the Enlightenment and to the early Marx, a distinctly apocalyptic undercurrent continued to characterize his observations of contemporary life, specifically, a perception of modernity as traumatic upheaval which will lead to catastrophe. Like Benjamin and Bloch, he could not envision change as immanent in history, as in bourgeois-liberal notions of progress and reform, but only as a total break. Therefore, the function of the intellectual was to “wait” rather than intervene: “We must remain hidden, quietistic, inactive, a thorn in the side of others, driving them (and ourselves) to despair rather than giving them hope.”¹² At the same time, the intellectual should engage in the work of redemption — redemption here conceived of in the utopian sense of a restoration of all things past and present and linked to the cabalist concept of *tikkun*.¹³

Kracauer’s affinity with the discourse of secular Jewish Messianism emerges less in his conceptual constructions than in recurring motifs and interpretive tropes (as, for instance, the image of an imminent *Umschlag* or switch). As Michael Schröter observes, an “aura of eschatological longing” emanates from the “luminous metaphors” of Kracauer’s texts, whether in the seemingly straightforward genre of cultural critique and sociological analysis or in more literary works like his autobiographical novel *Ginster* (1928). Betraying the intensity of shock-like experience, these metaphors often exceed the overt construction of Kracauer’s argument and take on a theoretical life of their own.¹⁴

On this connotative level, Kracauer’s account of the disintegration of the world also resonates with the legacy of Jewish Gnosticism, although,

(Kracauer Papers, Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar), which he wrote for an anthology on the Jewish contribution to German culture, probably before he knew about the Holocaust. For Kracauer’s *avant-la-lettre* analysis of the dialectic of Enlightenment, see for instance “The Mass Ornament” and “Aufruhr der Mittelschichten: Eine Auseinandersetzung mit dem ‘Tat’-Kreis,” *FZ* 10 and 11 Dec. 1931, *OdM* 87f.

12. Letter to Leo Löwenthal, 12 Apr. 1924, reprinted in Belke and Renz 40.

13. Scholten, “Messianic Idea” 4. The motif of redemption runs through Kracauer’s entire work and becomes eponymic notably in the subtitle of *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. Discussing the German translation of that subtitle with Rudolf Arnheim (who had proposed “*Rückgewinnung*”), Kracauer writes: “I still think ‘*Erloesung*’ would not be bad, precisely because of its theological connotation” (letter, 30 Nov. 1960, Kracauer Papers, Marbach am Neckar). According to Karsten Witte, the eventual translation of “redemption” as “*Errettung*” was suggested by Adorno.

14. Schröter 25, 28. For an example of the stylistic strategies in Kracauer’s early essays, see the closing pages of this essay.

as a doctrine, Jewish Gnosticism was just as suspect to him as other variants of religious mysticism. Drawing on Weberian concepts of rationalization and disenchantment, his analysis echoes other contemporary critiques of reification from Simmel to Lukács. Like Lukács, if only more so, Kracauer evokes the fallen world through images of petrification and mortification, of detritus, fragments, empty shells, larvae, and masks.¹⁵ Even with their anti-metaphysical thrust, such images recall the Gnostic tradition: they mark the negative traces of the withdrawal of God. As material evidence of the negativity of history, these traces have to be preserved and interpreted so that, when the great break occurs, the world can be redeemed in as complete a shape as possible, and the sparks encrusted in even the most fallen matter can be released. As Kracauer says in another programmatic essay, "Gestalt und Zerfall" ("Shape and Disintegration"), "the new shape [*das Gestaltete*] cannot be lived unless the disintegrated particles are gathered and carried along" (*FZ* 21 August 1925). What is more, since the original order of things is irrevocably lost and truth cannot be restored in any immediate and immanent sense, the process of disintegration has to be *advanced* so as to lay bare "the preliminary character of all given configurations" (*OdM* 39).¹⁶

It is in this Gnostic vision of *Weltzerfall* (disintegration of the world) that film assumes a two-fold function for the early Kracauer, a key role in the "all-out gamble of the historical process [*Vabanque-Spiel des Geschichtsprozesses*]" (*OdM* 37). In one sense, film shares this role with photography, which Kracauer theorized in his great essay of 1927. As Heide Schlüpmann has pointed out, Kracauer's concept of photography goes beyond a mere opposition of the photographic image to the "memory image," beyond the ideological effect of banishing time into the eternal present of illustrated magazines and newsreels.¹⁷ Rather, as

15. Adorno, in his 1931 inaugural lecture, uses similar imagery when he approvingly quotes Freud and the epistemological turn to the "Abhub der Erscheinungswelt" ("refuse of the phenomenal world"), "Die Aktualität der Philosophie," *Gesammelte Schriften* 1 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1973): 336. On literary Gnosticism, specifically in Kafka, see Harold Bloom, *The Strong Light of the Canonical: Kafka, Freud and Scholem as Revisionists of Jewish Culture and Thought* (New York: City College, 1987) 1-25.

16. The category of the preliminary or provisional in history reappears, as part of an extended analogy between historiography and photography, in Kracauer's posthumously published *History: The Last Things Before the Last* (New York: Oxford UP, 1969).

17. Heide Schlüpmann, "Phenomenology of Film: On Siegfried Kracauer's Writings of the 1920s," *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987): 97-114; also see Schröter 26-27. Kracauer's essay, "Die Photographie," *FZ* 28 Oct. 1927, is reprinted in *OdM* 21-39.

both symptom and agent of the petrification of the world, photography also gathers the detritus of history and reveals it in all its negativity. Thus it functions as an archive of “the last elements of nature alienated from intention” — “the world of death in its independence from human beings” (*OdM* 38). If the contingency of the photographic image undermines bourgeois fictions of the autonomous subject, it also offers human consciousness the chance to fully recognize and engage with the “foundations of nature” (*OdM* 36-37). If film, like photography, is to assume such a cognitive, archival function, it has to stick to the world of appearances, to “the mute, external surface of the world.” The manner in which it relates to that world, however, is not that of an *iconic* representation (which would conflict with the Biblical *Bilderverbot*) but, rather, that of an *indexical* imprint of the historical process; displaying the state of aggregation of the present.¹⁸

The second function of film in Kracauer’s historical project derives from specifically cinematic techniques not shared with photography, in particular montage, superimposition, and other special effects. If photography reflects the detritus of history in mere disorder, film has the possibility of advancing this disorder by systematically suspending “every habitual relationship among the elements of nature” and by “associating parts and segments so as to produce strange configurations” (*OdM* 39). Kracauer’s earliest attempts to define “the essence” or the “spirit” of film emphasize the anti-naturalist task of film to “thoroughly break to pieces the natural contexts of our life,” to promote the “continual transformation of the external world, the crazy displacement of its objects [*die verrückte Verrückung ihrer Objekte*]” (*FZ* 4 November 1923). Accordingly, the critic favors genres of the fantastic, the fairy tale, and the burlesque (*Groteske*), that is, slapstick comedy. In its systematic unfolding of chaos and discontinuity, slapstick comedy exposes the compulsive and narrow logic of capitalist rationalization: “one has to hand this to the Americans: with slapstick film they have created a form which offers a counterweight to their reality: if in that reality they subject the world to an often unbearable discipline, the film in turn dismantles this self-imposed order quite forcefully” (*FZ* 29 January 1926).

18. This claim to some extent recalls Philip Rosen’s argument about André Bazin, except that for Kracauer the filmic preservation of a transient moment can never be a positive emanation of creation but, rather, captures time only in its negativity, in its drift toward catastrophe from which alone redemption can come. See Rosen, “History of Image, Image of History: Subject and Ontology in Bazin,” *Wide Angle* 9.4 (1987): 7-34.

Finally, film's capabilities of displacement and disjunction, of figuration and disfiguration, harbor a utopian possibility, true to the Messianic tradition. "Genuine film drama," Kracauer writes in 1923, "has the task of ironizing the phantom quality [*Scheinhaftigkeit*] of our life by hyperbolizing its unreality so as to point toward true reality" (FZ 16 December 1923); that reality itself, however, has to remain unknown. The model for this hidden utopian dimension in Kracauer's early film theory is Franz Kafka, just as Marcel Proust figures as the patron saint of his later *Theory of Film*. Kafka appears near the end of the photography essay at the crucial transition from the provisional dis/order of photography to the possibilities of film:

It is therefore incumbent upon consciousness to lay bare the preliminary character of all given configurations and, perhaps, even stir up an intimation of the right order of the state of nature. In the works of Franz Kafka, a liberated consciousness absolves itself of this responsibility by destroying natural reality and jumbling the fragments against each other (*OdM* 39).

Kracauer's review of *The Castle* a year earlier could be said to contain the blueprint of a utopian film aesthetics. Although Kracauer never mentions the cinema by name, he situates Kafka's novel within the same parameters from which, during those years, he had been approaching film: (1) a Gnostic vision of history, centering on the abyss between human existence and truth ("*die Abgesperrtheit des Menschen von der Wahrheit*"); (2) the genre of the fairy tale, which prefigures the miraculous victory of truth over the blind forces of nature (the unfulfilled project of the Enlightenment); and (3) psychoanalysis, in particular the Freudian notion of negation, and the discourse of the unconscious in horror and dreams. Thus he reads *The Castle* as a negative fairy tale, "*die Matriz des Märchens* [the stencil of the fairy tale]," in which the mute fragments of habitual life are organized against each other in a series of displacements and inversions whose hidden order only appears from the perspective of the absent, unrealized truth. Instead of *Märchenglück* (the fortune, luck, happiness of fairy tales), however, Kafka's novel is submerged in fear, in the horror that truth may be buried for good. Kracauer compares this horror, on the one hand, to the experience of the dreamer, to "the disintegration of the human being in the dream who surrenders to elements of existence displaced not only by the play

of the drives.” On the other hand, he invokes the myth of the Medusa, which he would later take up in *Theory of Film*, and gives it a gnostic twist: “the Jew Kafka brings horror into the world because the countenance of truth is withdrawn from it. Were this countenance to reveal itself, the world would go mad with happiness” (*FZ* 28 November 1926).¹⁹

The Gnostic-Messianic capability of film assumes a political edge in Kracauer’s relationship to bourgeois art and culture. With his discovery of film as a cognitive medium, Kracauer turned his back on the institutions of German high culture from which he had been exiled by more than just personal intention. As for other Weimar intellectuals and avant-garde artists, the cinema figured for Kracauer as a practical critique of the remnants of bourgeois culture, of anachronistic attempts to conceal the actual state of disintegration and upheaval by means of what in Benjaminian terms would be called a false restoration of the aura. Kracauer had persistently criticized such attempts, from the closed form of historical biography through the George circle to Buber and Rosenzweig’s translation of the Bible. It is in this constellation that Kracauer valorizes the term “*Zerstreuung*” (distraction, diversion), invoked by cultural conservatives to decry the audience’s abandonment to glittering surfaces and glamorous appearances:

It is not externality that poses a threat to truth. Truth is threatened only by the naive affirmation of cultural values that have become unreal and by the careless misuse of concepts such as personality, inwardness, tragedy and so on, terms which in themselves certainly refer to lofty ideas but which, due to social changes, have lost much of their scope along with their supporting foundations. Furthermore, many of these concepts have acquired a bad aftertaste today because they deflect an inordinate amount of attention away from the external damages of society onto the private individual. . . . In a profound sense, Berlin audiences act truthfully when increasingly they shun these art events (which, for good reason, remain caught in mere pretension), preferring instead the surface glamor of the stars, films, revues and production values.²⁰

19. For a slightly different elaboration of the myth of the Medusa see Kracauer’s *Theory of Film* (New York: Oxford UP, 1960) 305-6. Also see the articles by Gertrud Koch and Heide Schlüpmann in this issue.

20. “Kult der Zerstreuung: Über die Berliner Lichtspielhäuser,” *FZ* 4 Mar. 1926, *OdM* 314; trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *New German Critique* 40: 94, translation modified.

The traumatic nature of social change not only challenges aesthetic claims to truth and generality, but calls into question the traditional hierarchy which the institution of art has relied on to exclude and suppress other, i.e., lower-class and more physical, forms of culture. Reviewing a book on the circus (which, incidentally, rehearses key thoughts of the "Photography" essay), Kracauer writes: "With the decline of the old social order, the boundaries collapse by which classical aesthetics had anxiously segregated the art of the ring from high art. . ." (*FZ* 26 July 1926).

Benjamin, elaborating Kracauer's concept of "distraction" in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," draws a parallel between mass culture's challenge to traditional aesthetics and the avant-garde's assault on the institution of art from within (as in the manifestations of Dada).²¹ For Kracauer, the artistic avant-garde is not only a critical model (one that, when Benjamin was writing the "Work of Art" essay, already belonged to the past), but also itself a symptom of the growing distance between the sphere of truth and modern existence, and of the dilemma resulting from that distance for the contemporary artist. In an essay still written in the early theological mode, "The Artist in This Time" (published in the Jewish journal *Der Morgen*), Kracauer describes that dilemma as a problem of connection (*Verknüpfung*), of bridging the gap between the principles of aesthetic creation and the need to confront contemporary reality. Before he cites examples from poetry, art, and music (and then only briefly, contrasting Expressionism with variants of *Neue Sachlichkeit* and Constructivism), he again returns to Grune's film, *The Street*.

He resumes his earlier reading of the film as an allegory of the fallen life, yet takes it further to identify its attitude as one shared by "human beings who seriously engage with reality and hence are doubly affected by the power of the forces which today deform the world into a city street." These people are no longer patiently "waiting," but have become impatient with any "romantic attempt to gloss over the realities of technology and economy."

They will do anything in their power to make the world disclose its phantom character, to let nothingness reign as it may. They are *nihilists* for the sake of the positive and hasten toward the end of

21. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," second version (1936), in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969) section 14.

despair lest a “yes” might impede that process halfway and ineffectively. . . . Therefore, they hyperbolize the negation, stretch the emptiness and reject soul where it is only make-up. They believe that America [a contemporary metaphor for disenchanted modernism] will disappear only when it discovers itself completely . . .²²

Clearly, Kracauer sees himself as one of these “nihilists,” even as he urges them not to abandon hope for the revelation of the absent divine; otherwise they will merely reproduce the gap between “film image and prophecy.”²³

Kracauer’s radical gesture in the essay is his movement from meta-physical and philosophical questions to a discussion of the film without apology, justification, or explanation. He does not take up the issue of whether film in general, or this film in particular, is art. In a modern world which, to paraphrase Rabinbach on Benjamin, “was not simply disenchanted, in Weber’s sense of the term, [but] infinitely impoverished and lacking in a *discourse that could adumbrate the nature of experience*,”²⁴ the significance of film as such a discourse was far more urgent to Kracauer than the question of its aesthetic value. Thus, a film like *The Street* serves Kracauer as a diagnostic tool or, more precisely, as a vision that he identifies with and appropriates into his own historico-philosophical discourse. The film’s function in the context of contemporary art and culture is to *express* the dilemma, not necessarily to solve it.

By 1926, however, Kracauer was well aware that the average film production did anything but advance the negativity of the historical process. Rather, the cinema seemed bent on outdoing bourgeois culture in patching up the effects of disintegration and petrification. As Kracauer remarks with gentle sarcasm at the end of his essay “Calico World” (*FZ* 28 January 1926), an enchanted tour through the surreal sets of the Ufa studio, the task of the director consists of:

shaping the cinematic material, as beautifully chaotic as life itself, into that unity for which life is indebted to art. . . . In most cases, there is a happy end. Clouds made of glass threaten and dissolve again. One believes the fourth wall. Everything is guaranteed natural [*Alles garantiert Natur*] (*OdM* 278).

22. “Der Künstler in dieser Zeit,” *Der Morgen* 1.1 (Apr. 1925): 105, 106. The section on *The Street* was reprinted, under the title “Filmbild und Prophetenrede,” in *FZ* 5 May 1925.

23. Kracauer, “Der Künstler” 106.

24. Rabinbach 102.

Around this time, Kracauer also begins to criticize the gentrification of theaters and exhibition practices, contrasting earlier, anarchic forms of distraction with the cultivated entertainment which is taking its place, “a scopophilia linked to actual experience” with the “amusement” dispensed by the average production.²⁵

Kracauer’s assessment of film from the perspective of a philosophy of history increasingly gives way to an approach committed to a critique of ideology — which anticipates in crucial ways Horkheimer and Adorno’s indictment of the culture industry. This shift, to some extent reflecting his reading of Marx the previous year, is signalled in Kracauer’s review of *Battleship Potemkin* titled “Die Jupiterlampen brennen weiter” (“The Klieglights Are Still On,” *FZ* 16 May 1926). He hails Eisenstein’s film as a major breakthrough vis-à-vis the bulk of American and European films, not for aesthetic reasons but because, for the first time, a film has taken on a “real” subject and speaks of “the truth” that matters. This truth is “the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressors”; it is “the moment of revolution.”²⁶ With his review, Kracauer joined Herbert Ihering, Lu Märten, Benjamin, and other critics in the campaign to defend *Potemkin* against the threat of censorship and political abuse. In terms of his emerging film theory, however, the political mandate for film to express “truth” as a positive term displaces its earlier function of capturing and hyperbolizing the negativity of history, the phantom reality of a fallen world.

Conversely, Kracauer begins to elaborate on the systematic connection between the cinema as a capitalist enterprise and the social messages of the films, on the collusion between industry and public. From 1927 on, his reviews and essays explore the ideological formulas by which films transmute social and economic contradictions into fables of individual success, exotic adventure and sentimentality. In the anonymously published series, “The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies” (*FZ* March 1927), Kracauer outlines a whole spectrum of “typical motifs” that recur in the average production. These motifs indicate “how society wishes to see itself” and therefore epitomize the range of

25. “Das Geheimnis von Genf,” *FZ* 29 March 1928. Also see “Kult der Zerstreuung”; “Kino in der Münzstraße” (*FZ* 2 Apr. 1932, reprinted in *Straßen in Berlin und Anderswo* [Berlin: Arsenal, 1987] 69-71); and, especially, “An der Grenze des Gestern: Zur Berliner Film- und Photoschau,” *FZ* 12 July 1932.

26. “Die Jupiterlampen brennen weiter: Zur Frankfurter Aufführung des Potemkin-Films,” *FZ* 16 May 1926, reprinted in *Kino: Essays, Studien, Glossen zum Film*, ed. Karsten Witte (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1974) 73-76.

current ideology (*OdM* 282). What makes these fables so objectionable is not their fantastic character, for Kracauer again and again defends the improbabilities of adventure *Kolportage* or detective films against the pretensions of the art film, the historical drama, or his *bête noire*, the “society film” (*Gesellschaftsfilm*). Rather, it is their specific way of tapping, embellishing, distorting, repressing the social reality that demands to be filmed. “What should be projected on the screen is wiped away and images cheating us out of the image of existence fill the surface.” The average fiction film, claims Kracauer in a scathing attack on “The Contemporary Film and Its Audience” of 1928, is nothing but an “attempt to escape” from the problems of the present (*OdM* 296). This approach predominates in Kracauer’s writings on film through 1933; it returns, from a historically changed perspective, in his “psychological history of German film” written in exile, *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947).²⁷

In this book, Grune’s film reappears as an “unpolitical product of the avant-garde.” The film, according to Kracauer, was fairly successful with a wide audience “which, however, consisted primarily of intellectuals.” While he still praises the “realistic” effort in the everyday quality of the (studio) setting, *The Street* now figures as an allegory for the regressive movement from rebellion to submission. The wandering protagonist is reduced to a social type, a philistine acting out historically specific and — in retrospect, politically fatal — psychological mechanisms.²⁸ With this analysis, Kracauer not only shifts the framework from philosophy of history to critique of ideology; he also disavows his own earlier fascination with the film, his critical identification with the experience of the doubly exiled wanderer.

It would be naive to ignore the reasons for that shift. By the end of the 1920s, the political situation in Germany (of which Kracauer was much more acutely aware than his friend Adorno) required a more specific intervention on the part of intellectuals than theories of rationalization, reification and alienation grounded in a negative theology. If, ironically, the theological angle had enabled Kracauer to leave the

27. For reviews in which Kracauer develops a critique of ideology from the perspective of spectatorial effects see, for instance, “Eine Berliner Range,” *FZ* 23 Apr. 1927 (which begins with the sigh, “Ach diese Berliner Gesellschaftsfilme!”); “Kiki,” *FZ* 1 Apr. 1927; “Klettermaxe,” *FZ* 10 Mar. 1927; “Eine Dubarry von heute,” *FZ* 19 Feb. 1927; “Heut’ tanzt die Mariett’,” *FZ* 14 Apr. 1928.

28. *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947) 119-123. Also see *Theory of Film* 72.

domain of bourgeois culture and philosophical idealism and to turn his materialist gaze to the media of mass consumption, the increased social complicity and political contestation of these media demanded a different language. The "waiting" that Kracauer had deemed the only adequate attitude for intellectuals was now being done involuntarily by the thousands, if not millions, waiting in breadlines, unemployment agencies, all-day movie theaters, or heated shelters.²⁹ By the time *From Caligari to Hitler* was written, the apocalyptic implications of Kracauer's early work had been realized with a vengeance: the all-out gamble of the historical process had been lost in an unimaginable catastrophe.

It would be misleading, however, to present the relation between his early, theologically grounded film theory and his increased commitment to a critique of ideology beginning in 1926 as if they were chronologically distinct phases in a linear development. Rather, the two discourses continue side by side and remain interwoven, with varying emphasis and degrees of contradiction, throughout Kracauer's later work. This is nowhere more evident than in his concept of "reality," which oscillates among metaphysical and material, perceptual, social, psychoanalytic, ideological, and political meanings.³⁰

Already in the essay "Those Who Wait," Kracauer's notion of "reality" begins to slide from the "spiritual sphere," depleted of meaning, to the sphere of existence, the alienated, confusing, contradictory multiplicity of modern life. Kracauer loosens the linkage of the real with the absent "truth" in favor of an affinity with the phenomenal, the "concrete," the "profane": "The place of truth itself is . . . present in the midst of the 'common' [*gemeinen*] public life" (*OdM* 178). Kracauer's uncompromising rejection of metaphysical forms of renewal forced him to plunge into the fallen world, seeking involvement with its unknown shapes, movements, and ornaments. To some extent, this involvement was strategic, a means to transform reality by way of mimetic subversion. As he writes in "Shape and Disintegration," "real life" (still committed to the absent "truth") must don "the mask of the derealized and base in order to affect a reality that continues to dominate

29. "Arbeitsnachweise," *FZ* 17 June 1930; "Wärmehallen," *FZ* 18 Jan. 1931; "Kino in der Münzstraße," *FZ* 2 Apr. 1932; all reprinted in *Straßen*.

30. On Kracauer's concept of reality see Leo Haenlein, *Der Denk-Gestus des aktiven Wartens im Sinn-Vakuum der Moderne: Zur Konstitution und Tragweite des Realitätskonzeptes Siegfried Kracauers in spezieller Rücksicht auf Walter Benjamin* (Frankfurt, Bern, and New York: Lang, 1984).

where it is vulnerable. It may be that, in order to change that reality decisively, one would have to apply a lever in its own medium. . .” (FZ 21 August 1925).

The critic’s suspension between truth and existence, the two poles of reality, is encapsulated in the paradox of a “de-realized reality,” a material presence without ostensible substance or origin. From the mid-1920s onward, Kracauer attempts to set this paradox into motion, to release its paralyzing contradiction into the possibility of political action. Analyzing the social topography of Paris, for instance, he dissolves the double bind of class and consumer culture into a configuration of center and periphery.³¹ He contrasts the Faubourgs, as the site of poverty and use value, with the Boulevards’ abundance of commodities, images, signs, lights, and publicity, and then concludes: “Broad streets run from the Faubourgs into the glamorous center. This center is not the one intended. The happiness envisioned for the shabby periphery is subject to a different radius than the available ones. But we must take the streets to the center because today its emptiness is real” (*OdM* 17).

The migration of reality into the empty center challenges the very distinction between real and unreal, between a prior essence and a superficial realm of images. Kracauer translates the Wildean apothegm about nature imitating art into the observation that social life has become indistinguishable from the cinema. Comparing the guests in a luxury hotel with their two-dimensional counterparts in the society films, he wonders “whether they descended into an ephemeral existence from the screen or whether those films were modelled on them. It almost seems as if they were living by the grace of an imaginary director.”³² Already in his essay “The Little Shopgirls,” he notes a convergence between cinematic and extra-cinematic levels of reality, ascribing this effect to the gullibility and conformism of female spectators. “Film drama and life usually correspond to each other, because the typists [*Tippmamsells*] fashion themselves after the models on the screen; but perhaps the most spurious models are stolen from life” (*OdM* 280).

Kracauer’s observation seems to anticipate the postmodern topos of the implosion of reality into images, of the shift from representation to

31. Müllder-Bach, “Mancherlei Fremde” 63.

32. “Im Luxushotel,” FZ 14 Sept. 1928. Kracauer himself invokes Wilde’s apothegm in an article on “Beautiful Actresses,” FZ 8 Dec. 1928.

simulation. But Kracauer can no more be reduced to a Baudrillardian hyperrealist than he can be dismissed as a naive realist. To the extent that historical developments warranted such an analysis, he was no doubt more disposed than, say, Adorno, to recognize the fundamental transformation of relations of representation and reception occurring in the area of mass and consumer culture. This does not mean, however, that he would have described, let alone endorsed, that process uncritically. For Kracauer, fascination with the cinema's surface effects and its ideological function are inseparably related: reality assails the boundaries between the two.³³

As problematic as the approach of "The Little Shopgirls" may be, especially with regard to its gender politics, the essay extends Kracauer's concept of reality to include a psychosocial dimension: "The idiotic and unreal film fantasies are the *day dreams of society* in which its true reality comes to the fore and its otherwise repressed wishes take shape." While these fantasies turn on the imbrication of romance and upward mobility, their discourse transcends class boundaries in a mise-en-abyme of the social imaginary: "In reality it may not happen easily that a scrubgirl marries the owner of a Rolls Royce; yet, is it not the dream of the Rolls Royce owners that the scrubgirls dream of rising to their level?" In assessing the force of such fantasies, Kracauer plays two notions of reality against each other: "The more [the contemporary films] misrepresent the surface, the more correctly they represent society, because they reflect its secret mechanism" (*OdM* 280). Within this basically Freudian model of cultural analysis, reality resides both in the mechanisms of repression and in what is repressed; in other words, reality can only be grasped in its contradictions.

The objects of collective repression are not only the "secret wishes" that occasionally erupt into film fantasies but, more effectively, what the viewers wish to escape from: "normal existence in its imperceptible horror [*das normale Dasein in seiner unmerklichen Schrecklichkeit*]." ³⁴ While Kracauer is fascinated with the luxury hotel as a space of simulation, he leaves no doubt about the exclusive character of that space and its inhabitants ("they resemble the lilies in the field: instead of

33. I differ here from Thomas Elsaesser, who charges that Kracauer's critique of ideology obscures and thereby "falsifies" his proto-postmodern "concern with the cinema as a marginal sphere of life and its fascination as an experience of surface effects." "Cinema — The Irresponsible Signifier or 'The Gamble with History': Film Theory or Cinema Theory?" *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987): 82.

34. Kracauer, *Die Angestellten* (1929), in *Schriften* 1: 298.

worries they have yachts"). If for a postmodernist like Baudrillard the implosion of reality is universal and complete (whatever the subjective-pragmatic experience of individuals may be),³⁵ for Kracauer it is still a matter of perspective, a question of the social, i.e. class-specific, horizon of that experience. Thus he reads even the "spatial images" of unemployment agencies as "dreams of society," "hieroglyphs" to be deciphered in terms of social reality.³⁶ The analogy between the spaces of fantasy and the areas of exigency they repress only underscores the contradiction: these areas are part of society's self-representation, even as — and because — they remain hidden from public view. Therefore, Kracauer again and again relates the reality of contemporary image production and circulation to the reality of its limit terms: injustice, poverty, suffering, and death. "The flight of the images is the flight from revolution and from death."³⁷

It could be argued that Kracauer's insistence on the discrepancy between the reality of the new media of consumption and a more authentic reality of human suffering assumes the function of the transcendently grounded concept of truth in his earlier, theologically motivated writings. In a strict epistemological sense, this may be the case, although in practice the relation between the two kinds of reality more often takes the form of a constellation that the critic constructs from the contradictory make-up of contemporary social life.³⁸ What seems more

35. See, for instance, Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," trans. John Johnston, in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983) 133, n. 4.

36. "Arbeitsnachweise," *Straßen* 52. Also see the discussion of the notion of "spatial images" (*Raumbilder*) as dreams of society, and the Benjaminian implication of the city as a "dreaming collective," in Adorno's letter to Kracauer, 25 July 1930, and Kracauer's response, 1 Aug. 1930 (Kracauer Papers, Marbach).

37. *Die Angestellten* 289, also 248. The chapter on the leisure culture of the white-collar workers is entitled "Asyl für Obdachlose" (Asylum for the Homeless) which alludes to the experience of "transcendental homelessness," now a mass phenomenon, but also refers to the structural inseparability of mass-cultural glamor and the misery it tries to make people forget. In a similar vein, the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti becomes a running theme in Kracauer's reviews of 1927, e.g., "Amerika im Film," *FZ* 24 Aug. 1927: "the other America, not the real one which executed Sacco and Vanzetti." And he finds the sentimentality and sadism of Universal's 1927 version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* especially objectionable "because it reminds us of the blacks' struggle for liberation which has *not* been filmed" (*FZ* 6 May 1928).

38. Methodologically, Kracauer's critical practice during this period corresponds to his endorsement of montage in film aesthetics, which emphasizes construction rather than a one-to-one representation of reality. Criticizing a social-democratic review that complains about the absence of the work force from a special newsreel program,

problematic is the economic logic which necessitates that the expansion of one reality can proceed only at the expense of the other ("the flight of the images is the flight *from*. . ."). Kracauer first develops this thesis in the "Photography" essay in the opposition between photographic image and memory image, and in the concomitant notion that the proliferation of photographic images (in newsreels and illustrated magazines, for example) reduces human beings' capacity for (involuntary) recollection. Like Benjamin in his essay on Baudelaire, Kracauer invokes Bergson and Proust, and with them a Jewish tradition in which memory is pitted against the forward momentum of history.³⁹ In an article on the Frankfurt premiere of two sound films he concludes:

The sound film is so far the final link in the chain of a series of powerful inventions which, with blind certainty and as if guided by a secret will, push toward the complete representation of human reality. This would make it possible, in principle, to wrest the totality of life from its transitoriness and transmit it in the eternity of the image.

However, he immediately qualifies this proto-Bazinian adage. The total cinematic grasp on reality extends only to that aspect of life which manifests itself in spatial terms and corresponds to the measurable, chronological time denounced by Bergson — as opposed to the time of experience, the time of Proust's *recherche*.

The reality preserved in the sound film corresponds so little to the reality Proust had in mind that the two exclude rather than complement each other. . . . It almost seems as if human beings were losing the intensive life that resists imaging in the measure in which they become capable of capturing the extensive, spatial life.⁴⁰

Kracauer objects that the point is rather to "change the arrangement": "Were the meaningless chatter replaced by a construction [*Anordnung*] in which one image could comment upon the other, the work force would not necessarily have to perform in the flesh but could, as it were, appear between the lines." *FZ* 22 Sept. 1931, reprinted in *Kino* 15.

39. Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1939), *Illuminations* 187ff; and his essay on Nicolai Lesskow, "The Storyteller" (1936/7), *Illuminations* 83-109. Also see Kracauer, *History* 82-86, 160-163, and *passim*. On the opposition of history and memory in the Jewish tradition see Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle and London: U of Washington P, 1982).

40. "Tonbildfilm: Zur Vorführung im Frankfurter Gloria-Palast," *FZ* 12 Oct. 1928, reprinted in *Schriften* 2 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1979): 411.

No doubt there is a connection between the historic explosion of mechanically — or electronically — produced images and the decline of certain kinds of remembering, but this need not lead to culturally conservative conclusions. Nor would Kracauer and, for that matter, Benjamin, want to occlude the possibility that film and photography have also enabled new forms of memory and experience (which for both are almost synonymous terms).⁴¹ In the same article on the sound film, Kracauer actually pursues this possibility, drafting the technology of sound for the project of redemption: “To redeem the unintentional din of the street for an intervention into our world is the preserve of the new technical procedure, just as it was that of previous film technique to make the life of light and shadows accessible to consciousness.”⁴² More than the formal play of light and shadows, cinematic devices like the close-up, camera movement, and editing can capture the world of things in its habitual, unconscious interdependence with human life, with the traces of social, psychic, and erotic relations. Writing on Jacques Feyder’s *Thérèse Raquin*, Kracauer extols the representation of the petty-bourgeois Paris apartment, “which is populated by ghosts”:

every piece of furniture is charged with the fates that unfurled here in the past. There is the double bed, the high armchair, the silver dishes — all these things have the significance of witnesses: they are palpably infused with human substance and now they speak, often better than human beings might speak. In hardly any film — except for the Russian films — the power of dead things has been forced to the surface as actively and fully as here [FZ 29 March 1928].^{42a}

41. On Benjamin’s concept of experience, see Marleen Stoessel, *Aura, das vergessene Menschliche: Zu Sprache und Erfahrung bei Walter Benjamin* (Munich: Hanser, 1983); on the role of cinema in relation to that concept, see my essay, “Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: ‘The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology,’” *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987): 179–224.

42. “Tonbildfilm” 410–11. The paragraph concludes: “Sound film will achieve its real significance only when it opens up an existence unknown before, the sounds and noises surrounding us which never communicated with visual impressions and always eluded the senses.” In a number of reviews following the introduction of sound, Kracauer outlines something like a cinematic phenomenology of noise — against the dominance of the voice qua dialogue — reminiscent of similar directions in modern music from Russolo through Satie to Cage. On the significance of sound in Kracauer’s film theory, see the recent article by Helmut Lethen, “Sichtbarkeit: Kracauers Liebeslehre,” in *Siegfried Kracauer: Neue Interpretationen*, eds. Michael Kessler and Thomas Y. Levin (Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1990) 195–228; 205–14.

42a. Reprinted in Witte 136f.

Kracauer's ascription of a new form of anamnestic capability to film touches on Benjamin's well-known metaphor of an "optical unconscious," referring to the camera's ability to explore an "unconsciously permeated space."⁴³

Like Benjamin and, before him, Béla Balázs, Kracauer adapts the method of physiognomy, the interpretation of character from imperceptible facial features, to the realm of film aesthetics and its psychosocial parameters. But more emphatically than Balázs he insists on the role of language in film's relation to reality. In a review of Balázs's book, *Visible Man or the Culture of Film* (*Der sichtbare Mensch oder die Kultur des Films*, 1924), he paraphrases that book's argument in decidedly linguistic terms: "as people on the screen remain mute . . . things are endowed with a tongue. For the first time ever, perhaps, they speak. Film retrieves the 'small life' of things and inserts it into the world of symbols" (*FZ* 10 July 1927). Since language is the medium of redemption (here too Kracauer is true to Messianic thought),⁴⁴ film's relation to reality entails a double work of transcription: on the level of production, in the selection and construction of the material through cinematic techniques; and on the level of reception, in the interpretive activity of spectators and critics. Balázs's denial of verbal (i.e. written) language, according to Kracauer a "serious blunder" (*schlimme Entgleisung*), leads him to a romantic conflation of physiognomy and class struggle, a confusion of mere visibility with genuine concreteness.

For Kracauer, the nature that returns the gaze of the physiognomist of modern life is neither preverbal nor pristine. The "material dimension" explored by the camera "at the expense of the intentional one" is still a social and historical space, by no means a space ostensibly exempt from, or opposite of, "ideology," as he later seems to suggest in the epilogue to *Theory of Film*. It is the alien landscape of a fallen world that confronts the beholder with its fragmentary debris and new configurations. Once Kracauer abandons the metaphysical premises under which the fallen world means nothing but "transcendental homelessness," he "calmly" (or perhaps not quite so calmly) "embarks on adventurous travels"

43. Benjamin, "The Work of Art," *Illuminations* 236f. Also see Hansen, "Benjamin" 207-212.

44. Rabinbach, "Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse": "Thought focuses on the *restoration* of lost meanings, suppressed connotations, and is often linked to a sense of redemption through language and through the reading of texts which reveal the hidden presence or traces of a Messianic epoch" (84-85).

through the “far-flung ruins” as which modern life presents itself in Benjamin’s famous passage, after film has “exploded [the urban-industrial] prison-world with the dynamite of one-tenth seconds.”⁴⁵ He does so in a progression of guises and roles, from the *flâneur* to the detective to the *chiffonnier* or *Lumpensammler* (an image bestowed upon him by Benjamin), a ragpicker gathering the detritus left behind by the storm of progress, refashioning found objects into allegories of modern experience.⁴⁶ For Kracauer, as for Freud, there is meaning in everything, in even the most insignificant, worthless detail, though we may be cut off from its original context; everything therefore demands interpretation.

Like Benjamin fascinated with the Surrealists, Kracauer sought to redeem the possibility of auratic experience as a cognitive mode in a postlapsarian, secularized world. This project is epitomized in a *Denkbild* entitled “Ansichtspostkarte” (“Picture Postcard,” *FZ* 26 May 1930), which oddly literalizes and at the same time allegorizes what Benjamin had called a year earlier, in reference to Surrealism, “profane illumination.”⁴⁷ Kracauer describes the “gentle glow,” “as calming as it is inexplicable,” that seems to emanate from the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche at night. The glow is in reality a reflex — a “reflex of the façades of light” by which the picture palaces of the Berlin Kurfürstendamm, with their pillars of light, glaring posters, and mirror-glass showcases, “turn night into day in order to banish the horror of the night from the working day of their patrons.” Yet even the aggressive ideological effort, which goes beyond the purpose of advertising, scintillates in oxymoronic, ambiguous terms: “a flaming protest against the darkness of our existence, a protest of a thirst of life which flows, as if by itself, into the desperate embrace of the pleasure business.” Adding another twist to Kracauer’s conceit, the church displays “the unintentional reflection of this sinister glow”:

45. *Illuminations* 236.

46. Benjamin refers to Kracauer as a *Lumpensammler* in an early review of *Die Angestellten* (“Ein Außenseiter macht sich bemerkbar,” *Gesammelte Schriften* 3 [Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1982]). Kracauer later recalled this epithet with great pride; see letters to Adorno of 28 Aug. 1954 and 16 Jan. 1964 (Kracauer Papers). Benjamin comments on the figure of the *chiffonnier* in Baudelaire in *Das Passagen-Werk*, *Gesammelte Schriften* 5.1: 441f.

47. “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt, 1978) 192. Also see Jürgen Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin” (1972), *New German Critique* 17 (Spring 1979): 30-59; 45-46; and Hansen, “Benjamin” 193. “Ansichtspostkarte” is reprinted in *Straßen* 37-38.

What the spectacle of light leaves over and what business has cast out is preserved by bleak walls. The outside of the church, which is no church, becomes the refuge of what has been spilled and forgotten and shines as beautifully as if it were the Holy of Holies. Secret tears thus find their place of memory [*Gedächtnisort*]. Not in the hidden interior — in the middle of the street the neglected and inconspicuous is gathered and transformed until it begins to radiate, a comfort for everyone.

A waste product of the relentless glare of modern simultaneity and presence, the luminous façade of the obsolescent site of interiority becomes a surface for remembering (Kracauer puns on the name of the church), a public screen or, less grandiose, a picture postcard inviting us to project what is being eclipsed, however undefined and unspectacular.

While Kracauer the moralist confronts his readers with the contradictions of everyday reality, a number of his writings before 1933 reveal a surrealist streak: they are propelled by a wide-eyed marvelling at modernity's strange new sights and juxtapositions, by an indomitable curiosity for the unknown, preliminary, and as yet undefined, for incongruous configurations and spaces of improvisation. Like Keaton, the silent knight, Kracauer roams through the magic forest of the modern urban landscape, but with Kafka he knows that this fairy tale cannot have a happy ending, because the spell is real.⁴⁸ The flipside of Kracauer's willingness to immerse himself in the thicket of the fallen life, however, is his pragmatic stance as the daily reviewer of the so-called average production. Thus, even Kracauer's most routine reviews of the most routine films, often no more than increasingly nonchalant if not parodistic plot summaries, may contain a saving remark about "beautiful nature scenes" or "city shots," about acting and performance style, acrobatic, dancing or riding stunts, or well-handled cinematic techniques. Moreover, as Kracauer is as much a cinema critic as

48. See, for instance, "Kalikowelt" and "Abschied von der Lindenpassage" (FZ 21 Dec. 1930), both reprinted in *OdM*. Benjamin extols the political force of Kracauer's "surrealist superimpositions" in his review of *Die Angestellten*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* 3: 226. For Kracauer's description of Keaton as a fairy-tale knight see his review of *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, FZ 27 Nov. 1928, reprinted in *Kino* 183-84. For his advocacy of "improvisation" see, for instance: "Zirkus Sarraani," FZ 13 Nov. 1929; "Stehbars im Süden," FZ 8 Oct. 1926, reprinted in *Straßen in Berlin und anderswo*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Arsenal, 1987) 51 ("The value of cities is measured by the number of places which they give over to improvisation"); "Der Eisenstein-Film" FZ 5 June 1928, reprinted in *Witte* 79; and "An der Grenze des Gestern," FZ 12 July 1932.

a film reviewer, he frequently comments on the quality of the screening as performance, the theater experience rather than the film experience, occasionally praising the musical accompaniment or (more rarely) the behavior of the audience.

The issue of Kracauer's "redemptive critique," to borrow Habermas's term for Benjamin, is linked to the question I will address in the remainder of this essay — a question of methodology and critical self-perception. For I think that the Gnostic-Messianic bent of Kracauer's early writings on film and mass culture not only motivated his turn to mass culture as an *object*, but that it also shaped his *approach* to that object. This approach is characterized by a peculiar way of entwining experience and critique — a mode of interpretation which is significant not only in comparison with Adorno's theoretical purism, and his blindnesses toward mass culture, but also in view of the critical quandaries of contemporary film theory and theories of postmodern culture.

As is well known, Adorno took Kracauer to task for his lack of dialectics, a charge that crops up early on in their lifelong correspondence and appears in published form in Adorno's ambivalent homage to Kracauer on his 75th birthday. The charge is that Kracauer stops halfway in battling the antinomy of theory and experience. On the one hand, Adorno accuses Kracauer of overwhelming the phenomena of experience with his own critical subjectivity: "In the gaze which is sucked into the object the place of theory is always already taken up by Kracauer himself."⁴⁹ On the other hand, Adorno attributes the "priority of the optical" in Kracauer to his psychobiographical affinity with the damaged world of things, a complicity which, in Adorno's view, leaves no space for "resistance to reification." Adorno stops short of saying, although in a complex way insinuates, that Kracauer's immersion in the fallen world amounts to a collaboration with the status quo.⁵⁰ What eludes Adorno's critique — and what seems symptomatic in these two conflicting charges — is that Kracauer could see himself at once as part of the fallen world and as advancing its transformation.

A number of Kracauer's essays from the mid-1920s onward display a remarkable shift in perspective, within one and the same text, towards

49. Theodor W. Adorno, "Der wunderliche Realist: Über Siegfried Kracauer," *Noten zur Literatur* 3 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1965): 92.

50. Adorno, *Noten* 107. On the lifelong friendship between Adorno and Kracauer, see Martin Jay, "Adorno and Kracauer: Notes on a Troubled Friendship," *Salmagundi* 40 (Winter 1978), reprinted in *Permanent Exiles* 217-36.

the mass-cultural object under discussion. Similar to his programmatic reading of the Grune film, yet with inverse emphasis, these essays tend to build up an impersonal distance by way of a sociological, culturally critical, or philosophical reflection, only to switch, at a particular point, to the voice of personal experience, to identification and participation. The shift is often staged through a rhetorical switch from a third person account to the first person, mostly plural or, in another variant, even to second person singular. To take an example from the "Photography" essay, Kracauer describes the photograph of a grandmother largely through the reactions of the grandchildren: they laugh at the old-fashioned dress, and, "at the same time, it gives them the shivers. For seeing through the ornament of the dress from which the grandmother has vanished they think they see a moment of elapsed time — time which passes without return" (*OdM* 23). Several sections later, toward the end of the essay, the critic assumes the shivers as his own: "This once clung to *us* like *our* skin, and this is the way *our* property clings to *us* even today. *We* are contained in nothing and photography gathers fragments around a nothingness." Hence "the shiver felt by the beholder of old photographs" (*OdM* 32; emphasis added). This gesture of identification is significant because of its tension with the surface argument of the text, which asserts that photography, especially as it proliferates through the illustrated magazines, is an attempt to repress the fear of death, in contrast with the memory image in which the thought of death is still present (*OdM* 35). By granting the photograph of the grandmother the power to inspire a reflection of — and on — mortality, the writer prepares for the turn of the argument at the end of the essay, when photographic negativity is allocated a function in the project of redemption.

Kracauer's rhetorical shifts in perspective are especially interesting when he, by switching to the first person, identifies with types of social behavior, in particular with forms of consumption, which he had previously criticized from what seemed like a culturally superior point of view. In an essay on "Travelling and Dancing" (*FZ* 15 March 1925), Kracauer reads the rise of tourism and modern forms of social dancing as symptoms of mechanization and rationalization, of the implementation of "an impoverished omnipresence in all dimensions that can be calculated" (*OdM* 45). Accordingly, these leisure activities are symptomatic of the "double existence" imposed on human beings who are cut off from the spiritual sphere. And yet, this *Ersatz* is not only "real"

in its negativity but also offers the “possibility of an *aesthetic* behavior vis-à-vis the organized drudgery” (*OdM* 48). The turn from critique to redemption is again accompanied by a switch of the grammatical subject: “*We* are like children when *we* travel, *we* playfully delight in a new speed, a relaxed roaming and roving. . . . Likewise, when *we* dance, *we* scan a rhythm that did not exist before, a time prepared for *us* by a thousand inventions. . . . Technology has taken us unawares and has opened up regions still looking at us with a blank stare” (*OdM* 49; emphasis added).

It is hard to imagine that Adorno would have written anything comparable, although Kracauer’s preceding critique in no way lacks the devastating acumen with which the former would have viewed these phenomena. The methodological difference, in this case, comes down to an issue of class. By acknowledging socially stereotypical and alienated behavior as part of his own experience, Kracauer refuses to let his intellectual privilege deceive him as to his actual social status — which, unlike Adorno’s, was all too close to the urban employees whose habits of consumption and leisure he studied. In his essay series on that new class, *Die Angestellten* (The White-Collar Employees, 1929), he acts as a “participant observer” not only for the sake of sociological method, but because he knew how little security separated him from their fate.⁵¹

The subject that moves between the outside and the inside of material is obviously not unified, not the identical, sovereign subject of transcendental philosophy and bourgeois culture. It is a subject “without skin,” to modify Adorno’s characterization of Kracauer; and it knows itself to be fragmented and precarious. What is more, it seems to seek situations in which its very possibility is threatened. Such situations are familiar in Kracauer’s prose pieces on his wanderings through urban streets and squares (as in his “Memory of a Paris Street”), and they are at the core of the other variant of the rhetorical switch, the shift to second person singular. In his beautiful essay on “Boredom” (*FZ* 16 Nov. 1924), for instance, the act of listening to the radio, with its boundless imperialism of imposing the world upon us, is compared to “one of those dreams one dreams on an empty stomach”: “a tiny ball rolls towards you from a great distance, grows into close-up and finally crashes over you; you can neither stop it nor escape,

51. For an example of this attitude see *Die Angestellten* 221-22. On Kracauer’s concept of the intellectual as white-collar worker, see Hans G Helms, “Der wunderliche Kracauer,” pt.1, *Neues Forum* 18 (June/July 1971): 28.

you are lying there like a powerless little doll. . .” (*OdM* 323). In the essay entitled “The Forbidden Gaze” (*FZ* 9 April 1925), the figure of the doll or puppet reappears in a similarly masochistic and paranoid scenario and is again introduced by a switch from third-person description to an emphatic “you.” The source of overwhelming anxiety in this case is a pianella, a musical clock with a *féerie* of dancing puppets, which constitutes the centerpiece of a shabby restaurant. The text builds up to the point where the beholder, entranced by the magic of mirrors, light, and movement, is seized by a shock: “you are suddenly awakened from a dream; but you don’t wake to reality, rather, a veil is torn and now, in that very moment, the phantom appears.” The phantom arises from the dancing figures of a past century, but it is an emanation of the forbidden gaze belonging to the limbo of the unredeemed dead. “This is it: that an encounter takes place between beings that do not really exist, that you, who are a phantom too in the empty nothingness, are haunted by bewitched figures which deny you passage and instead pull you down into the realm of loss.”⁵²

Such crossings mark Kracauer’s own passage through the “empty center,” to resume his troping of the Paris map. For the deliberately induced violation — to the point of annihilation — of the bourgeois ego is not merely the whim of a masochistic sensibility; rather, it is for Kracauer the very condition of experience. Even in *Theory of Film*, Kracauer makes the camera’s discovery of “the material world with its psychophysical correspondences” contingent upon the abdication of the unified subject: “we are free to experience it [i.e. the world in its dormant state] because we are fragmentized.”⁵³ Kracauer’s concept of experience owes at least as much to Freud as to Simmel and Scheler, much as he perceives the fragmentation of the subject in theological and historical terms. In that regard too, his concept of experience overlaps with Benjamin’s notion of the “aura,” especially in the implication of an uncanny, destabilizing self-encounter that has been spelled out by Gershom Scholem.⁵⁴

52. *Straßen 74*. The pianella described by Kracauer uncannily prefigures a similar object — and similar effects — in Fedor Ozep’s 1928 film, *Der lebende Leichnam*, which Kracauer reviewed for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on 28 Feb. 1929.

53. *Theory of Film* 300. Earlier in that book, Kracauer links this “fragmentized” receptivity to a psychic disposition of melancholy and self-estrangement (16-17). Also see his defense of passiveness and self-effacement as epistemological virtues in *History* 84-86.

54. Scholem, “Walter Benjamin and His Angel” (1972), *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis* (New York: Schocken, 1976) 236.

The subject in Kracauer's redemptive critique is both fragmented and isolated, isolated in a transcendental sense and in its exile from the crumbling bastions of bourgeois culture. But in this precarious state the subject is not alone, at least not on the level of rhetorical construction. Just as the emphatic "you" in the passages quoted above appeals to the reader to recognize the experience, Kracauer often invokes a community of contemporaries who share his sense of alienation and his investment in the preliminary — from "Those Who Wait" to the "genuine flaneur," the "vagabond" who understands the Lindenpassage as "a passage through the bourgeois world" which is at once critique and postmortem (*FZ* 21 December 1930). And just as Kracauer included himself among the consumers of mass culture (though not consistently, as the gendered polemics of the "The Little Shopgirls" shows), he also proceeded on the assumption that, in principle, the capacity for critical reflection was available to others as well — even those who were the subject of capitalist manipulation. If, in practice, the consumers are largely complicit, the boundaries between them and the critical intellectual are not fundamental but gliding and relative. A redemptive critique, after all, has to be able to become public and general, or it is not truly redemptive.⁵⁵

I will conclude with a *Denkbild* in which Kracauer evokes the possibility that the consumer could relate to the glamor of the surface in a simultaneously receptive and reflective manner. In an article from the *Frankfurter Zeitung* titled "Berg- und Talbahn" ("Rollercoaster"), published, significantly, on Bastille Day in 1928, Kracauer describes a roller-coaster at the Berlin Lunapark. The façade of the rollercoaster shows a painted skyline of New York: "The workers, the small people, the employees who spend the week being oppressed by the city, now triumph by air over a super-Berlinian New York." This façade, however, is incomplete; once the car has reached the summit, it gives way to a bare skeleton:

So this is New York — a painted surface and behind it Nothingness? The small couples are enchanted and disenchanted at the same time. Not that they would dismiss the grandiose city painting as simply humbug, but they see through the illusion, and the triumph over the facades no longer means that much to them. They linger at the place in which things show their double face; they hold the diminished skyscrapers in their open hand; they are liberated from a world whose splendor they nonetheless know.⁵⁶

55. Scholem, "The Messianic Idea" 16.

56. *Straßen* 35-36. For a more skeptical sequel to this *Denkbild*, contrasting the

This vision belongs to the moment, to be sure, but the double consciousness Kracauer sketches as a possibility, as a point of departure, differs strikingly from the singleminded expertise that Horkheimer and Adorno attribute to the peons of the Culture Industry.

Kracauer's *Denkbild* implies the vision of a modernity whose spell as progress is broken, whose disintegrated elements have become available for an emancipatory practice. When the roller coaster riders shriek involuntarily as they plunge into the abyss, their cry expresses not only an existential fear but also ecstasy (*Seligkeit*), the bliss of "traversing a New York whose existence is suspended, which has ceased to be a threat." Once reality is made to show its "double face," its two-dimensional images can be reappropriated as a discourse of experience to be negotiated within a public context of interpretation. America, the incarnation of a disenchanted modernity, can be overcome only "when it discovers itself completely," that is, when it radicalizes its historical promises and puts them into social and cultural practice.

If the tradition of secular Jewish Messianism and literary Gnosticism can be redeemed despite its metaphysical premises, then in this sense: that it enabled the self-consciously marginal intellectual to analyze modernity as an already disintegrating, yet still incomplete project — a project that, for Kracauer at least, necessarily entailed the democratization of culture. Driven by a powerful impulse of interpretation, he directed his critical-redemptive gaze at the material configurations and transformations of everyday life, seeking reality where it seemed most contradictory, ambiguous, and provisional. In this endeavor, he himself inevitably remained on the threshold of ambiguity, if not ambivalence — between a critique of reification grounded in a theology of history and a recognition of new, specifically modern forms of experience and relations of representation and reception. Wherever the message does not immobilize the method, he throws into relief an immanent modernity in which disintegration and emancipation are inextricably entwined, in which the contradictions between them have to be negotiated in terms of the concrete horizons of language, institutions, and the public sphere.

organized pleasures of the Berlin Lunapark with the unruly adventures of the Paris Foires, see Kracauer's article of the following year, "Organisiertes Glück: Zur Wiedereröffnung des Lunaparks," *FZ* 8 May 1930.

“Light Sorrow”: Siegfried Kracauer as Literary Critic

Karsten Witte

To study a well-known author within a lesser-known discipline is not to diminish his accomplishments or stature. Historians of modern thought are well aware that Siegfried Kracauer was first an architect, then a sociologist, a journalist, and a novelist, and finally a historian and a theorist of film and historiography. But are we thus obligated to maintain that he approached his *Sociology as Science* scientifically, his novels literarily, *The White-Collar Workers* sociologically, *Jacques Offenbach* musically, film cinematically, and history historically, as his critics in the various disciplines have traditionally argued? In other words, did his object determine his methods, or did his methods determine his objects?

To be sure, the architect used buildings to critique imperial architecture; the novelist wrote *Gunster* and *Georg* to critique New Objectivity; the sociologist used montage imagery to critique *The White-Collar Workers*; the chronicler of the Second Empire used its internal tendencies toward Bonapartism to critique the Kaiserreich; the film historian put fascism on trial; the philosopher of history — Kracauer’s last role — critiqued the privileging of linear time. Using existing conditions as his raw material, this author managed to propose countermodels for these same conditions — for always implicit in his critique was an emphatic belief in the perfectability of the basic social contract.

As Kracauer developed from a critic of his day into a historiographer of his time, the energy driving him, already apparent in his work at the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, was later channeled into deeply meditative books that took decades to write. There is no question that the exile experience was damaging to every aspect of the exiles’ lives, and Kracauer was no exception. Still, the trace left by this transition in the fabric of

his work remains to be investigated. We may therefore ask, amid the shifting paradigms evident in his cultural-political premises, in biohistorical breaks and discontinuities within his *oeuvre*, whether the strategies of Kracauer's texts were transformed as well. Was this transformation necessary, intended and therefore apparent? Neither the book on *Offenbach* — in which his methodological propositions fade from view in their very development — nor in his *Theory of Film* — a book that illuminates its methodological propositions in the form of an *overproduction* — offers a particularly distinct strategy for textual production. Whether operetta or musical film, Orpheus or Astaire — both media are presented and explicated in narrative form; both are subjected to the rules of literary rhetoric. Whatever Kracauer chose for his form of expression and whichever disciplines he chose to address, he did so within a canonically determined realm of possibilities, where the genre games of this critically intrepid entrepreneur met with considerable success.

Literary criticism is only one of the genres in which Kracauer's dramatizations and strategies reveal themselves — a revelation that is as concise as it is incidental. Granted, for an author better known for his film criticism, the field of contemporary literature was only a sideline. Nevertheless, he always took up the challenge. In this essay, the demanding nature of Kracauer's critical method will be presented with examples that are largely absent in complete form from the volume of works assembled by the author himself, *Das Ornament der Masse*, but that appear in the collection of essays recently edited by Inka Mülder-Bach.¹ In this treasure chest are enticing, largely forgotten reviews that set the tone for most of the Weimar Republic's cultural politics.

The forum for Kracauer's critical engagement with the world of literature was not a specialized journal like *Die literarische Welt* but rather the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, a paper published three times a day (not including the city supplement), one which assembled a breathtaking quantity of information and for which Kracauer served as contributing editor for the cultural and editorial pages from 1921 to 1933. From humble beginnings on assignments more appropriate for local reporters, his reputation as an independent and incorruptible critic grew, just as the newspaper, in contrast, fell into a relationship of increasing dependence on the economically motivated politics of the IG-Farben corporation. The regard for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* as a liberal paper was so widespread in

1. Siegfried Kracauer, *Schriften* 5, 3 vols., ed. Inka Mülder-Bach (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1990). Henceforth cited as *Schriften* 5.

Europe that even the Jewish merchants of Trieste received it, as Umberto Saba notes in his novel *Ernesto*.

As a reporter, Kracauer was responsible for transmitting "culture" in the narrowest sense of the word to the widest of audiences. Whether he was covering the renovation of the Frankfurt Exchange or the Main Post Office, a meeting of the Society for the Fight Against Sexually Transmitted Diseases, or one on the Frankfurt dialect, Kracauer felt compelled to file a story. His response was to make demands of his own, to challenge the intellects of his editors and readers. With reference to philosophers like Georg Simmel, Ernst Bloch, Max Scheler, and Georg Lukács, he concisely depicted the current state of contemporary thought, and while some of these polemics met with success, others ended in lawsuits or in some kind of turmoil. Kracauer's articles built temporary dams in the river of history, dams that made it possible to visualize the actual qualities of the material rushing over them, if only for a moment.

The singularity of this type of investigation into material reality in daily reviews was noted by Kracauer's friend and colleague Joseph Roth. In a letter to then editorial chief, Benno Reifenberg, written in Paris on 13 May 1926 and heretofore published only as a fragment, he states:

Krac is clear, well-grounded in the facts, pungent, bitter. Krac picks abstractions out of the air and brings them to life. Krac is a philosophic poet and therefore should be valued as a journalist. Krac is a Siamese prince.²

Roth characterizes Kracauer's journalistic abilities as those of a translator, a mediator who is able to examine what is foreign without colonizing it. Kracauer brought abstractions to life not by feeding them with naturalism but rather by keeping them alive *as* abstractions. Describing him as a "philosophic poet," Roth is well aware of the paradox he invokes: as is usually the case when the arts encounter systematic theories of knowledge, Kracauer's critical approach produced certain incidental by-products, which neither poetry nor philosophy could have produced independently. Thus Roth delineates a place and topos that suit Kracauer perfectly: the interstice that the latter would later experience as a formula for his own pathos. Roth's assessment also captures the undeniable physiognomic aspect of Kracauer's "Eastern" face, described

2. Joseph Roth, Catalogue from *Ausstellung Deutsche Bibliothek* (Frankfurt, 1979) 116.

as that of a “Siamese prince” — exotic, compelling, noble. Roth sketches an idealistic image of a friend whose sympathies, interests, and even methods were so close to his own that the foreign adjective “Siamese” could also be read as a symptom for a projection of the symbiotic and inseparable qualities in their relationship. The author Roth brought out the novelist in Kracauer; the editorialist Kracauer provided the journalist Roth with space in the paper at every conceivable opportunity.

The tone of Kracauer’s reviews was a product of the melancholy Kracauer felt when, finding it necessary to abstract life, he brought life to his abstractions. The sense of “light sorrow” (*helle Trauer*) that Kracauer experienced in a Joseph Roth novel is even more evident in his own work. This narrative tone, however, should not be confused with the one Walter Benjamin reproached as “leftist melancholy.” A philosophically grounded position, as suggested by Benjamin’s phrase, would be dissolved into a moral sentiment by Kracauer’s tone. Light sorrow can be considered a genuine alternative to the worn-out Enlightenment metaphor of Max Weber’s “demystification” or of Paul Tillich’s “demythologizing.” Directed against the premises of dialectical thinking, light sorrow implies a position of defiance in an individual, as well as an anonymous sign of willfulness.

Kracauer was entirely familiar with the aporia operative in the demystification metaphor. Without hesitation, he used it as an integral element of his textual strategy, assigning it the task of self-seduction. In this respect, the intent of his reviews is self-evident: with nothing more than brevity and elegance, pungency and laconism, and finally the self-reflexive play of his language, Kracauer’s reviews aim to produce insight *qua* critique.³ Even the enlightened demystifiers could not do without magic. They held their readers spellbound with sensual reason. To deny this “pleasure of the text” — in its production as much as in its assimilation — would be to fall prey to the classic crisis of that particular moviegoer who laughs in the dark but who suppresses his emotional reactions when the lights come up. Continuing to read Kracauer’s theoretical positions while conscious of their historical positioning, that is, as occupying a passing moment in time, I nonetheless see the textual strategies of Kracauer the critic as occupying an unsurpassable moment, where critical activity generates perpetual pleasure in the process of critique.

3. *Kritik*, the German word used here, also means “(book) review.” — Trans.

Kracauer's first piece of literary criticism to appear in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* is not, strictly speaking, literary criticism but a review composed in literary fashion, perhaps even as a model example of Roth's characterization. The interests of the reviewer center largely on the philosophical background of the author at hand, who hailed from the Darmstadt "School of Wisdom" of which Kracauer happened to be a staunch critic. Regarding Günther Weibrecht's book *Das Wir im Ich* (*The We in the I*) — whose title did not deliver a utopian promise — Kracauer penned what commentary he felt was necessary in two laconic, sarcastic sentences:

The beautifully printed book, furnished with a costly binding by an author who apparently belongs to the Keyserling circle, contains philosophical verse in pretentious, ballooning linguistic attire. Whether its publication was necessary in this time of paper shortage is certainly questionable.⁴

Kracauer's *brevitas* testifies to the book's emptiness, his resounding sarcasm to its failings. Also notable for Kracauer are the artificial device of overwhelming the book's content with its external appearance, and the vacant space where the book's argument should be made, which then contrasts the materialist concern for paper with the question of philosophical *production*. The unspoken call for an ideal is loud indeed: the moralist demands a book that justifies its material existence (i. e., printing costs). The literary content must live up to its form; the latter may not consume the former. From all this we may gather that doubt moves the critic's quill; criticism's task is to examine and to reproach. The ultimate critique occurs in a dismissive gesture.

Kracauer's presumption of free license here is even more surprising in light of the fact that his position at the paper had not yet been secured: it was not until 1924 that he received a firm contract as editorialist and his own small office in the newspaper's headquarters. His responsibilities initially included the editorial division of the travel section (*Bäder-Blatt*); responsibility for the *Literary Supplement* soon followed. This formal assignment under contract sheds light on how Kracauer received the *material* possibility — within a context of "position politics" (that is, struggle over placement within the section) — to become so visible as a literary critic. This occurred, incidentally, almost simultaneously with his

4. Kracauer, *Feuilleton* (*Literary Supplement*) of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 31 Mar. 1922.

establishment as a film critic in an uncontested leading role, which within the newspaper's hierarchy was *not* a matter of departmental dignity.

While Kracauer's continued interest in detective and serial novels remained relatively inconspicuous, his attacks on contemporary German authors (Klaus Mann, Peter Mendelssohn, and Otto Zarek, among others) were nothing of the kind. The discoveries he made for the bourgeois reading public stand out as well: authors from the Soviet Union, such as Ilya Ehrenburg and Sergei Tretyakóv. Anticipating his relentlessly rigorous mentor in French literature — Benjamin — Kracauer also dealt with novelists such as André Malraux, Julien Green, and Louis-Ferdinand Céline.⁵ And yet, remaining within the limits of his cultural and political responsibilities, these having become relatively fixed around 1930, Kracauer did not review a single Thomas Mann novel (ironically, the young Kracauer counted himself among the “glowing” admirers and imitators of Thomas Mann's *Jugendstil* novellas), although he had reviewed many of Heinrich Mann's books. Between 1930 and 1933, as the *Frankfurter Zeitung*'s cultural correspondent in Berlin, Kracauer showed a particular interest in international literature: Mikhail Sholokhov and Ernest Hemingway are two examples. Forced into exile, however, his production as a critic was cut short, and he redirected his energies toward the field of historiography.

Kracauer's later works' vexed relationship to his earlier writing is evident in a deletion he made from an early Weimar piece defending his *operative* critique. In the 1963 version of “How Do We Explain Successful Books?” (in *Das Ornament der Masse*; originally in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 27 June 1931), under the new title “On Successful Books and Their Public,” an ending suitable for 1931 could not be retained: “Whoever wants to change must be aware of what is already changing. The purpose of the series we are sponsoring is to facilitate public engagement with social reality” (first printing). His list of critical presuppositions thus includes the following: an operative engagement is subject to the dialectical condition that links knowledge to change (the young Marx formulated this concept with a conspicuously political pathos: the best weapon of critique is the critique of weapons); critique as well as the critiqued (review and book) are subject to *use-value* determinations. In a piece on “The Duty of the Film Critic” (23 May 1932), written on the occasion of a Frankfurt convention of the National Association of German Movie

5. See volumes 2 and 3 of *Schriften* 5.

Theatre Proprietors, Kracauer discussed the systems of dissemination particular to an art form in the guise of an industrial product like film. This experience is probably what taught him that a review, too, “is a product like everything else.”

How did this daily engagement actually appear in action? Examples from the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in which the critic reviews novels and short stories by Joseph Roth, Julien Green, Otto Zarek, Heinrich Mann, and Ernest Hemingway will serve to outline the patterns and strategies of Kracauer’s discourse. The discourse of other critics, whether active in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, in trade journals, or in other media, will not be referred to here. Roth and Benjamin will be touched on as needed; and the matter of how Benno Reifenberg or Friedrich Burschell (or for that matter, the essayists of neoconservatism, Josef Hofmiller, Rudolf Borchardt, and Ernst Robert Curtius) reacted to literature has been treated adequately elsewhere. I am more concerned here with isolating Kracauer’s critical demands and their fulfillment.

The Transformative Review

A good example of the transformative review would be the detailed review of Roth’s novel *Die Flucht ohne Ende* (*Flight without End*), published under the title “Siberia to Paris, with Stopovers” (*Frankfurter Zeitung*, 27 Nov. 1927). The book was distributed the same year by Kurt Wolff’s publishing company in Munich.⁶ The review is terse and demanding, a tour de force of criticism which reiterates in its insightfulness the very use-value of the genre. Roth’s novel, writes Kracauer,

describes the experiences of an educated “man of the heart” within the temporary stability of Europe today. There are hardly any more books like this one, not because of lack of available talent, but because there is a lack of people who are incorruptible. The place where, as in this case, incorruptibility finds its most precise characterization [*das genaue Wort*] is in a book that supplies its own individual tone and an authentic form.

Also appearing in the first sentence, which captures the exact sense of the contents, is the characterization of the work as a period novel. The

6. See *Schriften* 5, vol. 2: 100-03. Since the reviews treated here are short, individual page citations are not included.

topic at hand is “Europe today,” an expression whose skeptical tone cannot be missed. Furthermore, Kracauer’s interjection of “temporary” unmasks the European stability sought by the Locarno treaty of 1925 — a treaty generated by the political constellation of Aristide Briand, Austen Chamberlain, and Gustaf Stresemann, and regarded as a foreign policy success for Stresemann — as deceptive. In light of the general optimism of the interbellum period, this was a conspicuously sober assessment.

Kracauer makes it clear that Roth’s novel represents a departure from the norm. Sporting its “own tone” and “an authentic form,” it corresponds to Kracauer’s literary critical ideal. Bringing a Flaubertian category into play provides support for this evaluation: the precise word (*le mot juste*), a category that marks the effort to describe phenomena of the (outer) world without the mediation of concepts. By invoking a poetic category linked to authorial “incorruptibility,” Kracauer combines aesthetic judgment with moral argument. The critic consciously takes up a position that produces a rigorous equivalence between aesthetics and morals. For the sake of finding the *mot juste*, the maximum of literary variables must be made available and then discarded.

The second section of Kracauer’s Roth review, introduced with a quotation, deals more closely with the novel’s form, here characterized as a *report*. Still evaluating along the lines of the *mot juste*, Kracauer sees this genre classification, along with his positive assessment of Roth’s deliberate renunciation of narrative omniscience, as fundamental to the critical experience and analysis of reality. Quoting Roth, Kracauer notes:

I have not invented anything, nor composed anything. Writing is no longer a matter of condensing. What is most important is what can be observed. The novel is a report. Its form is distinguished by its unwillingness to force events into a uniform scheme. The European world in which we live has forfeited its uniformity: it would therefore be dishonest to maintain such a likeness. The discontinuity that reality offers remains in the novel as discontinuity. Threads are supposed to be knitted together but unravel at our touch. My novel leaves them as they are.

In the subsequent introduction of the novel’s hero, Franz Tunda, this hero’s “powerlessness, or better, his *impassibilité*” is cited as a further distinguishing mark of the novel’s form. Powerlessness is a central topos for Kracauer, as his observations on Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton attest. It is important to note, however, that the accent here is

not on the emotional state of powerlessness but on Flaubertian *impassibilité*, an already codified concept. Kracauer's translation shifts the stress from the personal (insensitivity, indifference, impotence) to the effects — to impersonality as an "*impassibilité cachée et infinie*." Kracauer's salvific strategy resurfaces in his emphasis on the preconceptual, the material *in statu nascendi*, the amorphous.

The continued analysis of the Tunda character — Kracauer virtually ignores the female characters surrounding the hero — reveals further the impersonality noted above. Tunda, so the story goes, is a person who "does not act"; he has no goals, he is disoriented and pointedly uninterested as entire countries pass him by. Kracauer's emphasis goes beyond the author here, producing a self-reflexive isolation intended for his own artistic or critical engagement:

In today's world, only a person who does not participate and who has no desires can become a receptacle for observations that concern the heart. Stillness reigns only around him. The ruling and the oppressed reveal their true forms only to him.

Both artistic and critical engagement are at stake here. Neither "the educated man of the heart" nor the "receptacle" is the novelistic issue for Roth. Kracauer loses himself in limitless empathy for Roth's hero. Siamese twins, once separated (or so one may speculate) grieve the loss of their symbiosis. And so Kracauer shapes his persona in secret: the critic as object, as fallen subject, the victim of impassibility, of ego expropriation, of depersonalization, all of which in turn are prerequisites for becoming a "receptacle for observations." The decision-making center for this process is not the head or the faculty of reason but the heart. The mediating action — the visibility of true forms, that is, the discarding of the untrue — takes place within this emotional attitude of tense waiting.

The concluding paragraph of the review relates to the reexamination of literature's aesthetic tools within a moral frame. Rather than revise sociobehavioral norms, Kracauer's review would reinstate a version of morality formulated in the spirit of the French moralists of the 17th and 18th centuries:

The book is suffused by a tone of light sorrow; it is not a protest directed against the times, but rather a sorrow that determines. It is deeper than protest — certainly not always, but on the other hand, in the formal area outlined here, indeed. While protest must remain blind in many places, sorrow has eyes, it sees. And in this

way, as nonviolent as it is, it helps protest. In the novel, sorrow is addressed not so much to current events, which may very well be crying out for change, as to the world, because sorrow embodies the world. Can anyone escape this world? No. As a result, sorrow travels on easily and lightly, as if over snow.

“Sorrow” is here the sense-filled form of protest. The clear-sightedness denied protest is granted to sorrow. Sorrow is granted the greater perceptive ability because the world, or society, experiences sorrow’s tautological positioning *as* the world, as an inescapable totality. The juxtaposition of sorrow and the concept “light” sets the former apart from the blinded realm of emotion — sorrow has eyes to see; it becomes easy and light.

Kracauer’s functioning as a critic requires that Tunda’s *attitude* — and not the uninvolved character himself — become, or rather be articulated as, the hero of the novel. As far as Kracauer’s textual strategy is concerned, one can only be a hero of *critique*. Kracauer no longer brings abstractions to life, as Roth suggested; on the contrary, he makes them into elements of his critical, transformative review.

The Motionless Review

The review appearing in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on 12 August 1928 of Julien Green’s novel *Adrienne Mesurat*, translated by Irene Kafka, offers a sense of another of Kracauer’s critical metaphors — that of motionlessness.⁷ Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the French original, bearing the same title and appearing in Amsterdam’s *International Revue*, serves as an instructive contrast to Kracauer’s review of *Mesurat*.

His review generates neither the “metaphysical foundation of the real,” of which Benjamin speaks, nor the “clockwork” of rudimentary and fateful forces “operating behind every event,” exploding with both endogenous and exogenous powers — admittedly “a cheerless stereotyping of all fateful moments.” On the contrary, it is the expression of a timeless human condition, which is the ultimate product of Kracauer’s analysis. In fact, apparently in acknowledgment of the fate metaphor, he too mentions the irrevocable “doom” besetting the woman protagonist. Yet this doom is not driven by the inscrutable powers of an anonymous

7. *Schriften* 5, vol. 2: 124-26.

fate; rather, it is determined by the heroine's surrender to a disorienting realm of the dead, "an entire choir" composed of things and people "cutting off all escape," writes Kracauer, using a clearly Kafkaesque image. A nameable realm of the dead "that will no longer allow disturbances" to interfere with its dominion — a minimum of historical reference is more than sufficient to situate this realm so the "signs of death" are condensed into the "funeral hymn of the old bourgeois world." This is the context in which the book is to be read. The "representation of an existence belonging to the dead," with an initially solitary and then increasingly monomaniacal detachment from reality, extending into a "sea of images without shores," culminates in the "flood of eccentric images" that breaks over the protagonist. Within this deluge of voices, lured by their "confused meanings," she slips into the "shadows." Overwhelmed by meanings, conventions, customs, and teleologies, she is unable to set limits on this reality and therefore meets her death.

Kracauer's review is more severe than Benjamin's, who praises the "homogeneous simplicity of the narrative," the "reporting's lack of exaggeration and [its] nuance," and the "sober language" as well as the narrative's visionary, old-fashioned quality and the actuality latent within it. Kracauer notes in contrast that "Green's language grants . . . the ghostly tones free reign. It is noiseless so that the spirits' discourse may be heard. It disguises nothing, but rather stirs up the objects which then come showering down." The conclusions of both reviews indicate very different perspectives. First, Benjamin:

Everything in this narrative, from the primitive energies present in humans to those of their environs — not any less primordial — seems so timeless that we can hardly believe it was written today. Therefore — to broach the underlying motif at least in my conclusion — we acknowledge that, in fact, the personification of love predominant in the novel could only have arisen today: a formation lying somewhere between a scullery maid and Erynnia, who squeezes the human body like a wet cloth in her powerful wringing hands until the last drop of life drips out.⁸

And Kracauer's corresponding coda:

A great stroke of the poet is that he shifts the dramatic action into the years preceding the war. Right at the end of the book, in the

8. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 3 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1972) 155.

middle of a national holiday celebration, the cry "Long live Farrières!" bursts forth. This type of allusion to historical content serves over and over again to situate an event revealed as explicitly bourgeois. This book is a funeral hymn to the bourgeois world. The world drives on toward madness, and the epilogue must therefore bring catastrophe.

What appears as fate when observed independently is an objectively grounded event; the destiny of individual madness becomes the general fate of society as a whole, meaning the bourgeois world. The critic's awareness of this enables him to make reliable predictions. Reality does not require the light of fame to shine through, as Benjamin claims.

The Conscientious Review

Kracauer's review of Otto Zarek's novel *Desire* (*Begierde*) appeared in the 17 August 1930 *Frankfurter Zeitung*.⁹ It begins by expressing amazement at the level of production reached by such a "dense piece of fiction" — the novel is seven hundred pages long — continues with a cutting remark about Thomas Mann, and proceeds to draw Stefan Zweig into the picture, the person whose spirited jacket-cover recommendation was meant to improve the book's marketability. The point of Kracauer's criticism is not Zweig's backing of another book; rather, it is the fact that such support, especially when repeated a number of times, comes to be cast as a "disreputable enterprise" that brings undeserved recognition to "bad and clumsy works." This outcome, however, contradicts the *ethics of criticism*, which require clear, just, and strict judgment and the critic's own sense of public obligation and responsibility. Neither carelessness nor incompetence should jeopardize this obligation, which the critic must conscientiously fulfill:

It [literary criticism] has nonetheless lost its good name long ago and has become a corrupt profession. . . . Amateur whim, the economy of cliques, and subjective interests govern the field. . . . What has happened in literary Germany? Where have the honest critics gone whose vision remains unclouded? They have left us in a state of emergency.

9. Repr. in *Schriften* 5, vol. 2: 220-24.

In 1929, in his *Frankfurter Zeitung* editorial, “The Poet Lives,” Joseph Roth observed a consensus of opinion among the authors of the paper’s inner circle. His material basis pointed to the persistent privileging of the powers of observation as technique and the corresponding discrediting of the “purely poetical” essence absent from this technique; this absence in turn betrayed the fact that the poetic had no place in such a technique:

From within the immediate vicinity of this paper came books like *Ginster, Jahrgang 1902* [*The Year 1902*], *Die Flucht ohne Ende*. It is purely coincidental that the author of these words also happens to have authored the latter book. Every one of us who contributes to the literary countenance of this paper could write (if not the books of the others, then certainly) the others’ opinions on contemporary literature.

Here the symbiotic component — the image of the Siamese twins — appears again. Roth’s letter to Stefan Zweig, dated 30 August 1930 and written on the occasion of the Kracauer review referred to here, reads initially like a withdrawal from this symbiotic relationship. In fact, it is part of a defense strategy designed both by and for Kracauer. The letter attacks Kracauer in order to save him from Zweig’s attack. However, any attack is offset by the defense of Kracauer in the letter. As Roth implies, “noblesse” and sentiment are one thing, “justice” and purity another:

Dr. Kracauer’s review has offended me considerably. He is one of those Jehova-Jews, Marxism is his Bible — the Eastern Jews have a good name for these men: God’s police. It is a matter of an inability to understand their own noblesse, which is no longer meant for this world anyway. Nonetheless, one should avoid considering Dr. Kracauer, who can be very naive, but who is also quite pure and lacks a complete understanding of his situation. He is in Bretagne at the moment. I will speak with him — although I have already done so once, when he told me he was thinking about writing. He knows language, philosophy, economics, and yes, sometimes he overlooks the human heart. Justice is a grim thing indeed.¹⁰

The word justice, though conceivably weakened by the phrase qualifying it as a “grim thing indeed,” dominates nonetheless and is an indication of something irrevocable, namely that quality of judgment characterized above as a requirement for critical reviewing.

10. Joseph Roth, *Briefe* (Cologne, 1970) 175.

That this kind of judgment is fundamental to Kracauer's review and to its clarification of the strategy revealed as the Zweigian "confusion" is made clear by the following:

A member of Zarek's metropolitan youth . . . once defined lust as the "becoming conscious of the tendency in being itself." Now that we know or more likely still don't know what lust actually is, he continues: "Our time is unraveling; modern economic conditions isolate the members of the ruling class. They thus become defenseless, greedy, torn open by sexuality — subordinated to the 'primacy of lust.'" Well, good; this piece of knowledge is neither new nor exact, but it is nonetheless usable. Think of modern promiscuity. . . . Even Zarek is thinking of this. He is thinking of so much that he completely forgets to make his conditions and sexuality useful for the novel. If economic conditions are left out, then only sexuality remains. With lustful abandon he lets himself sink into it; in seven hundred pages, which supposedly deal with the "becoming conscious of the tendency in being itself" — they are a filthy mess [*Schweinerei*].

A filthy mess, the review continues, for which "the publisher Zsolnay cannot be congratulated, even with the best of wishes and despite the printing of 11 to 15 thousand copies." Zweig's praises rang out thus: "Seldom has anyone so bravely ventured into the invisible burrows of the big city — the shadowy realms of Eros." Censuring it as a publishing ad at the outset, Kracauer now takes Zweig's assessment apart. Zarek's novel, which bears the subtitle "Novel of Metropolitan Youth," reveals that the author knows nothing "of today's youth, of the metropolis, of modern economics, and of our time." On the contrary, lust is predominant and becomes the book's own tendency. Even the "shadowy realms of Eros" cannot stop what the ads will make of them:

Nonetheless, I warn lustful readers about this book. If it were good pornography — decent pornographies are gallant and of a certain clean cynicism that derives from sadness. But there is something unclean about it here. Instead of commandeering sensuality and gracefully indulging in it, people befog their drives with great emotions that they don't have and proceed to exhale their inner life without interruption.

The Sharp-focus Review

For this example, another review from the series “What Does the Literature of Our Time Look Like?” is examined — Heinrich Mann’s novel *Die Große Sache* (*The Big Deal*). The review is titled “A Glimpse of the Postwar Generation” and appeared in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on 9 November 1930.¹¹ Kracauer’s evaluation of the novel in this detailed review is at once generous and ambivalent. As he stresses at the outset, the book attains its “weightiness” from the juxtaposition of age “with youth and with the time-period being shaped by the latter.” The characteristic behavior of youth, “action and struggle,” is revealed and thus unleashed by its own motivation, “fear,” driving the younger generation “to the limits of recklessness.” The crisis that compels the youths “to find themselves and come to terms with the authentic ‘big deal’ within them” can only be realized after these limits have been reached. Of course, this crisis never fully develops. For the “proof of the power of the individual,” and this is what the author is after, could only be adduced after an accurate assessment “of the economic and social determinants” has been made. However, Mann only makes this kind of assessment occasionally, tracing social conditions more or less incidentally “with cold disdain,” or in the form of isolated, socially critical, sarcastic comments, “thus producing some of the best prose he has to offer. Otherwise, Mann’s ‘refusal to acknowledge current living conditions’ — springing from a lack of sharp focus — leads to ‘arbitrary manipulations’ of those conditions, which then fall into ‘paradox’: ‘in the process of constructing an accurate human image, the resulting human images become unrecognizable.’”

Indeed, like Kafka, the author proceeds “haughtily” with reality; but “Kafka made reality crash against a more accurate version of reality, while Mann’s accurate human characters lack the ability to achieve or go beyond the freedom they want in our social system.” Mann’s achievement lies in his refusal to view the “power of the individual” as insignificant; he places trust in the potential power of a “well-educated humanity.” This trust may very well be blind, and hence overrated and ineffectual, a reflex of “prewar individualism.” But it is nonetheless interesting, because it calls attention to a blindspot in the dominant form of postwar literature known as “objective realism.” This form’s *parti pris*, explicitly

11. *Schriften* 5, vol. 2: 248–54.

marxist and socially critical, is based "on the presupposition that human beings are determined exclusively by their social environment." However, this ideological construct, despite its unrepachable aim to make social improvements, precludes the possibility that human beings may be "producers of their environments" as well. Contrary to this one-sidedness, Kracauer sees an alternative emerging:

There are only two possibilities available for definitively capturing conditions of existence. Either we presuppose those determined material conditions which Marx himself referred to — and then we should have to follow his line denouncing the rubber stamping of collective human expressions summarily as "superstructure," thus devaluing them; or we try, and there is nothing to be said against this alternative, to project the conditions through living human beings themselves. What we want to avoid at all costs is the nullification of human beings for the sake of a vague notion of their conditions.

The dilemma here lies in the fact that in the "objective realist" novels, the human beings who are not human at least manage to retain their positions in a specific time and place because of the "arrest warrant" imposed upon them by their social environment. In Mann's work, however — at least that of his later period, generally considered more mature — "the details of physical existence and many conditions of reality disintegrate," leading to a "paling of the outer world for the sake of expression," to a resigned retreat from social reality.

Mann's novel merits praise, in the critic's view, for it conveys its meaning in an elucidating form, the likes of which have surfaced only rarely since the postwar break in the tradition. Further, it is meant to penetrate the dialectic between social conditions and individuals that had been neglected to the detriment of social progress, and with the force of such a dialectical juxtaposition, to call attention "to the limits of objective realist literature." The issue at hand, in contrast to the Zarek novel above, is not tendentious literature but art. To be sure, the word art has a different implication here than in Benjamin's review of Green, where it was said to enable the "penetrating look" and to reveal "the simply-toothed clockwork . . . operating behind every event," brushing "reality against the grain." Kracauer, however, stands by the motto that "art does not utilize available raw material . . . it destroys it and employs the debris to facilitate cognition within material."

The Review as the Critique of Illusion

The review of Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*, which appeared in German translation in 1932, is titled "Shattered Hymns" and was published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on 4 September 1932.¹² Kracauer begins the review with a formal approach, discussing the short stories in terms of their arrangement. Not meant to be read in isolation, they are assembled in a particular way, but not in an organized one — namely around the interjection of fragments that hardly ever "have an intelligible relation to their surroundings." With the help of these fragments, a "mosaic technique" is haphazardly produced, which evolves out of Hemingway's basic response to his war experience — that is, a "desperate disbelief" when it came to the healing powers of elemental, natural events. A belief retracted in this way continually sabotages the hymn-like affirmation of the natural to which the author is nevertheless "faithfully devoted"; it shatters the hymns and "freezes the celebration" by destroying their coherence. In this way, it becomes clear that "coherence harbors an antagonism and that reality makes no sense." The fragmentary interjections have the effect and function of trigger sentences (*Sprengsätze*): "It is as if nature gone awry were to explode incessantly and produce its own devastation." Nature turns against itself and its illusory façade; it "destroys meanings and rips its noble creations to shreds." The knowledge of this sinister power engenders no hate but generates a desperate form of disbelief. This disbelief has its own tone: that of *impassibilité*.

An obviously detached ability to determine the true qualities of the world owes its existence to this world — a world that "walks away from the most important questions without answering" and "for reasons which remain unintelligible, [is] usually banal." Kracauer continues: "the author describes [the worlds'] silly disorder with a lack of illusion that was virtually unknown among authors preceding him." For this reason — because of the renunciation of illusion — the "discrepancy between the idea and its embodiment" is continually uncovered. Reality, which is otherwise disguised behind a veil of illusion, is stripped bare "in order to reveal its emptiness." Furthermore, the language generally used to retouch relationships — mostly between individuals — is disengaged, resulting in the "clarity of a sharply focused photograph that leaves no blemish unnoticed."

12. *Schriften* 5, vol. 2: 98-101.

The insensitivity with which everyday conversations are replayed appears suddenly incomprehensible: “a strangeness arising from the fact that Hemingway chases the mists behind which conversations first develop and then fade away within reality. The war opened his eyes, and he uses them now without pity. But also without indignation.” It is enough that one can look banality “in the face.” And yet:

The *impassibilité* into which Hemingway deteriorates is not in any way synonymous with apathy, and his fixed gaze [*Anstarren*] at the broken work of the world does not cause paralysis [*Erstarren*]. On the contrary, nihilism loosens him up, enables him to make insights and formulations that previously may have been beyond his capabilities.

The question of whether the author can survive, upon following the evanescent into nothingness, in that ultimate place where hymns are shattered, remains open, though perhaps not entirely, for the danger of illusion is perpetual. “To indulge continually in the loosening effect of nothingness,” concludes Kracauer, “would be desertion as well.”

It should be clear that the constant if implicit magnetic field of Kracauer’s literary and critical writing is none other than Kafka’s work. In addition, the critical notion of *impassibilité* came to be one of the operative imperatives of his reviewing technique: Flaubert was more consistently attractive than Tretyakov. Further, Kracauer sees criticism and literature as countermodels for the existing state of reality. Finally, Kracauer enjoys a more intimate relationship with art than with “realistic literature.” Kracauer’s model of reviewing follows a double strategy that has become its expression: the rhetoric of change that it practices is deconstructed by the formal lack of change in which it practices. Himself caught in the ornament of individuality, Kracauer wanted to slow the ever-accelerating social movement within aesthetic material in the hope of bringing it to a stop, so that the autonomy of meanings might manifest itself. This was the kind of engagement that suited him. In Kafka’s *America*, the end of the chapter entitled “A Refuge” reads:

“I know nothing about politics,” said Karl.

“That’s a mistake,” said the student. “But you have eyes and ears in your head, haven’t you?”¹³

Translated by Sara S. Poor

13. Franz Kafka, *America*, trans. Edwin Muir (New York: New Directions, 1946) 268-69.

"Not yet accepted anywhere": Exile, Memory, and Image in Kracauer's Conception of History

Gertrud Koch

In a letter to Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer writes of his novel *Georg* that it "has not yet been accepted anywhere"; this is an apposite description of the general situation in which Kracauer found himself, even before he went into exile in Paris. In the same letter of 24 February 1935, which, with its derisively bitter and paradoxical description, "we have now safely arrived at the absolute end of our means," bears no good tidings, Kracauer draws a fairly clear outline of how he saw the future:

A radical adjustment will be necessary to the Anglo-Saxon countries and France. I am well aware of the difficulties this entails, but I know of no other way out. (Actually, it should be easier for me than for many others to make such an adjustment, since I have always taken an alien, even hostile view of whatever might be called the German mentality.¹

Kracauer always had an acute sense of what he called the "niches of extraterritoriality," from which the world of things and the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) light up at a distance, a distance that imbues them with that auratic glow which on closer inspection contrasts sharply with their actual shabbiness. In his last, posthumously edited book *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, he writes in a thoroughly melancholy tone of Ranke's proclivity for trivial language:

1. Walter Benjamin, *Briefe an Siegfried Kracauer. Mit vier Briefen von Siegfried Kracauer an Walter Benjamin*, Theodor W. Adorno Archives, *Marbacher Schriften* 27 (Marbach, 1987) 82.

But none of us is immune to a magical, albeit empty glow. I remember having been in my youth under the spell of Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger*, with its elegiac, if ludicrous nostalgia for the blond, blue-eyed doers. In fact, my whole generation was.²

In a footnote to this parenthetical biographical note, Kracauer quotes himself via an exegesis of Mann's longing for *Bürgerlichkeit*, which one might construe as "blond and blue-eyed."

Kracauer himself never knew the "delights of ordinariness" (*Die Wonnen der Gewöhnlichkeit*) of firmly established bourgeois forms of life. When, at the age of fifty-two, he arrived in New York, he still had not experienced bourgeois ordinariness. Thus, he had to make a radical adjustment to a new country, to a new language, but not necessarily to a new form of existence. Kracauer was an example of the "emergence of a new type of intellectual,"³ one who could not and did not want to fall into line with academia, and who found in the phenomenology of the early 20th century, from Simmel to Scheler, a form of thinking that cut a path between empiricism and idealism, the conflicted philosophies of the day — a path that promised to have materialist, concrete features, at least in the attention it paid to "concrete things." It is therefore by no means a coincidence that it was Kracauer who began to develop an interest in the growing phenomenon of mass culture, or that it was he who included an early sociological study of white-collar workers among his reflections, composed a philosophical essay on the detective novel, and wrote "Die Gruppe als Ideenträger" ("The Group as the Representative of Ideas"), a treatise that was nothing short of prophetic, as well as stressing photography, travel, and dance as central phenomena of modern urban living.

Yet if one reads the writings of Siegfried Kracauer more closely, the disparity originally cited between "clear vision" and a longing for "a magical, albeit empty glow" widens into a permanent rift that tears the entire fabric of Kracauer's writings asunder. Kracauer, as we know, could often find no use for the dialectic variants of philosophy. He was suspicious of the idea of conceptual mediation. In his critique of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, he speaks of an

2. Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things before the Last* (New York: Oxford UP, 1969) 173-74.

3. See Theodor W. Adorno, "The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer," in the present volume.

unfettered dialectic which eliminates ontology altogether. His rejection of any ontological stipulation in favor of an infinite dialectics which penetrates all concrete things and entities seems inseparable from a certain arbitrariness, an absence of content and direction in these series of material evaluations. The concept of Utopia is then necessarily used by him in a purely formal way, as a borderline concept which at the end invariably emerges like a *deus ex machina*. But Utopian thought only makes sense if it assumes the form of a vision or intuition with a definite content of a sort. Therefore the radical immanence of the dialectical process will not do; some ontological fixations are needed to imbue it with significance and direction.

Neither in his critique of Adorno nor in his historicophilosophical attempt to redeem historiography *from* the philosophy of history, does Kracauer go into history. Mass-scale annihilation, which dominates Adorno's thought about Auschwitz, plays only a marginal role in his thought. Kracauer only once refers to the existence of concentration camps in a footnote — a footnote, however, that refers to an essay written by the historian Herbert Butterfield in 1931, that is, prior to the mass annihilation of the death camps:

Butterfield . . . alludes to this possibility when he says that the (technical) historian may assist the cause of morality by describing, in concrete detail and in an objective manner, a wholesale massacre, the consequence of religious persecution, or the goings-on in a concentration camp. For the rest, Butterfield's idea of technical history itself originates in an intricate mixture of theological and scientific notions.⁴

Kracauer himself takes up the theological motif in an oddly ambiguous manner, which does not seem coincidental, since it refers to central motifs in his thinking: redemption via reification, vacillation between phenomenological concretism and theology, the confluence of which remains ontologically disguised in the *Theory of Film*.⁵ In the text mentioned above, Kracauer paradoxically distances himself from the theological in a thoroughly characteristic manner:

4. Kracauer, *History* 201.

5. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford UP, 1960).

So the question as to the meaningfulness of “technical history” would seem to be unanswerable. There is only one single argument in its support which I believe to be conclusive. It is a theological argument, though. According to it, the “complete assemblage of the smallest facts” is required for the reason that nothing should go lost. It is as if the fact-oriented accounts breathed pity with the dead. This vindicates the figure of the *collector*.⁶

Kracauer deploys the figure of redemption through memory — the anamnestic solidarity with the dead — in a framework in which people and facts are to an equal extent also things. It appears as though it were only when the world is petrified in images that it might be deciphered and experienced as having a human face. As indicated by the subtitle, also the heading of the last chapter, *Theory of Film* is based entirely on “The Redemption of Physical Reality.” In this chapter, Kracauer also deals with pictures of the death camps. Under the subheading “The Head of the Medusa,” Kracauer begins with the story of the myth “as we learned it in school.” He interprets Athena’s advice to Perseus not to look directly at the dreadful head of the gorgon, but only at its reflection in the polished shield, to mean

that we do not, and cannot, see actual horrors because they paralyze us with blinding fear; and that we shall know what they look like only by watching images of them which reproduce their true appearance.⁷

Cinema thus functions as the mirror of a nature which is as horrifying as Medusa’s snake-locks, and in which events take place that “would petrify us were we to encounter them in real life. The film screen is Athena’s polished shield.” But the myth, according to Kracauer, does not stop at this cathartic function of “reflection” as the verification of one’s perceptions. Athena, whose advice enabled Perseus to behead Medusa, used the captured head to scare off her enemies. “Perseus, the image watcher, did not succeed in laying the ghost for good.” Kracauer did not infer from the fact that such horrifying visions cannot be dissolved, and serve no external purpose, that they had a superficial, attractive function that pointed toward a course of concrete action, but rather that their enshrining in memory was their secret telos:

6. Kracauer, *History* 136.

7. Kracauer, *Theory* 305.

The mirror reflections of horror are an end in themselves. As such they beckon the spectator to take them in and thus incorporate into his memory the real face of things too dreadful to be beheld in reality. In experiencing the rows of calves' heads [in Franju's famous documentary film about the slaughterhouse in Paris] or the litter of tortured human bodies in the films made of the Nazi concentration camps, we redeem horror from its invisibility behind the veils of panic and imagination.⁸

The description Kracauer gives of being able to perceive the "litter of tortured human bodies" is probably quite accurate. It corresponds to the images and experiences of viewing the first concentration camp films: after the liberation, as Germans are led through the camps, they turn away from the mountains of corpses with the most violent movements; in the cinema, they remain seated in front of the screen. Yet it is clear that Kracauer's argument does not confine itself to furthering rational understanding, but rather his theoretical line of argumentation comes up against intrinsic limits.

It is the primacy of the optical over the conceptual, of contemplation over transmission, that constitutes these intrinsic limits: "Seeing . . . is experiencing." Film gives an account of the visible world and enables the observer to experience this in the sense of Benjamin's hypostatization of film as the discoverer of the "optical-unconscious." Benjamin believes that it is "the camera with its aids" that allows one to see the optical world in film in a manner that reveals things which normally of necessity remain hidden to the eye. He states: "the camera first introduces us to unconscious optics the way psychoanalysis first acquaints us with unconscious impulses." Here Benjamin already outlines the idea that in principle every human being has the right to be reproduced in images, to present himself, and to represent: "Any man today can lay claim to being filmed."⁹ Although his use of this motif remains exclusively restricted to social participation in film, in the context of his idea of the optical-unconscious the cinematic influence of what has remained socially invisible up to that point also receives that redemptive quality of secular inspiration inherent in the exposure of what is not seen. In his essay on Benjamin in *Das Ornament der Masse*, Kracauer, who became friends with

8. Kracauer, *Theory* 305, 306.

9. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (Glasgow: Collins, 1973) 239, 233.

Benjamin and repeatedly helped to have his essays published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, emphasized the latter's theological intentions which, in the end, were not so very different from his own. The idea that "something is still happening between heaven and hell behind the back of things,"¹⁰ as he writes of Benjamin's book on baroque tragic drama, is one that would seem to fit his later design for the "anteroom" of history. Kracauer, at least up to and including his *Theory of Film*, accorded primacy to the optical, an idea first developed in the book on history to include redemption of the world of things via their historiographical identification and their transformation into narration. Thus in the end Kracauer indeed arrives where Adorno had always fancied him to be, namely, in the world of things as the only true world worthy of redemption; the optical is the medium, not the thing itself.¹¹

The Primacy of the Optical

If "seeing" is understood as "experiencing," then mass annihilation could only be experienced to the extent that it is possible to give it visual form. Only that which is concrete in nature, that which belongs to the world of physical things, can be visualized. A virtually boundless trust that what is immune to redemption evaporates when transformed

10. Siegfried Kracauer, "Zu den Schriften Walter Benjamins," *Das Ornament der Masse* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1963) 253.

11. Adorno sketches a portrait of Kracauer, whom he knew in his youth, when describing the latter's reaction to childhood, in which the relationship to things is much more animated than the adult's later, functional relationship to inorganic things: "In him the fixation on childhood, as a fixation on play, takes the form of a fixation on the benignness of things; presumably the primacy of the optical in him is not something inborn but rather the result of this relationship to the world of objects." See "The Curious Realist," in this volume. Regardless of how close the two realms are, the optical — the showing and presentation of things — merely replaces tactile contact by establishing eye contact. Benjamin perceived this clearly in his analogy of surrealism to film. In his case, however, the whole film is an animistic object attacking the observer: "the work of art of the Dadaists became a bullet. It hit the spectator, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality. It promoted a demand for the film, the distracting element of which is also primarily tactile, being based on changes of place and focus which periodically assail the spectator" (Benjamin 240). More recent psychoanalytic approaches in film theory resort to similar experiential structures. These result from the passive stance of the audience as well as the hyperactivity on the screen which attempts to seize hold of the audience — a sadomasochistic symbiosis, a "fort/da" game in the sense of Freud's theory of the transitional object with which the infant playfully learns to overcome its separation anxiety by making itself into the agent of a process of permanent disappearance and reappearance.

into images informs Kracauer's ontological interfacing of the optical, of the image as the "act of the redemption of physical reality." According to Kracauer's reading of the myth of the gorgon's head, Perseus is the actual hero *not* because he finally cuts off Medusa's head but rather because he had the courage to look at her in his shield. One could easily see in such an interpretation a heretic reply to iconoclasm itself: the images one is forbidden to make of Yahweh harbor a slight redemptive glow for him who has the courage nevertheless to remain on their trail.

One can glean how far Kracauer was willing to go in this respect less from the finely worked and enigmatic early prose pieces and more from a study he was commissioned to undertake in an expert capacity and in which his philosophical thoughts are voiced more nakedly and unguardedly. In his analysis of "Propaganda and the Nazi War Film," carried out at the Museum of Modern Art in 1942 with the help of a Rockefeller Foundation stipend to research psychological warfare, Kracauer examined the structure of Nazi newsreels and war reporting as well as the propagandistic function of staged war films, based on typical examples. Although one has to assume of course that knowledge of Nazi films could not have been particularly comprehensive at that time, it is nevertheless noticeable that Kracauer brings in a strong theoretical argument with which to explain the minimal presence of anti-Semitic propaganda:

Except for the aforementioned Polish war episode, however, these vituperations are confined to a few hints that, unseconded by visuals, disappear in the mass of verbal statements. While the Nazis continued practicing, printing, and broadcasting their racial anti-Semitism, they reduced its role in the war films, apparently hesitant to spread it through pictures. On the screen, anti-Jewish activities are almost as taboo as, for instance, concentration camps or sterilizations. All this can be done and propagated in print and speech, but it stubbornly resists pictorial representation. The image seems to be the last refuge of violated human dignity.¹²

The assumption that there had to be something in the pictures themselves that disseminated a kind of holy fear of their abuse unfortunately did not apply to the Nazis. They desisted neither from representing anti-Semitic propaganda pictorially nor from having films made in the

12. Siegfried Kracauer, "Propaganda and the Nazi War Film," *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947) 304-05.

concentration camps of their atrocious acts. With regard to Kracauer's writings, it is never possible to reconcile one-sidedly the various strands of trenchant ideology critique — undertaken from the perspective of "extraterritoriality" — with the unrestrainable wish for the "suggestive power of raw material brought in by the cameras."¹³

Although Kracauer does not, other than in the short passages on Medusa, ask whether optical primacy has not conclusively short-circuited as a phenomenological process, given that the events of the death camps exceeded all that can be humanly experienced in the sense of graphicness, in his exile writings it nevertheless becomes clear that he is haunted by a persistent doubt. The images on which he as a critic often took a very unequivocal stance now become ambiguous witnesses to the times, as if they could still hold messages after the fact, which, written with invisible ink, only reveal themselves to the experienced eye.

In 1930, for example, Kracauer had this to say about Josef von Sternberg's film *The Blue Angel* in the *Neue Rundschau*:

The crucial point is not that Heinrich Mann's novel is being mis-used here, but rather that this book, written prior to the War, was selected as the basis for a film in the first place. What motives led the film producers, who after all also had access to Mann's novel *Man of Straw*, to choose the sinister psyche of Professor Unrat and his relationships to Lola the singer? Precisely this: that the reproach of a too current topic reveals that such reproaches have no foundation. Regardless of whether the choices of subjects or events for public consumption is guided by conscious or unconscious factors, it is at any rate geared to making people forget reality, to covering it up, as *The Blue Angel* paradigmatically demonstrates. Unrat's personal fate is not an end in itself, but rather a means serving the end of escaping reality, and in this respect it resembles a painting on a theatre curtain which is supposed to simulate the play itself.

Kracauer's review of *The Blue Angel* at the time of its release is interesting because at such an early date it already diverts attention from the novel to an independent view of the film and already pinpoints a number of aesthetic characteristics that were to play a decisive role in Sternberg's later work. Not only does Kracauer refer to the highly effective use of sound, to the film's (technical) perfection, but he was also an early observer of Sternberg's tendency to flee social and psychological

13. Kracauer, *Theory* 302.

reality. He emphasizes as well the theatrical, artificial quality of the film, the vacuum produced when reality is evacuated: "Neither Unrat nor Lola has enough air to breathe."¹⁴

Sixteen years later, by then in exile in the United States,¹⁵ Kracauer once more addresses *The Blue Angel*. In *From Caligari to Hitler*, he sharpens the tone of his diagnosis of the times into an apocalyptic prophecy *a posteriori*:

It is as if the film implied a warning, for these screen figures anticipate what will happen in real life a few years later. The boys are born Hitler youths, and the cockcrowning device is only a modest contribution to a group of similar, if more ingenious, contrivances used in Nazi concentration camps.

Two characters stand off from these events: the clown of the artists' company, a mute figure constantly observing his temporary colleague, and the school beadle who is present at the professor's death and somehow recalls the night-watchman in *THE LAST LAUGH*. He does not talk either. These two witness but do not participate. Whatever they may feel, they refrain from interference. Their silent resignation foreshadows the passivity of many people under totalitarian rule.¹⁶

For Kracauer, *The Blue Angel* now becomes the product of a very specific constellation — namely the transition from the Weimar Republic to

14. Kracauer, "Der blaue Engel," *Die Neue Rundschau* 1930, repr. in Kracauer, *Schriften* 2 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1979) 418-19. The second volume of the writings edited by Karsten Witte includes, in addition to the complete retranslation of *Von Caligari zu Hitler*, the critique of *The Blue Angel*. The appendix offers the opportunity to make interesting philological comparisons between the various evaluations and assessments of films before and after Kracauer's emigration, not only in the exemplary case cited here. His experiences under National Socialism and during emigration at the same time offer the background for an analysis of film criticism based on social criticism.

15. In research on emigration it has become an established custom to distinguish in the terminology between *emigration* and *exile* in order to mark the sharp difference between those who were forced into exile and those who chose to emigrate. Those who did not want to return from exile after 1945 thus became *émigrés*. For the rest of his life, Kracauer surely came under the category of an exile. He would certainly have returned to Germany if requested: "I think he would gladly have gone back if he had been called upon to do so. And actually the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* should have offered him something" (Richard Plant, ctd. by Jörg Bundschuh, "Als dauere die Gegenwart eine Ewigkeit," *Text und Kritik* 68 [Munich, 1980]: 10). Adorno also wrote in his brief obituary that "he should have been brought back to Germany" (Theodor W. Adorno, "Nach Kracauers Tod," *Gesammelte Schriften* 20.1 [Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1986] 195).

16. Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* 218.

National Socialism. Whereas in the first review the “flight from reality” is subjected to moral criticism, this is done with greater differentiation in the second. Not only does Kracauer now provide more specific reasons for the aesthetic quality of the film, but he also assigns it a certain, albeit subconscious, prophetic quality in its portrayal of a character whom he defines as the typical figure of the petit-bourgeois rebel who in the end is broken and ruefully returns to the point whence he had originally departed in a rebellious huff: flight and then final submission to power. Kracauer gives the film, and in particular Emil Jannings’s portrayal, a sociopsychological interpretation that he would surely have rejected in his first review. Whether it is really borne out by the film or simply a projection on Kracauer’s part under the immediate experiential pressure of Nazi destruction and domination is moot.¹⁷ Sternberg was astonished by Kracauer’s interpretation of his film as a premonition of fascist terror.

The primacy of the optical, what Kracauer terms the redemption of reality through its pictorial representation, breaks down in those areas that are to be redeemed in the image and are supposed to permit anamnestic solidarity with the dead, but which elude visual presentation in any form. The concretism of visual plasticity (*Anschaulichkeit*) that must attach itself to an extant object — the image — is intrinsically opposed to a portrayal of that which constitutes *mass* destruction. Thus arises a horrifying hierarchy extending from the mountains of corpses of those whose bodies remained to be captured on film, to the people who literally went up in smoke, having left behind them no visual mnemonic trace that could serve their redemption. It would seem to be no coincidence that Kracauer asked one of the key questions of aesthetics after Auschwitz only in passing, circuitously. Kracauer attempted to remain true to himself in the primacy of the optical, while *de facto* the stones of remembrance could no longer be piled on top of each other. This too could be termed Kracauer’s obstinacy.

In the Anteroom

History: The Last Things before the Last was the next book Kracauer wrote after the *Theory of Film*. For him, the difference between the two subjects

17. On the assessment of Kracauer’s critiques of *The Blue Angel* with regard to the aesthetic qualities of Sternberg’s work, see Gertrud Koch, “Between the Worlds: von Sternberg’s *The Blue Angel* (1930),” *German Film and Literature: Adaptations and Transformations*, ed. Eric Rentschler (New York and London: Methuen, 1986) 60-72.

was marginal. In this his final book, he considers his defense of historiography against the truth claims made by philosophy on one hand and the mathematical sciences on the other to be an approach similar to that in his defense of film, a medium that, in the eyes of the phenomenologists, should remain as distant from formal art as from mere instrumentalization geared to external purposes. For, in Kracauer's view, historiography and photography have privileged access to the concrete. The image is to the redemption of the world of things what the evocation of things is to the collections and stories of the historiographer.

The process of redemptive naming takes place through reification, by apparatus-based reproduction of the pictures. If the historian wants to gain access to historical phenomena, then he has to transform himself mimetically to adapt to their petrified surface. He cannot understand alien, past life-worlds by means of operations of subsumptive logic with a view to writing a "universal history," but rather only through petrification, "self-eradication." The historiographer is one who has been exiled from modern times, who resides in a foreign kingdom as a silent observer. This image of the historiographer takes the exile as its model:

I am thinking of the exile who as an adult person has been forced to leave his country or has left it of his own free will . . . and the odds are that he will never fully belong to the community to which he now in a way belongs. . . . Where then does he live? In the near-vacuum of extraterritoriality, the very no-man's-land. . . . The exile's true mode of existence is that of a stranger. . . . There are great historians who owe much of their greatness to the fact that they were expatriates. . . .

It is only in this state of self-effacement or homelessness that the historian can commune with the material of his concern. . . . A stranger to the world evoked by the sources, he is faced with the task — the exile's task — of penetrating its outward appearance, so that he may learn to understand that world from within.

It is not difficult to gather from this image of the historiographer the author's self-portrait, as it continued to be remembered from innumerable motifs in his early essays, in brilliant, multi-layered language. It is not surprising that the metamorphosis of petrification Kracauer describes as "active passivity"¹⁸ derives from the position of the "attendant," the

18. Kracauer, *History* 83-4.

“passer-by,” who is a “vagabond,” and that the historiographer comes to light in that position.

Kracauer’s book on history is pervaded by a mood that vacillates strangely between a strenuous avoidance of ideology and the longing for meaning. Motifs crop up in it that had already appeared in the essays in the collection *Das Ornament der Masse* (*Mass Ornament*, 1963), yet here they gather another, more concrete historical meaning around themselves. The longing to assimilate to the world of mute things, to be their participant chronicler, already surfaced in the closing paragraph of the “Abschied von der Lindenpassage” (“Farewell to the Lindenpassage”), the last of the essays:

What we have inherited and have consistently called our own — on passing by, it was exhibited as if on show in a case, revealing a grimace as if long since dead. We encountered ourselves as deceased in this passageway. But we also snatched away from it that which shall always belong to us, that which sparkled there unappreciated and distorted.¹⁹

The impossibility of reconstructing history as that logical course of chronological time which could be subsumed under a general principle engenders the image of a discontinuous world of ruptures and rejections, whose chronicler could only be a survivor who has passed through the cataracts of time unscathed. At this point Kracauer returns to a “legendary” figure who already formed the title of the chapter: “Ahasuerus, or the Riddle of Time.” In this figure Kracauer sees the lost unity as being sublated negatively. In a peculiar description he hints that the figure of the survivor is someone who is condemned not to die — a figure who from today’s perspective reminds us so vividly of the symptoms of the guilt of surviving that the only puzzling thing about Kracauer’s description is the exclusion of this connotation:

It occurs to me that the only reliable informant on these matters, which are so difficult to ascertain, is a legendary figure — Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew. He indeed would know firsthand the developments and transitions, for he alone in all of history has had the unsought opportunity to experience the process of becoming and decaying itself. (How unspeakably terrible he must look! To be sure, his face cannot have suffered from aging, but I

19. Kracauer, “Abschied von der Lindenpassage,” *Das Ornament der Masse* 332.

imagine it to be many faces, each reflecting one of the periods which he traversed and all of them combining into ever new patterns, as he restlessly, and vainly, tries on his wanderings to reconstruct out of the times that shaped him the one time he is doomed to incarnate.)²⁰

Further on in this chapter, Kracauer addresses, as he does elsewhere, the temporal structure in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, which is written from a perspective he in turn amalgamates with that of the photographer who seeks aesthetic redemption through reification in the image. For Kracauer, the obstacles to the Proustian undertaking emerge in the fact that the history of the narrator's life can only be told from the viewpoint of its end; its fragmentations appear as the memory of experiences:

And the reconciliation he effects between the antithetic propositions at stake — his denial of the flow of time and his (belated) endorsement of it — hinges on his retreat into the dimension of art. But nothing of the sort applies to history. Neither has history an end, nor is it amenable to aesthetic redemption.

In this passage, then, Kracauer yields to his older, rationalistic impulse by blurring the strict distinction between art and history, which he had nearly made disappear before our eyes when describing Proust's photographic view of things — but only in order to allow the idea of redemption to arise again at a higher level. He concludes the Ahasuerus chapter with three sentences full of paradox:

The antinomy at the core of time is insoluble. Perhaps the truth is that it can be solved only at the end of Time. Proust's personal solution foreshadows, or indeed signifies, this unthinkable end — the imaginary moment at which Ahasuerus, before disintegrating, may for the first time be able to look back on his wanderings through the periods.²¹

The antinomy is "insoluble," truth "perhaps" also, for it refers to the end of time, which is "inconceivable." If the end of history arrives, Ahasuerus, the chronicler and survivor, will dissolve, for then the dead

20. Kracauer, *History* 157.

21. Kracauer, *History* 163.

will come back to the earth. Thus in the end, Ahasuerus becomes a figure representative of something else, namely the terrible face assembled from the many faces of the dead. That unimaginable leap out of time would be redemption. Kracauer, of course, leaves this all to the realm of the imaginary.

Kracauer operates no differently in his essay “Die Wartenden” (“In the Anteroom”), for there, in light of the decay of the old contents of faith and the resulting void and longing, he beats a skeptical retreat from the false alternative between the “principal skeptic” and the “Messianic enthusiast”:

Yet every indication here is surely anything but a signpost on the way. Must we add that getting ready is only preparation for what cannot be achieved by force — for transformation and devotion? What is not [in] question here is at which point this transformation now occurs and whether it occurs at all, nor should this concern those who make an effort.²²

With the materialist impulse of the trained architect who must pay attention to the statistics of airy constructions, in his book on history Kracauer also constructs a space that, like the anteroom of a railway station, is supposed to take in those who are waiting. The historian, he writes, settles “in an area which has the character of an anteroom. (Yet it is this ‘anteroom’ in which we breathe, move, and live.)”²³ The anteroom is thus our life-world, and it is here that the viewpoint from which we can put something into narrative form develops, namely from the context of concrete history. In his last book Kracauer again remains true to his unique position between phenomenology and metaphysics, just as he did in *Theory of Film*. The primacy of the optical is only relinquished in order to bring things onto a different level of mediation.

The Return of the Absent

In his grandiose design for a “qualitative content analysis,” Kracauer developed the idea that the prevailing, inadequate, positivistic approach should be countered by one that would permit categories to be

22. Kracauer, “Die Wartenden,” *Das Ornament der Masse* 118f.

23. Kracauer, *History* 195.

examined not only to ascertain whether they did indeed exist, but also to specify their singularity or their absence. If one follows the methodological recommendation of their author, Kracauer's writings only address the experiences of mass annihilation marginally — but one cannot conclude from this that the isolated remarks and considerations should be treated as negligible.

The above observations on mass annihilation come up against the intrinsic limits of Kracauer's concept of optical primacy, of graphicness. They recur, taking the shape of a flight into the imaginary, into helpless paradoxes, which is the shape of something that can only be thought of as the idea of reconciliation with the dead. But Kracauer also seems to bring terror to mind in the odd mimetic adaptation to the dead. He surely did not lack the courage of Perseus to look at the head of Medusa. Yet the shield of Athena onto which he casts the image of atrocity is one of mythical reconciliation. It may also be one of the reasons why Kracauer in his old age adhered more strongly to the metaphysical and ontological aspects of his thought than he had done in the metaphysically skeptical writings of the Weimar period.

Kracauer, "not yet accepted anywhere," finds himself exiled like Melville's Ishmael:

Buoyed up by that coffin, for almost one whole day and night, I floated on a soft and dirge-like main. The unharmed sharks, they glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths; the savage sea-hawks sailed with sheathed beaks. On the second day, a sail drew near, nearer, and picked me up at last. It was the devious Rachel, that in her retracing search for her missing children, only found another orphan.²⁴

Translated by Jeremy Gaines

24. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York: Norton, 1967) 470.

The Subject of Survival: *On Kracauer's Theory of Film*

Heide Schlüpmann

Since the introduction of semiotics and psychoanalysis, and ever since the debate in *Cahiers du Cinéma* on the cinematographic apparatus, film theory has deemed itself to be superior to the "Realist theories" promulgated in the 1940s and 1950s, in particular by André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer. Bazin's work, however, has withstood this "patricide" better than Kracauer's writings. Before it even had a chance to have a full impact, the latter's *Theory of Film* became the object of a systematic misunderstanding that studiously ignored the criticism the book itself leveled against "naïve realism." Even those who appreciated Kracauer's work as a Weimar film critic and essayist and the author of ideology critique underlying *Caligari* could not warm to his theory of film.¹ Adorno attributed the discrepancy between the early and late Kracauer above all to the problem of language,² judging his renunciation of the German language to be a loss, although he recognized the political and personal justifications for such abstinence. Nevertheless, while it is clearly correct to read the *Theory of Film* against the background of the Weimar writings, such a comparison should not foreground the deficiencies of the American book in order then to condemn it to silence. The theory of film concentrates on a different subject matter than did Kracauer's analysis of

1. On the West German reception of *Theory of Film* (New York: Oxford UP, 1960; German trans. Friedrich Walter and Ruth Zellschan, authorized by the author [Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1964]) in the 1960s, see Helmut Lethen, "Sichtbarkeit. Kracauers Liebeslehre," *Siegfried Kracauer. Neue Interpretationen*, ed. Michael Kessler and Thomas Levin (Tübingen: Stauffenberg, 1990) 195-228. All subsequent references to *Theory of Film* are from the Oxford UP edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

2. See Theodor W. Adorno, "The Curious Realist," in this issue of *New German Critique*.

photography and film in the Weimar period — should it not therefore also have a form adequate to its subject, adequate precisely because it exhibited a damaged form itself?

The subject of the theory is film — not film simply as a phenomenon of late capitalism, nor film before Hitler, but rather film after Auschwitz. In *From Caligari to Hitler* Kracauer had described Weimar cinema and at the same time considered the developments that had led to National Socialism in the form in which they were mirrored in film; *Theory of Film*, by contrast, thematizes film after Auschwitz — in both the subjective and objective sense. This not only entails finding words of description, finding language, but also a prior difficulty, namely that of regarding film in the context of this reality. In her article “‘Not yet accepted anywhere’: Exile, Memory, and Image in Kracauer’s Conception of History,” Gertrud Koch has indicated that, on the one hand, mass destruction is completely left out of Kracauer’s philosophy of history, and yet, on the other hand, Kracauer hopes deeply that film will be able to thematize this horror.³ His theory of film has two bases, one apparent, the other concealed: it reflects on film, and it reflects (on) the horror of National Socialism mirrored in film.

The *Theory of Film* is comprised of heterogeneous elements that, in contrast to Kracauer’s early essays, do not coalesce in the “autonomy of representation,”⁴ but rather derive a certain stability from the heteronomy of American English. The book consists in essence of three elements: American English, which involves “positive thinking” and a reference to positivist science; viewpoints that are characteristic of the Weimar essays; and finally, the dialogue with Marcel Proust. Americanism makes it possible to talk about film without touching on the historical abyss of Auschwitz; the elements of his Weimar essays allow Kracauer to reflect on his own awareness of the possibility of catastrophic historicopolitical developments; and the reference to Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* makes it possible to transcend the mimetic reproduction of positive thought.

I would first like to discuss Kracauer’s concept of “physical reality,” for it is a key concept in *Theory of Film*. At the same time, however, it can give rise to the greatest misunderstandings if one fails to reflect on the question of representation. On the one hand, *Theory of Film* makes

3. See Gertrud Koch, in this issue of *New German Critique*.

4. Adorno, “Der Essay als Form,” *Noten zur Literatur* 1 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1958) 9-49, esp. 44.

use of the term “physical reality” in a common sense, which includes popular science. Keeping in mind Kracauer’s critique of positivism during the Weimar period, the references to a “resemblance between cinematic and scientific procedures” (52) are startling. The book’s American subtitle “The Redemption of Physical Reality” conjures up precisely this analogy, and it is thus no wonder that the German translation dispenses with it. Yet the concept of redemption points to the fact that a historically informed view of physical reality, which left its mark on Kracauer’s essay writing of the 1920s, has not been abandoned. The objective development of history has, however, altered the shape of Kracauer’s view of reality.

This brings me to the second element of the *Theory of Film*: it adopts the viewpoint taken in the Weimar essays, but in terms of this viewpoint having been lost. Whereas talk of the all-out gamble that is history harbors the messianic hope that a history which has since become a catastrophe will be redeemed, that “catastrophe” has now come to pass, without the Messiah having arrived — that is, unless he is hidden, as Kafka suggests at the end of his novel *Amerika*, in the shabby American culture of entertainment, in the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma. In the essay on photography we read:

The same mere nature that appears in photographs lives its life out in the reality of the society which it [the capitalist production process] has created. A society which has degenerated into mute nature is quite conceivable; yet that society is devoid of meaning; however abstract it remains silent. Its rough outline crops up in the illustrated magazines. If it were to have any substance, the emancipation of consciousness would result in the erasure of consciousness; nature not permeated by consciousness would sit down at the table which consciousness had just vacated.⁵

With the transition from late capitalism to fascist society, precisely what had become conceivable in Weimar occurred: nature “sat down at the table” that consciousness had vacated.

This fundamental impression forms the backdrop to *Theory of Film*. It first comes to light in the fact that the systematizations undertaken in *Theory of Film*, which endeavor to emulate a scientific approach, are met

5. Siegfried Kracauer, “Die Photographie” (1927), *Das Ornament der Masse* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1963) 37.

head on by a consciously indeterminate use of the term *physical reality*: "Physical reality" is also called "material reality," or "physical existence," or "actuality," or loosely just "nature." Another fitting term might be "camera-reality" (28). It is in this indeterminate form that the historicophilosophical viewpoint of the Weimar essays reappears. Physical reality is so indeterminate in *Theory of Film* because in Kracauer's own eyes it has nullified all the traditional defining qualities of consciousness, and ultimately even any attempt to distinguish between primary and secondary natures.

The dialectic of Enlightenment has come to an end. However, *Theory of Film* starts by presenting a new form of perception according to which, contrary to all expectations, the nature present at the "table of consciousness" is also nonidentical. On the one hand, it is utter barbarism, the destruction of human life; yet, on the other, it is simultaneously survival. This new perception of the present is not possible without Kracauer's earlier historicopolitical reflections — while at the same time presupposing their negation. In order to articulate such a perspective, in *Theory of Film* he attempts to find a new language beyond the horizons of the once familiar conceptual tools. He assumes another language by mirroring and identifying his own perception in observations made by a literary subject, namely the subject of Proust's novel.

In the text, Proust appears as the antithesis to Kracauer's earlier work as a thinker and writer. Kracauer had already outlined nonidentity as secondary nature in the 1920s, in a discussion of the Tiller girls in the essay on "Mass Ornament." At that time, however, he conceived of it as both the "manifestation of lower nature" and the product of rational thought — rational thought contained a strand of hope.⁶ *Theory of Film*, by comparison, verges on distorting the view of film as the product of capitalist rationality. The pathos of the notion of "unstaged reality" cannot be linked to the call for "greater" rationalization, in line with the verdict that capitalism involves not too much, but rather too little rational thought. Hope, by contrast, now lies solely in a kind of survival, which is formed by the reproductive media. Just as rational thought refers to reason, so too survival implies "life."

Theory of Film has been accused of putting forward not only a vulgar theory of realism as the duplication of reality, but also a metaphysical *Lebensphilosophie* complementary to this positivism. Kracauer's critical

6. Kracauer, "Das Ornament der Masse," *Ornament* 60.

discussion in the 1920s of the philosophy of life, or at least his critique of this tradition in *Theory of Film* itself, should have given these interpreters pause.⁷ The recurrence of the concept of life in *Theory of Film* does not mean that Kracauer has given up the enlightened positions he championed in the 1920s. On the contrary, it represents his definitive departure from a philosophical context. If Kracauer places the image of Proust between himself and his own identity as a Weimar author — from which he has since become estranged — he does so not in order to repress that identity, but rather to see elements of his own former thought taking new forms in the images of the novel.

In Proust's *A la recherche* Kracauer comes across an everyday observation on nature at the table of consciousness, which Proust himself links to photography. It is the passage "where the narrator enters his grandmother's *salon* unannounced after a long period of absence":

I was in the room, or rather I was not yet in the room since she was not aware of my presence. . . . Of myself . . . there was present only the witness, the observer with a hat and traveling coat, the stranger who does not belong to the house, the photographer who has called to take a photograph of places which one will never see again. The process that mechanically occurred in my eyes when I caught sight of my grandmother was indeed a photograph. (14)

In this text, Kracauer was able to discern a description of some kind of "nature at the table of consciousness," which, however, does not mean the end of history but a part of it, part of a past life. Survival is now reimbued with a paradoxical hope for life because and inasmuch as it is mirrored in a "life" that, for its part, contained a kind of discovery of horror.

The photograph of the grandmother plays a role both in the 1927 essay on photography and in *Theory of Film*. Yet the two texts are concerned with different kinds of photography. Inka Mülder-Bach has already noted that the concept of photography in *Theory of Film* is different from that discussed in the earlier essay.⁸ However decisive this difference may be,

7. See, for example, "Life as a powerful entity — as it asserts itself, for instance, in the poems of Walt Whitman, and, perhaps, Emile Verhaeren — is a concept of relatively recent origin. It would be tempting to try to follow the evolution of this concept, say, from the time of the Romantics via Nietzsche and Bergson up to our days, but such a study goes beyond the scope of the present book, being a large-scale proposition of its own right" (*Theory of Film* 169).

8. Inka Mülder-Bach, "Schlupflöcher. Die Diskontinuität des Kontinuierlichen im Werk Siegfried Kracauers," *Siegfried Kracauer*, ed. Kessler and Levin, 249-66.

what is important is that Kracauer adopted the Proustian view of photography because he regarded it not as merely negating but as sublimating his own nihilistic utopian view of the 1920s.

Because of its revelatory power, the Proustian "photograph" of the grandmother approximates the photograph that Kracauer described in his essay on photography. But in contrast to the latter, it is not an old photo but an up-to-date image, and in this sense it resembles that of the film star. Proust's snapshot shows the grandmother "sitting on the sofa, beneath the lamp, red-faced, heavy and common, sick, lost in thought, following the lines of a book with eyes that seemed hardly sane, a dejected old woman whom I did not know" (14). The "estranged" picture of the Proustian grandmother becomes significant for Kracauer's purposes for two reasons. Whereas in the 1920s it was still possible to distinguish between two kinds of photographs, the course of history has since rendered such distinctions meaningless. All photography has been affected by the end of history that has occurred; at the same time, all photography now represents the repression of death, the continuation of life. However, the Proustian observation here centers on photography as the basic unit of film. For Kracauer, this observation was ahead of Proust's own life as a novelist. The age in which this photograph belongs is that of film; and although this age began with the new century, it was probably only possible after the end of the National Socialism to become conscious of it as the age of film, to grasp it in theoretical terms.

The Weimar Republic witnessed the appearance of such key works on the theory of film as Béla Balázs's *Der sichtbare Mensch oder Die Kultur des Films* and Rudolf Arnheim's *Film as Art*, whereas Kracauer himself, although leaving the central stage empty, constructed his own stage, as it were, from the wings. In the following discussion, I wish to investigate the relationship between *Theory of Film* and film-theoretical approaches of the 1920s. This discussion will provide a background for describing insights about film that Kracauer gains by breaking away from the above-mentioned models of film theory and turning instead to the novelist Proust. I will disregard the references to Arnheim; Kracauer's general verdict that film is not art separates him from this theoretician. I will begin instead with the conception of film that informs Kracauer's early essays "On Photography" and on "The Cult of Distraction" and will then return to his relationship with Balázs.

Toward the end of his essay on photography, Kracauer compares

film with the dream: "Whereas the chaos of the illustrated magazines is confused hotchpotch," he says, "the playful use of dismembered nature reminds one of a *dream* in which the fragments of everyday waking life are tangled up." It is clearly Kafka and not Freud whom he has in mind in this concept of the dream. And this is the case because a claim to realism is involved. Freudian theory goes only so far as to attribute a link between reality and the dream in the dream residues from which the dream is made but says nothing about dream-work as the agent of wish fulfillment in reality. As Kracauer sees it, however, the dreamlike quality of film allows it to mediate between two realities. He begins with the "residues of nature" that photography collects and ends with a distractedly entertained reception, the reality content of which Kracauer describes with the laconic statement: "The form of amusement corresponds necessarily to that of the 'factory'" ("Der Form des Betriebs entspricht mit Notwendigkeit die des 'Betriebs'").⁹ Film fuses the real fragmented quality of nature exposed in photography with the real distractedness of human society that is revealed in the cinema audience.

As early as the 1920s, Kracauer the critic had lashed out at the socially affirmative effect of film, the dream factory — while still putting his faith in an audience whose centrifugal force supposedly brought it halfway toward his own critical view. The collapse of Weimar society destroyed this trust. *Caligari* speaks of this disappointment. It also displays a sharpened eye for the responsibility of films as aesthetic creations and the responsibility of the filmmakers, and thus partially revises his own position on the *Autoren* films. Their dreamlike portrayals of reality did not encourage the audience to confront its own reality in the cinema, as Kracauer later pronounced. It thus appeared vitally necessary to produce the theory for a kind of film that would encourage the audience to reflect on its own reality.

When Kracauer then wrote this theory — in the United States during the 1950s — the categories of the fragment and distraction, both so relevant to his defense of the medium in the 1920s, no longer play much of a role. Instead, they seem to have been replaced by their opposite, namely the category of continuity. Specifically, he is concerned with a "material . . . continuum" (71), rather than with "continuity," with creating the illusion of continuity. The switch from distraction to the category of continuum mirrors Kracauer's mistrust of the audience's

9. Siegfried Kracauer, "Der Kult der Zerstreuung," *Ornament* 314.

“realism”: film can no longer rely on the audience’s addictive thirst for distracted entertainment as constituting a force that will break up ossified social conditions. Instead of leading an ethereal existence between photography and the audience, film is now forced to develop away from the gravitational pull of photography.

Kracauer could find the concept of continuum already in Béla Balázs’s *Der sichtbare Mensch oder Die Kultur des Films*, a work with which he was of course familiar, but oddly enough rarely quotes. Balázs uses the term *visual continuity* to free the unique, filmic medium from the clutches of a literary context, the context of everyday language, and thus to highlight its own status: “Even given the best directors and the best actors, the images used by such literary films have a touch of the lifeless, of the dismembered about them, for the lack visual continuity.” Balázs sees a potential for this visual continuity in connection with physiognomics, a theory that views external reality as the nonconceptual expression of an inner truth. In the final analysis, visual continuity thus has the character of a prelinguistic form of communication. Balázs’s basic assumptions include the Romantic idea of a primordial language, the language of gestures, which, having been supplanted by literary culture, finds a new form of expression in film. Kracauer, who like Balázs was equally interested in securing an aesthetic autonomy for film vis-à-vis literature, without however pressing it into the hierarchical frame of art, nevertheless aims more radically at an aesthetic that can get along even without the romanticizing recourse to language. Only thus can film be conceived of as capable of making the nameless horror visible. Balázs already envisioned a society in which “the soul has collected and crystallized itself in the world.” “The body, however,” he writes, “has been stripped naked — is without a soul and empty.”¹⁰ Yet it is Kracauer who first takes seriously the task of the “culture of film,” namely that it has to concern itself with the body. He comprehends the revolutionary meaning of film by minimally shifting the terms of reference; his theory moves from a romanticizing or critical battle with reified culture to a concentration on its waste product — which is, as it were, also a product of culture — namely the body “without a soul.”

This shift in position characterized the independence of Kracauer’s approach from the outset, not only with regard to Balázs but also to

10. Béla Balázs, *Der sichtbare Mensch oder Die Kultur des Films* (1924), *Schriften zum Film* 1 (Munich, [East] Berlin, and Budapest: Hanser, 1982) 63, 52.

Adorno, as, for instance, in his appreciation of photography as a collection of natural remains. Nevertheless, when, in the 1920s, he championed a view of deanimated physical reality, this stance remained coupled to a critique of the reification of culture. Nor is photography granted a dignified status of its own vis-à-vis such critical thought as a result of the theorist's view alone, but rather in the virtual face of death. As the earlier conception would have it, the mechanics of film lends apparent life to lifeless remains. It was not until *Theory of Film* that he emphasized the assembly of moving, "lively" moments of reality in film. The mechanics of film then does not merely serve to fabricate the dream of life; rather, its real ability lies in revelation, in exposing life as a soulless corporeality.

It is on this continuum of life that Kracauer focuses, and only secondarily on the continuum of film in which this life presents itself. Film, conceived of as a dreamlike complex, was defined as a specific form in the 1920s — a complex distinguished by the fact that it mediated the form of the photographic fragment with the form of entertaining the distracted audience. Precisely its "immateriality" enabled it to mediate the various materials of nature and society with one another. This specificity of form is rejected in *Theory of Film*, a rejection that surfaces in the polemic against Eisenstein's theory of montage. At the beginning of *Theory of Film* Kracauer states that he wanted to write a "*material aesthetics*" of film: "My book differs from most writings in the field in that it is a *material aesthetics*, not a formal one. It is concerned with content. It rests upon the assumption that film is essentially an extension of photography" (ix). Yet the "extension" would appear not to have been as easy as this sentence suggests; after all, most of the book revolves around the notion of this extension. Scarcely heeding the assertion that the photographic contents have priority, Kracauer develops a theory of montage based on an aesthetics of the individual photographic frame. This aesthetic is neither that of photography as defined in the 1927 essay nor that of Balázs's close-up with its emphasis on physiognomies. It is that of the Proustian photographic image. The single frame only becomes the basis of montage because it itself already contains such montage *in nuce*. The estranged picture of the grandmother that presents itself to the Proustian narrator is itself already a continuum, which emanates from an interruption, namely the interruption of the normal process of vision. For the perception of the grandmother as a beloved person is interrupted, but an image that is

new, new in terms of content, namely that of an old, feeble woman, takes shape. However, this means that photography is by its very process inscribed with the negation of an intentional, "soul-filled" perception by the eye, for it posits a new form of perception over and above intentionality. The mechanics of photography is not the cause of this negation but an expression of it.

However, the aesthetics of the single frame photograph entails a rupture in the "normal," linguistically structured visual process. As a consequence, a cinematic continuum that follows the aesthetics of photography cannot consist solely of a one-to-one depiction of physical movement. Rather, it always has to allow the psychic permeation of those images to take place not in order to imbue reality with a soul but, on the contrary, to produce the photographic view of soulless reality again and again, seen from the "eye which anticipates love." The cinematic continuum moves within the tension between psychic permeation and exposure of the physical: "Due to the continuous influx of the psychophysical correspondence thus aroused, they [the shots] suggest a reality which may fittingly be called 'life'" (71). Unlike Balázs, Kracauer does not conceive of the "psychophysical correspondences" in the organic sense of physiognomics; rather, the rupture between *psyche* and *physis* is intrinsic to them, a rupture that first permits the unique, innate qualities of *physis* to become visible.

The Proustian conception of the photographic approach provides the basis for a notion of montage derived from the aesthetics of the photograph. However, it leaves the question unanswered as to how, within the continuum of film, such a "normality" of psychic permeation can again generate the photographic view already achieved of physical reality as is necessary if that conception is to be able to renew the photographic view. Here again Kracauer sees the makings of an answer in Proust's novel, namely in the petite madeleine episode. Proust describes a shocklike physical perception that triggers psychic activity, namely that of remembrance:

Under the influence of the shock he suffers when dipping a madeleine into his tea, Proust's narrator is, body and soul, transported back to places, scenes, and the core of names many of which amount to overpowering images of things external. The generic term "psychophysical correspondences" covers all these more or less fluid interrelations. (68-69)

The complementarity of the two observations — namely, the narrator's estranged perception of his grandmother and the madeleine's triggering of remembrance — form the substantive elements of Kracauer's concept of the cinematic continuum. As I see it, they form the background to his division between "realistic" and "formative" tendencies but are only inadequately represented at this systematic level. Film, for Kracauer, has two aspects: the photographic approach on the one hand — the exposure of physical reality — and the perception of the traces of history inscribed in the camera reality on the other. Film, as a montage of photographic images, is capable of perceiving the relationship between the physical and nonphysical in the negativity of the camera reality, is capable of developing historical reality, in a manner analogous to the story that wells up at the taste of the madeleine.

Whereas Kracauer takes the concept of psychophysical exchange from Proust, he nevertheless does not think that this concept is realized in the novel itself. Once the process of remembrance has been set in motion, no road in the novel leads back to a new experience of physical reality. Proust reveals, as Kracauer puts it, "in experiences and thoughts which no longer have an equivalent in the visible world. They are language-bound" (238). This withdrawal into the invisible world of the psyche is inevitable because the novel is a linguistic medium. Only film can and must forever lead remembrance out of introspection. The moment the psyche gets the upper hand over the eye is for film the impulse to renew the photographic approach. Kracauer takes this as the basis for his hypothesis that in film the formative tendency must always remain subordinate to the realist thrust. Yet should this so-called realistic tendency not, by the same token, "subordinate itself" again and again to uncovering the traces of history?

Kracauer's verdict only becomes understandable on the basis of a concrete experience: the experience of American cinema of the 1950s, which involved a return of the novel in film. Kracauer champions the priority of the photographic principle over films that allow their story to deteriorate into language-bound invisibility. One of the goals of *Theory of Film* was to show that film had superseded the novel in line with historical necessity. This is why film can only be judged a success in aesthetic terms if it fulfills its historical mission and does not degenerate into the literary model. In the cinema of the 1920s, which, at least in Germany, was strongly influenced by theatre, the film's relationship to the novel was not a problem. During this period, Kracauer himself

was still characterizing his time in terms of Lukács's concept of transcendental homelessness, of the remoteness of all meaning; and Lukács, after all, had viewed the novel as the epitome of this situation. It was not until the postwar years that Kracauer regarded film — and this emerges in his epilogue to *Theory of Film* — as the new signature of an age in which it is no longer the experience of the remoteness of meaning that is significant, but rather the remoteness of "physical reality."

On the other hand, however, the pathos with which Kracauer admits the priority of the realistic tendency also reveals a streak of resignation. For, if film leads history out of introspection, it does so only in order to lead it into a present that negates history. It would appear that the problem can only be solved through a decision-making process, and Kracauer's decision applies to the present, to physical reality. This decision is, as we have already seen, the basis for Kracauer's conception of a material aesthetics, but the explanation also leads back to it: at the point at which aesthetic reflection resigns itself, the discussion of "our time" reveals a certain pathos. Indeed, a plea is made on behalf of physical reality that ends with a view of the family as the metaphor of a humane society grounded in physical reality.

In the 1920s Kracauer's critical work on film was driven forward by the belief in Enlightenment, in establishing a form of social subjectivity among the "spectators." In a time of "transcendental homelessness" Kracauer regarded the spectators as the last residue of the subject of the Enlightenment. This idea too is destroyed when he writes his theory of film. However, I do not share Helmut Lethen's view that Kracauer's *Theory of Film* is therefore already a poststructuralist work; rather, it characterizes his acceptance of the concept of the subject while simultaneously breaking with the Cartesian and Kantian tradition, according to which the subject is the basis of all knowledge.¹¹ Kracauer posits the object, namely physical reality, against the conception of the subject as an apparatus that produces knowledge. The motif of redemption in the midst of catastrophe reappears here: the specific substitution of physical reality for the function previously accorded the subject — nature at the table of consciousness — could liberate the subject from that which Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* called the compulsion for self-preservation intrinsic to all scientific knowledge. Subjectivity is reflected upon at many levels in *Theory of*

11. Lethen 196. He speaks of Kracauer's aesthetics as bearing an "amazing affinity with . . . or even (being) a precursor of post-modernist theories."

Film. In this respect, the tenacious insistence on the priority of physical reality has above all a negative meaning, that is, to negate the principle of self-assertion in the subject.

The choice of the metaphor of the family at the end of the book is therefore no coincidence. Bourgeois thinkers from Rousseau to Horkheimer regarded the family, via the woman, as representing a principle different from that of the egotism of bourgeois society. The main theme informing the development of Kracauer's theory of film is the priority of the object, but those elements of the subject continue to cluster around it, even after the subject has been stripped of its function of generating cognition; these are, as it were, "fragments around a void." The metaphor of the family stands for the moment in which the fragments might find a new cohesion.

Feminist critique, however, can only regard this other as complementing the male-bourgeois principle of self-assertion, from which the subject must also free itself. Kracauer's theory of film, with its main theme of the redemption of physical reality, ignores this aspect of emancipation. This results in inconsistencies in the way the project is executed, as for example in the concept of the relationship between "realistic" and "form-giving" tendencies. Kracauer's theory of film as the redemption of external reality fails to reflect critically on the bourgeois organization of the relationship between the sexes and is thus ultimately unable to provide the theory of saving the subject that it aims to be.

I will only address these two aspects briefly, namely the attempt to redeem the subject and the failure of this attempt. Kracauer wanted to write a material aesthetics, but that meant neither an aesthetics based on a one-to-one reproduction nor an aesthetics that would do justice to artistic material, *Materialgerechtheit*, as was frequently advocated by the avant-garde of the 1920s.¹² This meant, as he says, that his theory was concerned with "contents" and that it conceived of film "essentially as an extension of photography." I have attempted to describe what the latter means for a notion of montage. Now I would like to consider his view of film as an extension of photography from another angle — namely, that photography is not only inscribed by the negation of the subject but also in this respect again represents a relationship between subject and world.

12. With regard to both misunderstandings, it is tremendously enlightening to read the parts of the book on documentary film and avant-garde film. One must not allow oneself to be deceived by the strategy of portrayal that begins with photography.

The old concept of photography and the new concept adopted from Proust both conceive of photography not in terms of technique but as “materialization,” as the representation of a relationship between subject and world. In the first case, it was the anticipated gaze that looks back on the world from the end of history, and in the second case “the eye which anticipates love” (216). The subject of film presupposed here is the estranged subject, who corresponds to the photograph of an alienated object world. All of the work done by the camera, the director, the spectators, and the *mise en scène* generate this one subject, which, however, does not exist independently of this manifestation. In any case, the technical apparatus of the camera and of film production does not in itself provide the foundations of a “realistic” relationship to the world; rather, it is connected to a subject state, which Kracauer also refers to as “dejection”:

The dejected individual is likely to lose himself in the incidental configurations of his environment, absorbing them with a disinterested intensity no longer determined by his previous preferences. His is a kind of receptivity which resembles that of Proust's photographer cast in the role of a stranger. (17)

The first sentence again brings to mind the gesture with which Kracauer moved about in the cities of the Weimar Republic and for whom exile did not at heart constitute a change, but at most further accentuated the figure of the foreigner. Nevertheless, in taking the step from *flâneur* to photographer, *Theory of Film* takes a leap forward in the portrayal of this subjectivity. What distinguishes *Theory of Film* from the earlier essays is that it perceives the technical medium to be a form of representing the subject in which the latter presents itself as separate from the individual without at the same time relapsing into some transcendental metaphysics.

The technical side of film, by virtue of now allowing the uncoupling of the representation of the subject from individuality, thus produces meaning. Kracauer asserts that its significance for a material aesthetics develops in relation to contents. The reason for this soon becomes clearer — namely because the contents represent elements of the reality of the subject. *Theory of Film* essentially deals with two kinds of contents, those of “unstaged reality” and those of staged contents, essentially the story. However, Kracauer tends to prioritize the first kind of content — to assign staging the task of creating the illusion of reality and

consequently to judge a story appropriate to film according to whether or not it incorporates the gesture of reproducing the coincidental.

The concept of what constitutes a film plot is the major problem in *Theory of Film*, and the definitions it provides are far from satisfactory. At times one has the impression that, if it were up to Kracauer, he would dispense with the story altogether. Yet, his own acumen does not permit this. The story is important in two respects: first, for the audience, and second, in order to depict a certain kind of reality. One could perhaps regard the first argument as pragmatic, but the second is of central import to a "material aesthetics." The film, he says, needs the "story" in order to grasp "those aspects of potentially visible reality which only personal involvement is apt to summon" (212), or, in other words, which only exist in connection with the individual. Kracauer's discussion of the possible contents of the story is, however, not geared to the specificity of this reality but rather inquires as to the adequacy of the portrayal of these contents in relation to "unstaged reality." He thus concludes that only the "story he has come upon" and the "episode" are appropriate to film.

In film, the reality that only personal involvement is apt to summon received *de facto* a different treatment than all other aspects of reality. Teresa de Lauretis, for example, has referred emphatically to this difference in her essay "Desire in Narrative"; she points out that the difference between the *mise en scène* of the coach at the beginning of Renoir's *Une Partie de campagne* and that of the female protagonist has to do with the fact that, put simply, "a woman is not a cart."¹³ At the same time, however, cinema also has a tendency to make this difference invisible. It "naturalizes" the woman in order to create an identity between the position of the male individual and that of the subject of the film. By wishing to grant precedence to the reproduction of an unstaged object world, Kracauer also resists any restoration of this subject position. However, by adopting the maxim that the story should conform to photographic realism, he reaffirms the tendency of cinema to render the difference between the two "natures" invisible. At the vanishing point of this tendency the woman clearly disappears, and thus, as a logical consequence, the male does too. Only a considered inconsistency apparently implied by film itself prevents *Theory of Film* from reaching a conclusion that would confirm film as the mirror of a world devoid of people.

13. Cf. Teresa de Lauretis, "Desire in Narrative," *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1982) 103-57.

It would appear to me, however, that a different conclusion can be drawn from *Theory of Film*, for a view that regards film technique as a representation of the subject uncoupled from "personal involvement" contains a potential not tapped by Kracauer. To do so would mean assuming that film can in principle yield a critique of individuality. The aesthetics of the story in film would have to follow the direction taken by this critique. Pursuing this Ariadne thread, it would then arrive, in the face of an individuality stripped of the dignity of subjecthood, at a notion of the subject that would refer neither to the male bourgeois individual nor to the female domain of the family.

Translated by Jeremy Gaines

boundary 2 an international journal of literature and culture

Paul Bové, editor

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Kracauer's Epistemological Shift

Patrice Petro

It has often been remarked that, until fairly recently, Kracauer's reputation in film theory rested upon the two books he wrote in English: *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947) and *Theory of Film* (1960).¹ These two books, which established Kracauer as a major, if fundamentally flawed, thinker on film, have frequently been compared to the essays and more aphoristic writings of the French film theorist André Bazin, who shared Kracauer's concern for an aesthetics of realism in the cinema.

In standard surveys of film theory, however, the comparison between Kracauer and Bazin is made only to underscore the tendentious and one-dimensional quality of Kracauer's thought. Dudley Andrew, for example, characterizes the difference between Kracauer and Bazin in the following way. He writes:

Kracauer is the kind of man who decided after forty years of viewing film that he ought to work out and write down his ideas about the medium; so he went straight to the library and locked himself in. There, reading widely, thinking endlessly, and always working alone, always cut off from the buzz of film talk and film production, he slowly and painstakingly gave birth to his theory.²

1. *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947); *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York and London: Oxford UP, 1960).

2. *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction* (New York and London: Oxford UP, 1976) 107. It should be mentioned here that Andrew borrows his characterization of Kracauer from Peter Harcourt. However, throughout his chapter on Kracauer's film theory, Andrew tends to add Harcourt's description, putting particular emphasis on Kracauer's "incomparable self-confidence and . . . imposing German seriousness."

Andrew continues:

Unlike Kracauer, who spent years alone in a library generating *Theory of Film*, Bazin seems always to have been with people who were making films or discussing them. . . . It has been suggested that the best of his criticism has been lost because it occurred in the form of oral presentations and debates. . . . In any case, Bazin displayed little concern for the future of his ideas. He seemed satisfied that his thoughts could be of service in particular situations.³

In this account, Bazin is upheld as the quintessentially French intellectual, collegial in his approach to scholarship and aware of the contingent nature of thought. Kracauer, by contrast, emerges as the stereotypical German pedant, shut off from the world of practical criticism and obsessed with the future of his own ideas. Indeed, what Andrew values most in Bazin is directly related to what he finds most lacking in Kracauer. The local and specific nature of Bazin's theorizing about film — its provisional and essayistic quality — is precisely what prevents it, according to Andrew, from becoming the formidable and formidably closed system represented by Kracauer's ponderously Teutonic thought.

This obvious caricature of both Kracauer and Bazin is not merely an expression of an opinion, not simply the reflection of a Francophile sentiment. For while it is that, it is also much more, pointing to the intellectual and historical origins of contemporary film theory. No attentive reader of Anglo-American film theory over the past three decades would fail to miss its distinctly French orientation. From *auteurism* to poststructuralism, French traditions of thought have had the most significant influence on the development of Film Studies as an academic discipline, both in the United States and in Britain. To be sure, German theory has been enlisted along the way to expand the domain of a critical film theory. But it is Freud as read through Lacan, or Marx through Althusser, that has set the terms for the reception of German film theory. Even initial attempts to restore a phenomenological dimension to film study appealed to existential phenomenology rather than to critical theory, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre rather than Kracauer or Benjamin, in order to challenge the analytic and overtly scientific approach of early film structuralism and semiotics.⁴

3. Andrew 135.

4. See, for example, Dudley Andrew, "The Neglected Tradition of Phenomenology

What this points to, among other things, is the relative ease with which ideas have circulated between French and Anglo-American traditions, and the fundamentally impaired or more limited movement of German theories in the United States and Britain — at least insofar as the recent history of film theory is concerned. The rise of Nazism, which forced some of the most sophisticated theorists of cinema and mass culture into exile, certainly accounts for the loss of texts and traditions that contributed to a vital film culture in Germany during the 1920s. More significant than this, however, was the temporal lag between the translation of important German texts into English and the clearing of an institutional space in the 1970s for serious academic film study.

With no understanding of German theoretical traditions, and with no knowledge of the German language, some of the most prominent film scholars in the seventies had considerable difficulty in seeing any connection between Kracauer's final work on history and Benjamin's *Illuminations*, or, for that matter, any relationship between Kracauer's study of the Weimar cinema and Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In a thumbnail sketch of Kracauer's career, for example, Andrew mentions only four of his major studies — *From Caligari to Hitler*, *Theory of Film*, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, and *Offenbach and the Paris of His Time* — books originally written in English, or, in the case of the Offenbach study, books readily available in English translation. Had Andrew considered Kracauer's writings for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, he might have suggested how they share the improvisational character of Bazin's essays and how they connect to a wider history of German thinking about film.

Unaware of this early work, and failing to appreciate the circumstances under which *Theory of Film* was actually written, Andrew therefore fails to assess adequately the reasons for Kracauer's and Bazin's different working methods. Kracauer, Andrew tells us, "decided after forty years of viewing film" to write down his ideas about the medium, and "so he went straight to the library and locked himself in." Bazin, by contrast, is valorized for the social nature of his criticism, for having always "been with people who were making films or discussing them." Forced into exile in the early 1930s, Kracauer's solitary mode of scholarship can hardly be compared with Bazin's, since Bazin was never forced to leave his native France. And while risking, in the very writing

in *Film Theory*," repr. in the second volume of *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley and Los Angeles: California UP, 1985) 625-32.

of *Theory of Film*, the possibility of appearing out of date and overly ambitious, Kracauer also risked what Edward Said has described in relation to Erich Auerbach as the very real "possibility of *not* writing and thus falling victim to the concrete dangers of exile: the loss of texts, traditions, and continuities that make up the very web of a culture."⁵

Said's discussion of the effects of exile on Auerbach's writing of *Mimesis* bears further comparison with Kracauer's *Theory of Film*, not least of all given the two men's shared affiliation with a formidable tradition of European literature and letters. Said points out that in the epilogue to *Mimesis*, Auerbach casually mentions his experience of exile in Istanbul, thereby invoking not merely a place outside of Europe, but also "the ultimate alienation from and opposition to Europe." As Said explains, "For centuries Turkey and Islam hung over Europe like a gigantic composite monster, seeming to threaten Europe with destruction. To have been an exile in Istanbul at the time of fascism in Europe was a deeply resonating and intense form of exile from Europe."⁶

Said concludes by suggesting how Auerbach's experience of exile in the Orient ultimately served an enabling purpose, allowing him to convert his sense of pain and alienation into a work of literary criticism whose insights derive not simply from the culture it describes but also, and more crucially, from a necessary and agonizing distance from it. The same might be said of Kracauer's analysis of the Weimar cinema in *From Caligari to Hitler*, and yet the parallels between Kracauer and Auerbach go further than this. For instance, Auerbach's own admission of the need to transcend national boundaries ("our philological home is the earth," he writes; "it can no longer be the nation"⁷) certainly illuminates the final section of *Theory of Film*, where Kracauer, drawing directly on *Mimesis*, argues for an aesthetics of cinema derived from the texture of everyday life. Films whose composition "varies according to place, people, and time," Kracauer writes, "help us not only to appreciate our given material environment but to extend it in all directions. They virtually make the world our home."⁸

Even more striking than Auerbach's and Kracauer's shared commitment to a realist aesthetic, however, are the similar effects of their different destinations as refugees from Nazi Europe. If Istanbul was a

5. *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983) 6.

6. Said 6.

7. Auerbach, "Philologie der Weltliteratur," qtd. in Said.

8. Kracauer, *Theory of Film* 304.

particularly intense form of exile for a literary critic like Auerbach, so too, was the United States a deeply resonant experience for a film theorist like Kracauer. Since at least the 1920s, Hollywood cinema represented not merely an alternative to European filmmaking but also the very ethos of consumer capitalism that threatened to overtake and subsume other national traditions. Although Kracauer never shared Adorno's antipathy to Hollywood or, indeed, to other forms of commercial filmmaking, he was certainly aware of the dangers of consumerist logic, even if, on the surface, this seems more obvious in his early writings than it does in *Theory of Film*.

In any case, it would be impossible to see Kracauer today as the author solely of *From Caligari to Hitler* or of *Theory of Film*, or to assume that these books contain all of what he had to say about the cinema. The translation of some of Kracauer's most important early writings in the pages of *New German Critique* has gone a long way to ensure a reevaluation of Kracauer's reputation in Film Studies, and has in fact inaugurated a veritable Kracauer renaissance in contemporary film theory. What has emerged from recent discussions is a view of not one but two successive and autonomous theories of the cinema in the corpus of his writings; in other words, one finds a view of "two Kracaues" in contemporary film theory: the early Kracauer of *Das Ornament der Masse* and the later Kracauer of *From Caligari to Hitler* and *Theory of Film*.

The early Kracauer, for instance, is characterized as the practical film critic of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, the anticapitalist practitioner of a "material dialectics" (if not a dialectical materialism), the phenomenological observer of the local, the ephemeral, the everyday. The later Kracauer, by contrast, is seen to be the massive system-builder and conceptual thinker of *Caligari* and *Theory of Film*, the anticomunist émigré intellectual, the sociological critic turned melancholy realist. While retaining Dudley Andrew's pejorative assessment of Kracauer's American work, this new view also assumes that the inconsistencies in Kracauer's writings constitute overwhelming evidence of a schism or epistemological shift in his thinking about film — a shift that separates the early, improvisational essays of the 1920s from the later, academically imposing, studies of the postwar period.

To be sure, some commentators have suggested that Kracauer's writings exhibit a continuity of concerns, despite apparent inconsistencies in his method or chosen format, be it the exploratory essay or the book-length study. Karsten Witte, for example, maintains that the link

between the early and later work “lies in [Kracauer’s] intention to decipher social tendencies revealed in ephemeral cultural phenomena.”⁹ For others, however, Kracauer’s work evidences a significant theoretical division, with the later work marking a lapse into a fundamentally flawed or one-dimensional reasoning. Heide Schlüpmann, for example, writes that “in *From Caligari to Hitler* and *Theory of Film*, Kracauer’s tendency to generalize, to subsume particulars within conceptual constructs, presents an obstacle to the expression of his ideas.” The strength of the early essays, she further contends, “lies in their phenomenological procedure, their taking up of individual manifestations of daily life and dwelling upon them reflectively.”¹⁰ Thomas Elsaesser similarly stresses the differences between Kracauer’s work written in Germany and in America, claiming that between the 1927 essay “The Mass Ornament” and the 1947 book *From Caligari to Hitler*, Kracauer abandoned the dialectical core of his early criticism in favor of a sociological reductionism and an unredeemed humanism.¹¹ In Elsaesser’s estimation, the early Kracauer’s emphasis on the impossibility of separating high art and mass culture distinguishes him as a proto-post-structuralist, whereas the later work places him squarely within the traditions of American sociology and cold war anticommunism. Although the divide between early and later work is therefore variously interpreted, there is little dispute over the fact of a division — a division separating marxist critique from a theory of realist aesthetics, and Weimar Germany from postwar America.

Given the terms of Kracauer’s reception in Film Studies, there is some question of whether we must speak of *Kracauer’s* epistemological shift, or, rather, of an epistemological shift in Kracauer criticism. Of course, in the context of Film Studies, to speak of an epistemological shift at all is necessarily to invoke David Bordwell’s essay on “Eisenstein’s Epistemological Shift,” which attempts to show how Eisenstein’s writings turned from a materialist aesthetic informed by Pavlovian physiology and dialectical materialism to a romantic aesthetic grounded in psychology, organicism, and empiricism.¹² In a surprising reversal of

9. “Introduction to Siegfried Kracauer’s ‘The Mass Ornament,’” *New German Critique* 5 (Spring 1975): 59.

10. “Phenomenology of Film: On Siegfried Kracauer’s Writings of the 1920s,” *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987): 98.

11. “Cinema — The Irresponsible Signifier, or ‘The Gamble with History’: Film Theory or Cinema Theory,” *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987): 85.

12. *Screen* 15.4 (Winter 1974-5): 32-46.

classical film theory's traditional separation of formalist and realist aesthetics, Eisenstein and Kracauer have come to be discussed in remarkably similar ways. In Bordwell's view, Eisenstein's later writings evidence a shift toward political conformity as well as a move from a practical engagement with film to a stance of isolated self-absorption. According to recent commentators like Elsaesser, Kracauer's writings similarly reveal a turn away from dialectical thinking to political conservatism, as well as a shift from practical film criticism to academic film theory. What is at stake, then, in claims for epistemological shifts in the development of film theory are assumptions about intellectual responses to Stalinism and to communism in the cold war era. As one critic has put it (without, however, making any reference to Kracauer): "It is strange to see how the philistinism of the Stalinist regime in the 1930s finds its belated double in the United States of the Cold War two decades later."¹³

Of course, the concept of "epistemological shift" has a wider theoretical lineage, one that can be traced to Louis Althusser's structuralist rereading of Marx, with its claim for a divide separating the young, humanist Marx of the 1844 Manuscripts from the mature, scientific Marx of *Das Kapital*.¹⁴ While clearly an intellectual response to Stalinism and its cult of personality, Althusser's concept of epistemological shift also finds parallels in assessments of other marxist thinkers, notably Lukács, whose work is typically interpreted as split between an early idealism and romantic anticapitalism, and a later orthodox marxism and realist aesthetics.¹⁵ The notion of epistemological shift, however, has even deeper historical resonances in Film Studies, and can be traced to early *auteur* criticism, which stressed the negative impact of American culture on various European directors' careers.¹⁶ Within this tradition, the British Hitchcock was compared to the American Hitchcock, the German Fritz Lang to the American Fritz Lang, and, almost invariably, the American work was found wanting. Recent discussions

13. Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1969) 56. After this remark, Wollen adds, "'Realism' has always been the refuge of the conservative in the arts, together with a preference for propaganda of a comforting rather than disturbing kind."

14. *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left, 1977).

15. See, for example, Andrew Arato and Paul Breines, *The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism* (New York: Seabury, 1979).

16. For a historical overview of *auteur* criticism, see John Caughie, *Theories of Authorship* (London: British Film Institute, 1982).

of Kracauer's epistemological shift would therefore seem to partake of both the marxist critique and the *auteurist* legacy in Film Studies, since his writings are said to split upon both a critical response to Stalinism and an uncritical embrace of American culture.

Kracauer himself would not object in principle to the concept of epistemological shift, since his final study of history provides a compelling analysis of historical time as profoundly fractured and disjunctive.¹⁷ He would, however, insist on seeing his German and American writing as part of a common project, and this, in fact, is one of the main arguments of the *History* book, which attempts to situate his life's work within a continuum of concerns. Although some have suggested that Kracauer manipulated his image for posterity in this final study,¹⁸ it is clear that he was attempting to respond to the critique leveled against him by his longtime friend and former colleague, Theodor Adorno, who argued in a 1965 essay that Kracauer's work became increasingly affirmative in America, that it embraced the possibility of happiness in the world and failed to sustain a critique of the status quo.¹⁹

The image of Kracauer conveyed by Adorno suggests a familiar story of the émigré intellectual in America: the refugee fleeing from fascist Europe ultimately settles in America where, feeling himself exiled, displaced, and alienated, he writes a scathing critique of his former culture. He then goes on uncritically to accept the English language and is eventually seduced by American culture (not to mention its cinema), finding in it a haven from forced exile and voluntary emigration, thereby mirroring the "end of ideology" criticism fashionable in America in the 1950s. To be sure, Adorno ultimately conceded that the source of Kracauer's conservatism must be sought in the very tensions and pressures of emigration. And yet, by reading Kracauer's career as a mirror reflection of wider historical developments in cold war politics, he failed to consider the range of institutional changes that necessarily separated Kracauer's early and later work.

17. *History: The Last Things Before the Last* (New York and London: Oxford UP, 1969). Phil Rosen and David Rodowick have both stressed Kracauer's disjunctive view of historical time. See Phil Rosen, "History, Textuality, Nation: Kracauer, Burch, and Some Problems in the Study of National Cinema," *Iris* 2.2 (1984): 69-84; D. N. Rodowick, "The Last Things Before the Last: Kracauer and History," *New German Critique* 41 (Spring-Summer 1987): 109-39.

18. See, for example, Martin Jay, "The Extraterritorial Life of Siegfried Kracauer," *Salmagundi* 31-32 (Fall 1975-Winter 1976): 49-106.

19. "Der wunderliche Realist. Über Siegfried Kracauer," *Noten zur Literatur* 3 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1965) 83-108; English version in this issue of *New German Critique*.

To begin with, Kracauer confronted very different audiences and institutional arrangements in America than he had known in Weimar Germany. Needless to say, in the United States of the 1940s and 1950s, there was little place in film journalism for a man of Kracauer's training and expertise, even though he was able to find a congenial environment for intellectual work on the margins of academic life. The shift in his writings from practical criticism to academic film theory must therefore take into account the very different sense of place and belonging, as well as the very distinct forms of association and community, entailed in the movement from Europe to America at the time.

Second, it is important to note the changing status of film as a cultural object in the period spanning Kracauer's migration. In the 1920s, Kracauer wrote about the cinema as a marginal sphere of life and about film viewing as an experience that marked the cultural disintegration of absolute values and objective truths. By the 1940s, the cinema could no longer be construed as a marginal phenomenon, since it had clearly emerged as one of the central institutions in modern cultural life. Without an established institutional place for Film Studies in the 1950s and 1960s, however, *Caligari* and *Theory and Film* failed to find a wide or appreciative audience. And when academic film study was formally institutionalized in the 1960s and 1970s, these books became even further marginalized and unreadable, antithetical as they were to the reigning critical orthodoxies of *auteurism*, structuralism, and antirealist film theory.

Today, of course, all this has changed, as some of Kracauer's early writings have been translated into English and interpreted from the perspective of contemporary film theory. No longer is there any doubt of Kracauer's connections to critical theory, and it has become nearly impossible to relegate his materialist aesthetics to a "naive realism" or simple-minded reflectionism. Kracauer's critique of totality and concern for history have also inspired extended comparisons with such poststructuralist thinkers as Baudrillard and Foucault, and it would not be unthinkable to imagine future comparisons between Kracauer's conceptualization of modern culture as a "mass ornament" and the Situationists' description of their own era as "The Society of the Spectacle." That Kracauer's writings have now become readable from the vantage point of poststructuralism is undoubtedly related to the fact that the cinema itself has once again become a marginal sphere, dominated by television and the computer. It is nevertheless ironic that the reevaluation of Kracauer's career has involved elaborate appeals to the authority of French traditions in criticism and theory, and that Kracauer's later work continues to

be criticized when it seems most overtly or most resolutely "German."

But it would be too easy to dismiss as ahistorical and disingenuous the recent characterizations of Kracauer as a proto-poststructuralist. And it would also be a mistake to underestimate the role played by what Edward Said has called "borrowed" or "travelling theory." As Said explains,

Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by [a] circulation of ideas, and whether it takes the form of acknowledged or unconscious influence, creative borrowing, or wholesale appropriation, the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity. Having said that, however, one should go on to specify the kinds of movements that are possible, in order to ask whether by virtue of having moved from one place and time to another an idea or a theory gains or loses in strength, and whether a theory in one historical period and national culture becomes altogether different in another period or situation.²⁰

This concept of "travelling theory" helps to illuminate the reasons for an epistemological shift in recent Kracauer criticism, as well as the shift in Kracauer's own thinking about film. Indeed, what attracts contemporary scholars to Kracauer's early work on cinema, and, moreover, to his final thoughts on history, is precisely his commitment to the feel and texture of experience, his critique of abstraction and totalizing theories of culture, and his investment in questions of the local, the ephemeral, and the everyday. Kracauer's early writings are fascinating for us today because they do not present a theoretically closed or coherent system, but read instead like a phenomenology of everyday life, offering both an analysis of the sensory, perceptual apparatus of film viewing and a critique of its reified institutions. In the wake of the massive system-building of structuralism and semiotics, Kracauer's materialist phenomenology represents a timely alternative to outmoded forms of conceptual thinking and an early historical precedent for what is now called "cultural studies." While the movement of Kracauer's early theory into contemporary Film Studies has necessarily involved processes of representation and institutionalization different from those in Weimar Germany, it has also inaugurated a subtle approach to questions of cultural production and reception from the standpoint of a theory that, one would hope, will one day constitute a history of subjectivity in relation to everyday life.

20. Said 226.

In this regard, it is important to emphasize that Kracauer's less fashionable American work also merits serious rereading, since it clearly re-frames the arguments originally posed in the 1920s and offers a compelling critique of abstraction and conceptual thinking, if often in highly abstract and conceptual terms. *Theory of Film*, for instance, provides a reading of mass culture in relation to the fragmentation and alienation of everyday life and levels a critique against intellectuals for attempting to preserve outmoded aesthetic values under changed cultural conditions. Focusing attention on peculiarly modern forms of subjectivity, *Theory of Film* thus takes up where "The Mass Ornament" left off, analyzing a culture dedicated to the play of surface in and through its representations. Whereas the early essays enlist marxist theory and economic analysis more obviously and more thoroughly, lending equal weight to the manipulative character of mass culture as well as to its emancipatory potential, the later work preserves an interest in dialectical thinking, although it tends to take up either side of the dialectic in individual studies.

In *From Caligari to Hitler*, for example, Kracauer analyzes the cinema as an institution that functioned historically to paralyze social life, reifying it into ornamental patterns, and evacuating the possibility for individual judgment or critical thought. In *Theory of Film*, the reifying process of cinematic representation is interpreted more positively, as a force which energizes the unforeseen and potentially liberating possibilities of a technological medium in an abstract and modern age. This much is suggested by Kracauer when he writes, "We literally redeem this world from its dormant state, its state of virtual nonexistence, by endeavoring to experience it through the camera"; or, again, when he observes that "abstract painting is not so much an anti-realistic movement as a realistic revelation of the prevailing abstraction."²¹ Kracauer's final work on *History* then restates the dialectical relationship between critique and possibility in photography and in history, thereby restoring the complicated alternation of ideas that energize the early work.

The corpus of Kracauer's writings therefore suggests the difficulties in viewing his ideas as mere reflections of his time, as Adorno tended to do, for there is, in fact, no linear progression in his thinking about film, and no simple or necessary movement from critique to embrace of mass culture as his theory traveled across time or, indeed, across space. Kracauer's later writings, I would submit, actually reveal less of

21. Kracauer, *Theory of Film* 300, 294.

an epistemological shift than a shift of emphasis in the original theory, resulting in an overstatement and, in places, a simplification of the analysis of mass culture developed in the 1920s.²² Taken together, *From Caligari to Hitler* and *Theory of Film* constitute a complex dialectical view of the cinema such as one finds theorized in the early writings. When read separately, however, these books tend to suggest a one-dimensional, one-sided, and impoverished account of the relationship between institutional constraints and perceptual possibilities in the cinema and in history. As Adorno might have reminded Kracauer, although here, in a celebrated reply, he is responding directly to Benjamin:

The reification of the great work of art is not just loss, any more than the reification of the cinema is all loss. It would be bourgeois reaction to negate the reification of the cinema in the name of the ego, and it would border on anarchism to revoke the reification of the great work of art in the spirit of immediate use values. Both bear the stigmata of capitalism, both contain elements of change. . . . Both are torn halves of an integral freedom to which, however, they do not add up.²³

In typical fashion, Kracauer seems to have anticipated this critique in the writing of *Theory of Film* and, as if to defend himself against it, offered a comparison of Marx and Freud that illuminates his own reasons for attempting to extend his theory of film beyond the early writings, precisely by underlining the ways in which the cinema helps us to overcome abstraction and reified thinking through a concrete mode of apprehending and understanding. "Freud probes deeper than Marx into the forces conspiring against the rule of reason," writes Kracauer. "But Marx," he continues, "intent on widening that rule, could not well make use of discouraging profundities." As a kind of afterthought, and in a gesture that speaks both to his experience of exile in America and his own intellectual journey from "The Mass Ornament" to *Theory of Film*, Kracauer adds: "When you want to travel far, your luggage had better be light."²⁴

22. And, to complicate things even further, Miriam Hansen has pointed out that Kracauer's early writings also reveal a shift in emphasis, from a concern with metaphysical questions in the early 1920s to a concern with ideology and material practices from 1927 on. See Hansen's, "Decentric Perspectives: Kracauer's Early Writings on Film and Mass Culture," in this issue.

23. Adorno, "Letters to Walter Benjamin," repr. in trans. in *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Ronald Taylor (London: New Left, 1977) 123.

24. Kracauer, *Theory of Film* 290.

History as Autobiography: The Last Things Before the Last

Inka Mülder-Bach

Muted response — the keynote of Siegfried Kracauer's reception both in Germany and America — gives way to embarrassed silence when attention turns to his last work, the posthumously published study *History: The Last Things Before the Last*.¹ The extreme cultural and scholarly isolation in which this book was written is reflected in the history of its impact, which is the history of an impact that was never made. This lack of public attention contrasts sharply with the author's own evaluation. There can be little doubt that Kracauer considered *History* to be his most significant accomplishment, the final realization of his most profound philosophical intentions. Having reached what he regarded as the culmination of his intellectual development, he turns back on his earlier writing in an attempt to grasp the essence and fundamental coherence of his theoretical endeavors. Thus he writes in the Introduction to *History*:

Lately I came across my piece on "Photography" and was completely amazed at noticing that I had compared historicism with photography already in this article of the 'twenties. Had I been struck with blindness up to this moment? Strange power of the subconscious which keeps hidden from you what is so obvious and crystal-clear when it eventually reveals itself . . . at long last all my main efforts, so incoherent on the surface, fall into line — they all have served, and continue to serve, a single purpose: the rehabilitation of objectives and modes of being which still lack a name and hence are overlooked or misjudged. (4)

1. (New York: Oxford UP, 1969); subsequent references to *History* will be made parenthetically in the text.

The question of the relationship to the earlier writings is indeed crucial for an understanding of *History*, but it is precisely as a reader of Kracauer that one hesitates to agree with the interpretation he puts forth here. In order for his “incoherent” efforts to “fall into line,” in other words, in order to transform the discontinuities of his works into a surface expression of an underlying continuity, Kracauer must first place these works in a certain perspective, a perspective indicated in the casual phrase “at long last.” As Kracauer himself insists in his subsequent reflections on the vagaries of historiography, this perspective is not to be trusted: when one is dealing with totalities, contours become blurred; the overall picture can be obtained only at the price of important specifics. I will therefore use the micrological lens that the author himself preferred as a tool of interpretation in order to illuminate motifs in *History* against the background of his essays of the twenties. I will first demonstrate by example what in my view constitutes a crucial difference between the early and the late work, then place this difference into a broader context in order finally to proceed from this explanation to a new reading of *History*.

The structural analogy between “historical reality” and “camera reality” and, correspondingly, between historiography and photography, is the connecting thread along which Kracauer pursues in *History* the perennial problems of the theory of history. In the process he repeatedly returns to a scene in the third part of Marcel Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*, which had already aided him in illustrating “the photographic approach” in *Theory of Film*.² The scene in question is the one in which the first-person narrator Marcel enters his grandmother’s salon unannounced. For one moment, the brief moment of his unnoticed entrance, he registers her with a glance in which he himself has — so to speak — not yet arrived:

Of myself . . . there was present only the witness, the observer with a hat and traveling coat, the stranger who does not belong to the house, the photographer who has called to take a photograph of places which one will never see again. The process that mechanically occurred in my eyes when I caught sight of my grandmother was indeed a photograph.³

2. (1960; New York: Oxford UP, 1965) 13-20.

3. Cited in *Theory of Film* 14, from Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: 1932 and 1934) 1: 814.

This photograph shows him his grandmother as he had never seen her before, as “part of a new world,” the strange world of time. The eye of the photographer Marcel, as organ of pure receptivity that for the duration of a snapshot forestalls the regulating effects of subjectivity, sees “sitting on the sofa, beneath the lamp, red-faced, heavy and common, sick, lost in thought, following the lines of a book with eyes that seemed hardly sane, a dejected old woman whom I did not know.”⁴ The significance of this passage for Kracauer lies in its association of the photographic gaze with a moment of self-alienation. As the product of a deliberate act, of a conscious withdrawal of the formative powers of the self, which tend to blur the authentic image, this process of self-alienation is characteristic of the photographer and is the basis of the methodological analogy between his activity and that of the historian. For the historian, too, must endeavor to put himself “in brackets,” even more radically, to “efface it” (82), if he wants to grasp in history not always only himself, but rather the Other, that which does not relate to him as well. Alluding to Ranke’s dictum about recognizing “wie es eigentlich gewesen ist” (“how it actually was”), Kracauer concludes: “For the first time Marcel . . . sees his grandmother as she really is” (83).

Forty years earlier, the essay “Photography”⁵ took a different tack. Here Kracauer set forth a dialectical theory of photography in which the concept of photographic representation is developed from a consideration of what photography does not and cannot represent. The core of this theory, again modeled on Proust, is the confrontation of photograph with memory-image. Memory-images arise through an unconscious process of selection and condensation in which individual features are involuntarily filtered from the multiplicity of personal experience. Though these images represent the empirical continuum of time and space only fragmentarily, they are by no means unorganized. Rather, they group themselves around a secret midpoint, a meaning that gives them coherence. This hidden center, the telos of memory, is the single, transparent image that can be called “the last one,” since in it the “truth

4. *Theory of Film* 14.

5. First published in *Frankfurter Zeitung* nos. 802 and 803 (28 Oct. 1927); first repr. in Siegfried Kracauer, *Das Ornament der Masse: Essays* (1963; Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1977) 21-39; now reprinted in Siegfried Kracauer, *Schriften* 5, ed. Inka Mülder-Bach (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1990). The three volumes of *Schriften* 5 are divided as follows: 5.1: *Aufsätze* (1915-1925), 5.2: *Aufsätze* (1926-1931), 5.3: *Aufsätze* (1932-1965). The reference here is to 5.1: 83-98. As far as possible, Kracauer’s essays will hereafter be quoted with reference to these volumes.

content" of the empirical world is saved from time. "The last image of a person is his real *history*. . . . It resembles a *monogram*, which condenses the name into a linear character that has meaning as an ornament" (5.2: 86).

What memory preserves cannot be recognized in the photograph. There is no path from the nonmimetic image to the naturalistic representation. The photograph captures only what presents itself to the camera during the brief moment of exposure. The telos of its technical reproduction is not the single, transparent image but rather the accumulation of moments into a complete reproduction of the time-space continuum. It is precisely this feature that links photography with historicism. Kracauer points out this affinity with the metaphoric density so typical of his writing: "Historicism is concerned with the photography of time. The equivalent of its time-photography would be a gigantic film depicting the temporal chain of events from all sides" (5.2: 85). Not, as in *History*, self-alienation as the precondition of genuine knowledge, but rather the reduction of reality to juxtaposition and succession, to the spatial and temporal relations among its elements, forms the comparative term of this analogy — the positive and negative signs of which are, moreover, reversed. For according to the earlier theory, the events documented by the "gigantic film" would be a random and meaningless jumble. Historical reality does not submit to mimetic reproduction, since it is incommensurable with the empirical continuum of time-space. "In order for history to depict itself, the mere surface cohesion offered by photography must be destroyed" (5.2: 88).

Knowledge in the emphatic sense in which this term is used in the "Photography" essay is inseparably bound to the transformative powers of subjectivity. The self-alienation experienced by Proust's narrator does not clear his vision but rather blinds him. The photographic impression he received as an indifferent "witness," as a mere "observer," demonstrates the "spatial configuration of an instant" (5.2: 92), in which the figure of the grandmother "as she really is" is not represented. "It is not the person who stands forth in his photography but rather the sum of what can be abstracted from him" (5.2: 92).

The difference between Kracauer's early and late interpretation of photography testifies to a fundamental change in his theoretical position, a change not easily comprehensible — to move from illustration to concept — through such key words as *metaphysics* versus *phenomenology*, or *construction* versus *mimesis*. More important is the question of what motivates the changes referred to in such conceptual differentiations and where their focus lies.

Implied in the metaphoric definition of historicism as the “photography of time” is the idea that the instantaneous configurations that the camera records are equivalent to discrete points of time along that linear-temporal sequence that historicism attempts to reconstruct. The temporal realm of photography is an isolated date along the axis of chronology, in which everything that happens is irrevocably stamped with transience. This realm is purely of the present and as such, in the next moment, already “altogether past” (5.2: 91).

Proust’s narrator also had to discover that “time in its terribleness”⁶ arises through photography. At this juncture, however, Kracauer takes a considerable step beyond Proust, in that he reads the temporal signature of photography as an expression of the photographic signature of his time. “The world itself has put on a ‘photographic face’; it can be photographed because it strives to merge into the spatial continuum which lends itself to snapshots” (5.2: 94). In the surface connections of the photographic space we recognize the contours of a reality that, stripped of its historical dimension, threatens to rigidify into a “natural” condition of total presentness. In this respect photography is indeed the realistic medium par excellence. Yet its realism, based on the assimilation of objects to the conditions of their technical reproduction, is more complex than its naive theoreticians could ever dream.

This process of assimilation is traced by Kracauer’s metropolitan images of Berlin, which should be read as a continuation of the “Photography” essay. “Straße ohne Erinnerung” (“Street without Memory”) is a programmatic prose text of 1932, dedicated to one of Berlin’s main streets, the Kurfürstendamm. In the confrontation with a narrator who behaves according to the experience and expectation of historical continuity, the street reveals its “true face” (5.3: 172) — as the “embodiment of the empty flow of time, in which nothing is allowed to last” (5.3: 170). The narrator seeks to move in this space as in a “long familiar” residence, with “automatic” gestures made safe by habit. Yet shocklike experiences in which he fails to recognize once-familiar scenes, force him to learn that the street resists this kind of assimilation. As a “gold vein” of business and consumption, the features of the street are molded by the “rootlessness” of commodities. “Uncanny winds” blow forth stores, bars, and display windows, which appear on the “screen” as if by “witchcraft,” only to disappear after a short time into “nothingness” (5.3: 171-72).

6. Siegfried Kracauer, “Das Buch vom Zirkus,” *Frankfurter Zeitung* 549 (26 July 1926).

The past usually clings to the places where it resided in its day; on the Kurfürstendamm it vanishes without a trace. . . . What once existed is gone, never to be seen again, and what happens to take hold at the moment monopolizes the present one hundred percent. (5.3: 173)

If the photographic face of modernism displays on one side the figure of time disintegrating into a discrete sequence of isolated instants, then on the other side it displays that of space closing into a timeless system. When Kracauer casually remarks that “bourgeois society . . . [moves] in a system of paths which are as straight as avenues” (5.2: 40), his metaphoric *aperçu* should, as is so often the case, be taken literally. It evokes the image of easily comprehensible axiality and geometrically strict linearity, which have become the epitome of modern architecture. The standard of functional rationality with which the latter operates demands that the irregular be straightened out, that deviations be eliminated — not least those of historic discontinuities. This process of leveling also shapes the “Street without Memory”:

Many houses have been stripped of their ornamentation, which formed a kind of bridge to the past. Now their plundered façades stand unsupported by time — as an allegory of the ahistoric transformation taking place behind them. (5.3: 173)

The leveling of continuities, the homogenization of space, and the linearization of time are mutually determined factors of that comprehensive systematization of *Lebenswelt*, in which modern rationality makes itself felt in everyday experience. In his essay “Das Ornament der Masse” (“The Mass Ornament”),⁷ Kracauer had understood the deeply ambivalent nature of this rationality as the dialectic of enlightenment — or, as he prefers to say, of “demythologization” (5.2: 61) — and had related it to the relations of production in a society that regulates itself anarchically, according to “economic laws of nature” (5.2: 96). The “horror” repeatedly invoked in his Berlin texts (see 5.2: 206; 5.3: 40, 41) results not least from the opposition between the “chaos” of capitalist economy and the “system” of the sensory world, between the anarchy of a commodity society incapable of organizing itself in a

7. Published in English (trans. Barbara Correll and Jack Zipes) in *New German Critique* 5 (Spring 1975) 667-76; for a detailed discussion of this essay see my book *Siegfried Kracauer — Grenzgänger zwischen Theorie und Literatur. Seine frühen Schriften 1913-1933* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1985) 60-67.

reasonable fashion and the “methodical construction” of “dead matter” (5.3: 41). Yet in Kracauer’s description the systematizing assault on the phenomenal world takes on features of a crazed compulsion that transcends economic conditions. It is accidental that he depicts the process of the assimilation of objects to the conditions of their technical reproduction in active terms (“the world can be photographed because it *strives* to merge into the spatial continuum which lends itself to snapshots”). For he senses behind this process of assimilation a “secret will”⁸ that evades materialistic explanations. Kracauer risks an existential interpretation:

Through their proliferation photographs wish to ban the reminiscence of death which accompanies every image of memory. In the illustrated papers the world has become a photographic present, and this photographic present has been immortalized. It seems to have been torn away from death; in reality it is at its mercy. (5.2: 94)

If memory saves the past from time by being mindful of its irretrievability, photography seeks to ban transience by abandoning itself to the present. Yet absolute presentness (*Allgegenwart*), which “finds no support in what has been” (5.3: 174), would lose with its history also its future as a remembered past and would decay, “unredeemed” (5.2: 91), with time.

Fear stands as the driving force behind those measures through which bourgeois society attempts to attain permanence “beyond the moment” (5.2: 40). The rationalization of space, which closes into a unified system that appears to be positioned forever; the homogenization of time, which as absolute presentness promises eternal duration: these are measures intended to protect human existence, but that actually endanger it. For they exclude precisely those contents “which are not encompassed by the construction of our social existence but rather which bracket this existence itself.”⁹ The true purpose of all orders that pretend to permanence and perfection is to “hurl into the abyss of imageless oblivion” — in a kind of collective effort of repression — the memory of the existential border regulations of death and revolution. In the light of this interpretation the system of the modern *Lebenswelt* proves to be a system of self-preservation as barbaric as it is deceptive. “Indeed,” writes Kracauer in his review of Kafka’s prose volume *The Building of the Chinese Wall*,

8. Siegfried Kracauer, “Tonbildfilm,” *Schriften 2: Von Caligari zu Hitler*, ed. Karsten Witte (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1979) 411.

9. Siegfried Kracauer, *Die Angestellten*, *Schriften 1* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp) 289; the subsequent quotation is from the same page.

the edifice built by one generation after another is sinister. But sinister because it is supposed to ensure a security which human beings cannot possibly attain. The more systematically they construct it, the less they can breathe in it; the more perfect they strive to make it, the more inevitably it becomes a prison. (5.2: 364)

To critique the system of late bourgeois society by critiquing the material organization of its *Lebenswelt* means to take the materialism of materialistic theory literally. Through such a literal interpretation Kracauer gains a margin of play that allows him to retain existential motifs that cannot be integrated into orthodox versions of Marxism. While in his view social relations of production shape the forms of everyday experience as the expression of a collective self-understanding, the latter are nonetheless not universally determined by the former. It is only consistent that Kracauer always sketches the image of an alternate realm of experience, an alternate organization of the phenomenal world, into his vision of a more humane society.

While the structure of this alternate realm of experience is the same in all his texts, the names under which it appears vary: Marseilles, Nice, Naples, and above all and repeatedly, Paris. "The German" from Berlin, who "lives with his time" — thus we read in the "Paris Observations" of 1927 — "rediscovers the past" in Paris (5.2: 25). Paris has been spared the leveling operations that turned Berlin into a "city without memory." Here, today is penetrated by yesterday; the past is not only known, but also it can be grasped sensually in material layers and deposits that mark the stages of the effort it cost human beings to have a history. For Kracauer no difference is more telling than that between the Berlin subway system and the Paris Metro. In Berlin: refuges of "glass-smooth tiled walls" from which all "traces of their origin" have been erased; in Paris: an "archaic labyrinth" in whose caverns the stone from which it was hewn can still be detected — and with it the natural resistance that human labor had to overcome (5.2: 299). Even the Roman baths — so Kracauer would have it — have been spared the fate that usually overtakes ancient edifices: becoming "stone anachronisms in a world alienated from them," the ruins in Paris "endure" without "falling out" of time (5.2: 132).

The city's spaces are as "incalculable" (5.2: 39) as its temporal borders are fluid. No mapped out "system of paths" shows the visitor the way; he will attempt in vain to get an overview of things. The standard

toward which such an overview is directed — an initial, ordering accessibility — does not exist, nor does the code that gives individual places positions in a continuous syntax. The streets, squares, houses of Paris do not form an enclosed unity of homogeneous space but are rather permanently transformed, like pieces of a “mosaic” which decay before they can be assembled to form a “readable pattern” (5.2: 40). The city’s secret is its heterotopic organization, the rules of which only “the dreamer [knows]” (5.1: 379). Whoever wishes to penetrate Paris will therefore have to learn to improvise. Improvising, he can orient himself by combining and recombining the city’s topographical elements into a multitude of possible orders.

“The value of the cities is determined by the number of places in them which are devoted to improvisation” (5.1: 383). Improvisation and system are opposite terms, also with regard to their existential implications. While the system of the modern *Lebenswelt* obstructs the individual’s view of himself, in the spaces devoted to improvisation he is able to attain self-awareness. Improvisation corresponds — in a metaphor of Kracauer’s that renders the sensory existential — to “human proportions” (5.2: 29), to the dialectic of transient nature and transcending freedom.

“Ultimately I am an anarchist,” Kracauer writes in a 1926 letter to Bloch,

though admittedly skeptical enough to regard anarchism as it exists today as a distortion. The question is . . . whether and how the true reality of anarchism could be approached. Here I am filled, precisely because I believe, with a disbelief similar to Kafka’s, and it seems to me as if truth in its reality lies at exactly that point past which we have just proceeded (and, to be sure, at the point just ahead of us as well).¹⁰

If truth is a border concept, the concept of a threshold, which lies always already behind us and forever ahead of us, then true life is possible only during the moment of transition. In the final chapter of his novel *Ginster*, which reads as a kind of inventory of his utopian motifs, Kracauer expresses this transition in the image of a person on the verge of departure. For one utopian moment he finds himself between here and there, in the no-man’s-land of no-longer and not-yet.¹¹ For

10. Ernst Bloch, *Briefe 1903-1975*, ed. Karola Bloch et al. (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1985) 1: 280-81.

11. See Siegfried Kracauer, *Schriften 7: Ginster. Georg*, ed. Karsten Witte (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1973) 233.

Kracauer, a society is to be measured not least according to whether it leaves room for this threshold experience.

That Kracauer resorts to literary forms and procedures as a means of outlining alternatives to the system of the modern *Lebenswelt* is no accident. In the process of forced rationalization that occurred in the twenties, this system not only became more rigid but also expanded inexorably. The spaces devoted to improvisation were excluded, pushed to the margin, to the periphery. Materialistic theory, striving to maintain a vision of alternate form of social organization, found itself increasingly thrown back on the imagination. Yet the imagination also works with the elements of experience, and experience bespeaks the inescapability of the system.

Workers at the construction site: Kafka sees them everywhere. They hammer and pound, and their masonry is so thick that no sound gets through to us anymore. Foolish expectation — to be able to slip out in spite of it all! The doors have no keys, and any holes that might open are immediately walled up again. (5.2: 365)

Kracauer finds in Kafka a formulation of something that seems to have pursued him with the force of an obsession. Again and again in his prose one encounters a narrative pattern that describes the movement of escape and recapture; again and again imaginary projections are followed by disillusionment, dreams by shocklike awakenings; again and again the excursions into the periphery end in a scene whose features are not difficult to decipher: the “desolate plaza” of the short prose piece “Zwei Flächen” (“Two Surfaces”), a meticulously drawn “square” in the middle of which the “prisoner” awaits his sentence (5.1: 379-80); the deceptive dead end of “Erinnerung an eine Pariser Straße” (“Memory of a Street in Paris”) — “straight as an arrow, only a few minutes long, and relatively wide” (5.2: 244) — to which the first-person narrator is compulsively drawn back. These scenes are exemplary sites of modern experience, embodiments of “depraved presentness in its calculable dimensions” (5.1: 293).

If the centripetal maelstrom of the system cannot be escaped, then there is only one way out: it does not lead back to the premodern world at the periphery but rather “right through the middle of the system,” to adapt an often-quoted phrase from “The Mass Ornament” (see 5.2: 67). Kracauer also sketched this forward-directed flight into a metropolitan image, the “Analyse eines Stadtplans” (“Analysis of a

City Map”) of 1926. (That we are dealing here with a text about Paris should not be disturbing; the movement it describes can be extended to Berlin. The polarity between periphery and center — the subtitle of the text is “Faubourgs and Center” — that Kracauer first reads here from a map of the French capital is transformed soon afterward into a dialectical relation between Paris and Berlin.) The text contrasts the “filled life” (“gefülltes Dasein”), which has survived in the “giant sanctuaries” (5.1: 401) of the outskirts of Paris, with the business on the brightly lit boulevards of the city center in order to proceed in the last paragraph from the topographic figure to a critical *Denkbild*:

Wide streets lead from the outskirts to the splendor of the center. It is not the intended center. The good fortune destined for the wretchedness on the outside is pierced by other radii than the existing ones. But the streets leading to the center must be followed, for its emptiness is real today. (5.1: 403)

Kracauer decodes the topographical map as a historical-philosophical outline of his era. At the lusterless and luckless periphery he finds remnants of a society oriented around human needs, a way of life that, in the “upperworld of the boulevards in the center” (5.1: 402) has fallen victim to the leveling operations of rationalization. Here, in the center, by virtue of this rationalization, a second periphery has emerged, an “illusory external life” (5.1: 300), which exhausts itself in the “surface,” in the “cult of distraction” and consumption.¹² The point of the “Analysis” is the thesis that the social substance that has survived at the periphery can be saved only by penetrating this surface of the center and not by turning away from it in a naive affirmation of anachronistic cultural values. Hence the insistence: “the streets leading to the center [*must*] be followed, for its emptiness is real today.” When Kracauer speaks of the “reality” of the empty center, he not only means that this center exists, but also that it stands at the forefront of the historic process, that it marks the most advanced stage of “disenchantment.” Only at this forefront, from this extreme, will the revolution, which would

12. “Cult of Distraction” is Thomas Y. Levin’s translation of “Kult der Zerstreuung,” the title of one of Kracauer’s first and most famous essays on mass culture, originally published in *Frankfurter Zeitung* 167 (4 Mar. 1926), reprinted in *Das Ornament der Masse* 311-17; trans. in *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987): 91-96. On the constellation of a “double periphery” see Burkhardt Lindner, “Die doppelte Peripherie. Kleines Resümee eines Verlusts,” *Literaturmagazin* 15 (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1985): 60-69.

also mean a reversal of periphery and center, break out. "America" — as Kracauer puts it in terms of a metaphor familiar to his contemporaries, "America" as the epitome of disenchanted modernism — "will only disappear when it completely discovers itself" (5.1: 305).

The forward-directed flight that Kracauer undertakes in the mid-twenties follows this desperate dialectic. It motivates his commitment to the "empty center" as well as his determined turn toward the "surface" and its techniques of reproduction, photography, and film. Confronted with the inescapability of the system of modernism, Kracauer banks on the possibility that this system, "thought through to the end in its negativity" (5.2: 295), could explode, and that in such an explosion the periphery could become the new center of a liberated society.

Only a short time later, Kracauer's topographic-historical construction of modernism was shaken to its roots. By 1933 at the latest, the desperate dialectic that he, and not only he, had banked on in the twenties, proved to be a terrible illusion. Fascism mobilized the periphery in a completely different way — in a way that effectively cemented the violence of the system's center. Its excesses of negativity did not provoke a revolutionary overturning of the system, but rather reached unimaginable proportions. Kracauer draws the consequences of these experiences when in *History* — to return to his last work — he vehemently rejects all theoretical totalizations, all attempts to turn history into "a comprehensible whole," "an intelligible arrangement of things" (72). Regardless of whether this totality arises in the form of historical-philosophical ideas or scientific laws, it is invariably built on the discredited model of the "closed system," "one of the pipedreams of unfettered reason" (73). The historian must steer his way between "the Scylla of philosophical speculations with their wholesale meanings" and "the Charybdis of the sciences with their nature laws and regularities" (45). What then enters his field of vision is a world that Kracauer, using the German term in English, names after Husserl's concept of *Lebenswelt*, a world "of much the same stuff as our everyday world" (46), "partly patterned, partly amorphous" (58), and "virtually endless" (45), a fragmentary world filled with "contingencies" and "new beginnings" (31), with "transient impressions" and "unforeseeable encounters" (58), which are "surrounded by a fringe of indistinct multiple meanings" (59).

While Kracauer uses the concept of *Lebenswelt* to establish the connection between historical and photographic reality, his interpreters

tend to take up this concept in order to build a bridge to his writings of the twenties.¹³ But this bridge does not hold. Rather, it is precisely against the background of the early work that the problem of the late phenomenology becomes clear. This problem lies in the fact that, although Kracauer identifies history and *Lebenswelt*, he no longer reflects on the *Lebenswelt* itself as historical. The paradoxical effect of his phenomenologization of history is the dehistoricization of the phenomenal. By representing history as a totality, Kracauer deprives it of its effects.

Kracauer's critique of the so-called present-interest theory of history, to which a whole chapter of *History* is devoted (see *History* 62-79), can serve to demonstrate that it is precisely the crucial element of his early phenomenology that falls victim to this process of dehistoricization. The "present-interest theory," whose most often-quoted representatives are Croce and Collingwood, initially says nothing other than that the historian is a child of his era, that the "spirit" of his era, its *Zeitgeist* accounts for "the why and how of his devotion to the past" (63), and that he cannot free himself from these contemporary influences. A trivial point, one might think, but Kracauer tries to diminish its obviousness. He challenges what the theory presupposes: the existence of a *Zeitgeist* of which the historian allegedly is a product. In reality, he argues, every era has many "spirits," every historical period is a colorful "mixture" (147) of "heterogeneous elements," which "more often than not manifest themselves independently of one another" (66-67). But if this is the case, if "the historian's 'historical and social environment' is not a fairly self-contained whole but rather a fragile compound of frequently inconsistent endeavors in flux," then "the assumption that it moulds his mind makes little sense" (67).

The claims made by present-interest theory in its second and stronger version make even less sense: namely that the present is not only the unavoidable point of departure of all historical reconstruction but should also be its vanishing point, that historical research should be motivated by an interest in the present and proceed with an eye to it. Yet interest in the present and that which deserves to be called historical reconstruction can only be brought into accord — thus Kracauer's objection — if a "principle governing the whole of human history" (63) is postulated. Only on condition that the historian's material stands for a "virtually consistent and surveyable 'cosmos' of a sort"

13. See, for example, Martin Jay, "The Extraterritorial Life of Siegfried Kracauer," *Salmagundi* 31-32 (Fall/Winter 1975-1976): 49-106.

would the “identification of history as contemporary history” (73) be justified. This precondition is, however, untenable. The totality of history is no more a homogeneous unity than are individual periods. The historian’s world is rather a “precarious conglomerate” (66) of “unconnected events” (38), an open world of “non-simultaneous processes,”¹⁴ of temporary “tendencies” and uncompleted “aspirations” (66), the heterogeneity of which we are prevented from recognizing by the deceptive spell of the calendar, the “magic” (38) of chronological time, which transforms gaps into connections, discontinuity into continuity, succession into linear sequence, coincidence into purposefulness.

Nonsimultaneousness, heterogeneity, discontinuity: these terms sound familiar. They derive from the constellation of concepts that arose in the twenties around the metaphor of the periphery. At that time the metaphor referred only to the one pole of a dialectical relation whose other pole was called “middle” or “center” and was characterized by concepts such as synchronicity, homogeneity, and linearity. In *History* these latter concepts, which originally described the specific organization of the modern *Lebenswelt*, its systematic character, are quoted only by way of negation: as hallmarks of that which the *Lebenswelt* of history precisely is not.¹⁵ Transformed by the gaze of Kracauer the historian into a “universe . . . of a nonhomogeneous structure” (*History* 127), this world merges completely with what had once been known as the periphery.

The *totalization of the periphery*, the transference of its structural features to the entirety of historical reality, is the decisive step in the process of theoretical reorientation that probably began sometime in the late forties, after Kracauer completed his study on Weimar film, *From Caligari to Hitler*, and that manifests itself in his last work. The relationship of *History* to the early writings is more clear when one becomes conscious of this step and its consequences. In contrast to Kracauer’s own claim, there is no continuous deep structure mediating between the discontinuities on the surface of his writings. Rather the opposite: the elements of the surface — figures of speech, motifs, and images — are preserved, but the structure in which they are embedded has changed. They alter their position, become elements of completely different theoretical moves.

14. Kracauer uses the German term *Ungleichzeitigkeit*, which he translates as “nonsimultaneousness” (*History* 148).

15. See, for example, Kracauer’s criticism of modern theories that conceive of history “as an immanent continuous process in linear or chronological time which on its part is thought of as a flow in an irreversible direction, a homogeneous medium indiscriminately comprising all events imaginable” (*History* 139).

This change can also be seen in the two Proust interpretations, which initially served to exemplify the difference between Kracauer's early and late work. To put it schematically: these interpretations treat the same scene, they work with the same concepts, and they define these concepts according to the same characteristics — photography as alienation, subjectivity as transformation, history as discontinuity. But there is a fundamental shift in relations and evaluations. For the Kracauer of the "Photography" essay, the subjectless, alienated eye of the camera is in the emphatic sense without knowledge. It reproduces the spatial configuration of an instant of chronological time, the linear order of which is incommensurable with history. History can be brought to representation only through the medium of subjectivity, which shatters the space-time continuum in order to piece the salvaged fragments together into a new configuration in a precise reversal. For the Kracauer of *History*, photographic self-alienation is a prerequisite for the cognition of history, the true image of which is obscured and distorted by the subject. The reason for this reevaluation is now clear: according to the later interpretation, there is no need for the transformative power of subjectivity, since the continuum that would require transformation does not exist. Reality itself is already a configuration of fragments. It is given as that which according to the earlier theory was to be created by the subject of cognition.

But what then does the late Kracauer mean by historical knowledge? What is the purpose of historical research? Wherein lies the goal of the "historian's journey" (see *History* 80-103) — to take up a metaphoric leitmotif of the book? If Kracauer does not answer these questions,¹⁶ it is because they do not pose themselves to him in this way. For his historian moves not so much toward something as away from something. What matters is not that he arrives but rather that he is *under way* — in that limbo-space of the no-longer and not-yet, which in *Ginster* was the

16. At one point, Kracauer explicitly poses "the question as to the meaningfulness" of what he, following Butterfield, calls "technical history," that is, the "fact-oriented accounts" of "historical research proper" (*History* 135-36): "the question as to the meaningfulness of 'technical history' would seem to be unanswerable. There is only one single argument in its support which I believe to be conclusive. It is a theological argument, though. According to it, the 'complete assemblage of the smallest facts' is required for the reason that nothing should go lost. It is as if the fact-oriented accounts breathed pity with the dead. This vindicates the figure of the *collector*" (*History* 136). There is, however, no indication that Kracauer identifies himself with this position; on the contrary, he seems to distance himself from it. The argument is "conclusive" only in the context of a theological interpretation of history, which he did not make his own.

realm of the utopian. His journey does not lead from here to there but rather back and forth between the here and the there, the known and the foreign, the present and the past. "His mind is in a measure unlocalizable; it perambulates without a fixed abode" (*History* 93); Kracauer's characterization of the historian evokes the image of Ahasuerus, and behind this image appears the figure in whom he depicted himself at the end of his life, the figure of the stranger.

"His life history" — thus Kracauer portrays the stranger and thereby himself —

is disrupted, his "natural" self relegated to the background of his mind. To be sure, his inevitable efforts to meet the challenges of an alien environment will affect his outlook, his whole mental make-up. But since the self he was continues to smolder beneath the person he is about to become, his identity is bound to be in a state of flux; and the odds are that he will never fully belong to the community to which he now in a way belongs. . . . In fact, he has ceased to "belong." Where then does he live? In the near-vacuum of extra-territoriality, the very no-man's-land which Marcel entered when he first caught sight of his grandmother. The exile's true mode of existence is that of a stranger. So he may look at his previous existence with the eyes of one "who does not belong to the house." (*History* 83-84)

The autobiographical experience that lies behind the features of this self-portrait is not summoned up by the traditional concept of exile. Exile means expulsion, banishment. For Kracauer, however, as for countless others, 1933 marked the beginning of a decade of flight and persecution. This experience is recalled by his concept of "the exile's *true* mode of existence," in which the not-belonging of the stranger is thought of as a liberation: a liberation from the effects of origin and native language, from the ties to a cultural tradition and a social system — and, above all, from the dates of one's own time, the "labels of chronology." Kracauer expresses this idea more openly in two letters to Adorno from the fall of 1963, which he jointly gave the heading "Briefe zur Extraterritorialität" ("Letters of Extraterritoriality"):

My mode of existence would literally be put on the line [buchstäblich aufs Spiel gesetzt] if the dates were roused and assaulted me from the outside.¹⁷

17. Letter to Adorno, 25 Oct. 1963 (Kracauer-Nachlaß, Deutsches Literaturarchiv,

It is not as if I were trying to appear young or younger; it is solely my fear of being torn away from chronological anonymity by the fixation of dates and the unavoidable connotation of such a fixation.¹⁸

If extraterritoriality thus means not only a geographic no-man's-land but also and above all a historical one, the realm of a life that has freed itself from its own time, then it is readable as a sublimated and simultaneously heightened expression for escape.

The motif of escape — or, to put it psychologically, the fear of inescapability — propels as a *primum mobile* the reflections of Kracauer's late work. (One is tempted to quote a phrase from his self-projective portrait of Erasmus: "Everything falls into pattern once you think of this fear as the prime mover behind the scenes" [*History* 10].) Under the pressure of this motif the terms are interchanged. Once, in the twenties, Kracauer had depicted the system of the modern *Lebenswelt* as a "sinister edifice": "Foolish expectation — to be able to slip out in spite of it all! The doors have no keys, and any holes that might open are immediately walled up again" (5.2: 365). Now, in the first pages of *History*, he reverses the image and thereby introduces in prelude form the motif that the subsequent reflections vary. "There are always holes in the wall for us to evade and the improbable to slip in" (*History* 8).

To transfer the characteristics of the periphery to the totality of historical reality means to think of history as a world in which escape is possible. There is thus more at stake in Kracauer's critique of the present-interest theory of history than the hermeneutic question of the connection between our understanding of others and our understanding of ourselves. What is at stake is Kracauer's own "mode of existence," which "would literally be put on the line" if the assumption upon which this theory is founded turned out to be true: "that people actually 'belong' to their period" (*History* 68). Kracauer's historian proves by example that "this must not be so," that the "inescapability" of one's own time is only "seeming" (*History* 65). On his journeys through the discontinuous times and heterogeneous spaces of the historical "universe," there are always smugglers' paths that lead into the open, coincidences that point to an exit, doors through which the improbable enters. The confrontation with inescapability seems to be postponed

Marbach am Neckar); on the concept of extraterritoriality see also Martin Jay, "The Extraterritorial Life" 13n.

18. Letter to Adorno, 8 Nov. 1963 (Kracauer-Nachlaß).

until the very end — the end to which the title of the book ambiguously alludes: *History: The Last Things Before the Last*. In German that would be: *Geschichte. Die letzten Dinge vor dem Letzten*, or *vor den letzten*, since grammatically “the last” can be either a singular noun or a plural adjective. There is method in this ambiguity: if it were possible to multiply “the last,” there might even be an exit in the end.

From the fifties on, Kracauer toyed with the idea of writing his autobiography.¹⁹ In the light of his lifelong preoccupation with biographical genres this cannot be surprising. It is, however, difficult to imagine what form the autobiography could have taken. How would one document a life that conceived of itself as extraterritorial? The narrative path that Kracauer had taken in the twenties with his novels *Ginster* and *Georg* was no longer open. His command of the English language, which after the war became his exclusive language of publication, was insufficient for such an enterprise. Nor could the “biography of a society,”²⁰ represented by the study on *Jacques Offenbach und das Paris seiner Zeit* (*Orpheus in Paris: Offenbach and the Paris of his Time*) and in a certain way also by *From Caligari to Hitler* (Kracauer once characterized the latter as “a kind of biography” of his generation²¹), have served as a model for the late autobiography. For the biography of a society seeks to tell the story of an individual in such a way that on the one hand the individual becomes transparent against the social conditions determining him, and on the other hand the social conditions, which as such are formless and incomprehensible, assume definite form in him. Yet the late autobiography would have been the story of a person who not only theoretically mistrusted such mediations but also believed he had evaded them. This is precisely what is meant by extraterritoriality: the nonidentical, radically particular existence that cannot be mediated by any general principle. A third possibility might have been the documentation of this nonidentical existence, in other words, the story of the “stranger” standing apart from society — one that provides shelter

19. See, for example, his letter to Adorno of 1 Oct. 1950, cited in *Marbacher Magazin* 47: *Siegfried Kracauer 1889-1966*, ed. Ingrid Belke and Irina Renz (Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 1988) 110; see also Jörg Bundschuh, “Als dauere die Gegenwart eine Ewigkeit. Notizen zu Leben und Werk von Siegfried Kracauer,” *text + kritik* 68 (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1980) 10-11.

20. Siegfried Kracauer, *Schriften* 8: *Jacques Offenbach und das Paris seiner Zeit* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1976) 9.

21. Letter to Herbert Levin, 15 Oct. 1942, cited in Karsten Witte, “Nachwort des Herausgebers,” *Schriften* 2: 606.

without determining him — and outside of historical time, whose chronology is meaningless and corresponds only coincidentally to his own. Yet even this form of self-representation would have endangered Kracauer's "mode of existence." For extraterritoriality does not only refer to a sociohistorical Outside; it also and emphatically means this Outside to be the realm of an *invisible* anonymous existence. There is only one possible way for this existence to acquire form without having its anonymity compromised: it has to be represented in an Other. *History* offers precisely this solution. In it Kracauer outlines his own existence by sketching its features in history. The historical *Lebenswelt* becomes a reflection of extraterritoriality; the stranger's world is mirrored in the structure of the periphery. As the legendary painter enters into his picture, so Kracauer enters into the book called *History*. By cloaking the image of his Self in the guise of an Other, he is able to represent it and at the same time to preserve what is crucial for him: anonymity, invisibility as a form of escape.

Translated by Gail Finney

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*The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer**

Theodor W. Adorno

In recent years a number of Siegfried Kracauer's works have become accessible in Germany again. But the author's image has not yet become as clearly defined for the German public from these wide-ranging writings as it ought to be. For a very simple reason, I may be qualified to make a start on this by outlining some of the features of the figure of Kracauer: he and I have been friends since I was a young man. I was a student at the *Gymnasium* when I met him near the end of the First World War. A friend of my parents, Rosie Stern, had invited the two of us to her house. She was a tutor at the Philanthropin, where

* It is with some hesitation that the editors have decided to include Theodor W. Adorno's essay in the present issue of *NGC*, for Kracauer's response to it was emphatically ambivalent. Originally written as a radio talk in 1964 for Kracauer's seventy-fifth birthday, the essay was the subject of a lively correspondence between the two friends, Kracauer's initial positive assessment giving way to disagreement, demands for specific changes in the published text, and considerable personal resentment. Indeed, to the man who first taught Adorno to read Kant and who served as an intellectual mentor to the entire Frankfurt School in its early years, the claim that Kracauer's work is tinged with a certain "amateurish thinking on his feet," a "slackness" that damped "self-criticism," must have seemed condescending, even arrogant. So too the assertion that Kracauer, having resolved "to be happy," made his peace with bourgeois society in America — this from a man who rather quickly came to terms with the country that perpetrated Auschwitz. Nonetheless, Adorno's essay provides a probing, substantive assessment of Kracauer's entire intellectual opus from the point of view of one who could judge his inner life — what Adorno calls his "spiritual character." Originally intended to reintroduce his friend to a new generation of German readers, "The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer" may now perform the same service for English-language readers familiar only with *From Caligari to Hitler* and *Theory of Film*. The editors wish to thank Columbia University Press for gracious permission to print this essay, which will appear next year as part of Adorno's *Notes to Literature* (New York: Columbia U P, 1991), vol. 2. — Eds.

Kracauer's uncle, the historiographer of the Frankfurt Jews, was a member of the faculty. As was probably our hostess's intention, an intensive contact sprang up between us. Drawing on my memory of that period, and mindful of the deficiencies of such a source, I would like to try to sketch something on the order of the objective idea of Kracauer's spiritual character, guided more by its potential than by what was concretely realized: Kracauer himself, decades ago, pointedly criticized the type of person he called the "*werkhafte Mensch*," the man of works.

For years Kracauer read the *Critique of Pure Reason* regularly on Saturday afternoon with me. I am not exaggerating in the slightest when I say that I owe more to this reading than to my academic teachers. Exceptionally gifted as a pedagogue, Kracauer made Kant come alive for me. Under his guidance I experienced the work from the beginning not as mere epistemology, not as an analysis of the conditions of scientifically valid judgments, but as a kind of coded text from which the historical situation of spirit could be read, with the vague expectation that in doing so one could acquire something of truth itself. If in my later reading of traditional philosophical texts I was not so much impressed by their unity and systematic consistency as I was concerned with the play of forces at work under the surface of every closed doctrine and viewed the codified philosophies as force fields in each case, it was certainly Kracauer who impelled me to do so. As he presented it to me, Kant's critical philosophy was not simply a system of transcendental idealism. Rather, he showed me how the objective-ontological and subjective-idealist moments warred within it, how the more eloquent passages in the work are the wounds this conflict has left in the theory. From a certain point of view, the fissures and flaws in a philosophy are more essential to it than the continuity of its meaning, which most philosophies emphasize of their own accord. Under the watchword ontology, interest in this, which Kracauer shared during the period around 1920, opposed epistemological subjectivism and its passion for system. At that time no clear distinction had been drawn between what was actually ontological in Kant and the traces of naive realism in him.

Without being able to account for it fully, through Kracauer I perceived for the first time the expressive moment in philosophy: putting into words the thoughts that come into one's head. The opposite moment, the moment of rigor, of compelling objectivity in thought, took second place to it. For quite a while after I first encountered it in the practice of philosophy at the university it seemed academic to me, until I

found out that among the tensions that are the lifeblood of philosophy the tension between expressiveness and rigor is perhaps the most central. Kracauer was fond of calling himself an alogical man. I am still conscious of how much this paradox impressed me in a man engaged in philosophy, someone who operated with concepts, judgments, and conclusions. But what pressed for philosophical expression in him was an almost boundless capacity for suffering: expression and suffering are intimately related. Kracauer's relationship to truth was that suffering entered into the idea in undistorted, unmitigated form, whereas normally the idea dissipates suffering; suffering could be rediscovered in ideas from the past as well. The word *Leiden*, suffering, even made its way into the title of one of Kracauer's first monographs. To me Kracauer seemed, although not at all sentimental, a man with no skin, as though everything external attacked his defenseless interior; as though he could defend himself only by giving voice to his vulnerability. He had had a difficult time in his childhood, in more than one regard; as a pupil in the Klinger Upper School he had also suffered anti-Semitism, something quite unusual in the commercial city of Frankfurt, and a sort of joylessness hovered over his own milieu, despite its humane scholarly tradition; this was probably the source of his later aversion to the architectural trade he had had to pursue. In retrospect it seems to me that, for all the friendliness I was shown, the catastrophe that befell his mother and her sister, who seemed to have an influence over him, in extreme old age had long been anticipated in the atmosphere of Kracauer's home. Suffice it to say that Kracauer told the story of carrying, in a pitiful parody of the little red book in which the teachers recorded their marks, a similar book in which he graded his fellow students on their behavior toward him. With him, many things were reactive; philosophy was in no small measure a medium of self-assertion.

This is connected with the antisystematic tendency in Kracauer's thought and his aversion to idealism in the broadest sense of the term, something that never left him. For him idealism was a transfiguring form of thought, as in Georg Simmel's dictum that it was amazing how little the sufferings of humankind could be seen in its philosophy. Philosophy had not been Kracauer's major at the university, and the power of its great constructions, which easily degenerate into affirmation, Hegel in particular, remained alien to him. Kracauer's work was so deeply stamped by this that at one point, around 1923, Benjamin called him an enemy of philosophy. His oeuvre is tinged with a kind of amateurish

thinking on his feet, just as a certain slackness damped self-criticism in favor of a playful pleasure in felicitous insights. Ideas that are too heavily defended against the danger of error are of course lost in any case, and the risks Kracauer ran are not without a certain sly cautiousness. Kracauer once gave as a motto for a *tractatus* a sentence by Nietzsche to the effect that an idea that is not dangerous is not worth thinking; it is only that the victim of this danger is more often the idea itself than its object.

On the other hand, being an autodidact gave Kracauer some independence from routinized method. He was spared the fate of professional philosophy, the doom of being established as a department, a specialized discipline beyond the other specialized disciplines; accordingly he was never intimidated by the line of demarcation between philosophy and sociology. The medium of his thought was experience, not that of the empiricist and positivist schools, which distill experience itself down to its general principles and make a method out of it. He pursued intellectual experience as something individual, determined to think only what he could fill with substance, only what had become concretized for him about people and things. This established the tendency toward content in his thought, which contrasted with the firm neo-Kantian formalism of his youth.

Kracauer followed Georg Simmel and Max Scheler, who were the first to oppose the official division of labor and link the philosophical interest with a social interest that had been in ill repute in philosophy at least since Hegel's death. He knew both men well. Simmel, on whom he wrote, advised him to go completely over to philosophy. Not only did Simmel train Kracauer's capacity to interpret specific objective phenomena in terms of the general structures that, according to this view, appeared in them; Kracauer was also indebted to Simmel for a style of thought and presentation that connects one element to another with a gentle carefulness, even where the movement of thought could dispense with many such intermediate parts, where the tempo could become quicker: thinking with the pencil in hand. Later, during his activities as an editor, this moment of carefulness protected Kracauer from journalism. It was hard for him to get rid of the circuitousness that always had to find everything for itself, even what was familiar, as though it were freshly discovered. Simmel's influence on him lay more in the gesture of his thought than in any affinity with the irrationalist philosophy of life. He encountered phenomenology in Scheler before he encountered Husserlian phenomenology. His book

Soziologie als Wissenschaft [*Sociology as Science*] (1922) is clearly concerned with connecting the material-sociological interest with epistemological reflections based on the phenomenological method. The latter accommodated his specific talents well.

Although Kracauer as a youth wanted little to do with his *métier*, architecture, the primacy of the optical that architecture requires remained with him in sublimated form. There was no pompous intuitionism in his kind of intellectuality, but there was a lot of sober seeing. He thinks with an eye that is astonished almost to helplessness but then suddenly flashes into illumination. The oppressed may well become master of their sufferings with such a gaze. In a way that is difficult to articulate, his thinking was always more contemplation than thought, singularly intent on not letting anything that solid things had impressed upon him be wrangled away through explanation. His mistrust of speculation was fed not least of all by his temperament, which was all the more guarded when it came to illusion because it had weaned itself from illusion with so much difficulty. The program of *Wesensschau*, the intuition of essence, and especially the so-called *Bildchen-Phänomenologie*, the phenomenology of mental images, seemed suited to the long-suffering gaze that refused to be dismissed, although in other respects Kracauer's skepticism rejected Scheler's claim to have grasped something simply and objectively valid immediately, without reflection.

The phenomenology of that period held possibilities quite different from those that predominated after Scheler. It was inscribed on the body, as it were, of a newly emerged type of intellectual and his needs. The watchword, *Wesensschau*, presented itself as a cure for experiencing consciousness's growing incapacity to understand and penetrate a complex social reality that lay beneath a more and more closely woven veil of ideology. The physiognomy of that reality took the place of theory, which had become discredited. It was by no means a mere surrogate for the latter; it taught consciousness to assimilate something that easily escapes the person who thinks from the top down, and at the same time not to be put off with dull, heavy facts. Phenomenology was for those who wanted to be dazzled neither by ideology nor by the façade of something subject merely to empirical verification. Such impulses bore fruit in Kracauer as in few others.

Kracauer's central theme — which precisely for this reason hardly ever becomes thematic in his work — is incommensurability, which, in the form of the relationship between idea and existence, is of perennial

concern to philosophy. In his book on sociology this theme is manifested in the idea that once the specific existent has been eliminated one cannot return with continuity and without rupture to empirical reality from the highest abstract specifications to which that discipline arises. In all his works, Kracauer reminds us that thought, looking back, should not forget what it divested itself of in order to become idea. This motif is a materialist one; it led Kracauer, almost against his will, to social criticism, the spirit of which is urgently concerned with this kind of forgetting. At the same time, Kracauer's aversion to unrestrained thought gets in the way of a consistent materialism. Just proportion always carries its own penalty, moderationism. In his political years in Berlin, Kracauer once mockingly called himself the *derrière-garde* of the *avant-garde*. It came neither to a break with the latter nor to an agreement.

I remember a somewhat earlier and very wide-ranging conversation between us in which Kracauer, opposing me, was not willing to grant the concept of solidarity much significance. But the pure individuality to which he seemed to adhere so obstinately virtually unmasks itself in its self-reflection. In evading philosophy, the existential becomes clowning, not far removed from Brecht's paradoxical line, "In mir habt ihr einen, auf den könnt ihr nicht bauen" ["In me you have someone you can't count on"]. Kracauer projected his self-understanding of the individual onto Chaplin: Chaplin, he said, is a hole. What had taken over the place of existence there was the private individual as *imago*, the Socratic crank as the bearer of ideas, an irritant by the criteria of the prevailing universal. Kracauer sometimes explained his *parti pris* for the inexplicable residue — a constant in his extremely eventful development — as an aversion to anything uniform, anything that was 100 percent what it was. But that is simply his aversion to theory in the emphatic sense: theory must go to extremes in interpreting its objects if it is not to conflict with its own idea. In opposition to that, Kracauer stubbornly insisted on a moment that always evaporated in the idea stage for the German spirit of almost any orientation. In doing so, however, he renounced the task that his awareness of the nonidentity of the thing and its concept led him to the edge of: the task of extrapolating the idea from something refractory to it, extrapolating the general from the extreme of particularity. Dialectical thought never suited his temperament. He contented himself with the precise specification of the particular for use as an example of general matters. He hardly felt a need for strict mediation within the thing itself, the need

to demonstrate the essential within the innermost core of particularity. In this he held, conservatively, to subsumptive logic [*Umfangslogik*]. He would have dismissed the idea of an intellectual splitting of the atom, an irrevocable break with phenomena, as speculative, and would have stubbornly taken Sancho Panza's side. Under the aegis of its impenetrability, his thought lets reality, which it evokes and which it ought to penetrate, stand as it is. From there one can make the transition to its vindication as something unalterable. Correspondingly, the enthronement of a form of individual experience, however eccentric, that is comfortable with itself remains socially acceptable. However much it feels itself to be in opposition to society, the *principium individuationis* is society's own principle. Thought that hesitates to venture beyond its own idiosyncratic form of response thereby binds itself to something contingent and glorifies it simply in order to avoid glorifying the great universal. But the individual's spontaneous reaction is not an ultimate; nor, therefore, does it guarantee binding knowledge.

Even responses that are ostensibly extremely individual are mediated by the objectivity they are reacting to and ought to take cognizance of this mediation for the sake of their own truth content. Just as there is a motivation behind any disinterestedness in something merely learned, that is, in the externals of scientific activity, so, conversely, thought needs detachment from the experiential sphere in which it is formed.

There are sufficient reasons for Kracauer's suspicions about theory as the arrogance of a reason that has forgotten its own quasi-natural quality. Not the least of these is the degree to which theory in its purity becomes a means of domination. The evil spell cast by ideas — and their success in the marketplace — is aided by their systematic articulation in terms of a deductive logic. The idea, however, that responds to this problem by evading theoretical consistency — the cogency every idea inherently claims — not only becomes impotent within reality (that alone would not constitute an objection to it), but it also sacrifices force and obviousness internally as well. The conflict between experience and theory cannot be conclusively decided in favor of one side or the other but is truly an antinomy and must be played out in such a way that the contrary elements interpenetrate one another.

Kracauer did not swear by phenomenology any more than he did by any other intellectual position; he was most faithful to Simmel, with a kind of philosophical infidelity, a sort of over-vigilant fear of intellectual obligations, as though they were literally debts. Kracauer's reactive stance

was quick to shift when he felt constrained. Almost all of the many reviews he wrote during his lifetime, some of which are quite biting, represent breaks with aspects of Kracauer himself or at least with impressions that have overwhelmed him. In Hegelian terms, one could charge him — for all his openness, and precisely because of the stubbornness of his openness — with lacking freedom in his relation to the object. With Kracauer, in place of theory it is always Kracauer himself who is already present in the gaze that grips the subject matter and takes it in. The expressive moment attains primacy over the material with which experience is concerned. While Kracauer's thought recoils from thought, it seldom attains self-forgetfulness. The subject, guarding his primary experience as though it were a possession, readily places himself in front of the object of his experience with the motto "*anch'io sono pittore*" — I too am a painter. He was continually casting barbs at others, even Scheler, about whom, despite their close personal relationship, he published an essay in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* that pinpointed, brusquely and sincerely, but without euphemisms, the arbitrary and therefore ideological character of the eternal values Scheler was promoting.

It is not as though Kracauer preaches the individual as a norm or telos; his responses are too social for that. But his thinking holds fast to the idea that what ought to be thought cannot be thought; his thinking selects this negative idea as its substance. It is this, and not a true theological need, that bound him to Kierkegaard and existential philosophy, which he came close to in monographs like the unpublished one on the detective novel, the first chapter of which has now been published in *Das Ornament der Masse*. Long before Heidegger or Jaspers, he had planned an existentialist work, though he no more completed it than he did one a few years later on the concept of man in Marx. It is not a *bon mot* but a simple observation to say that one of Kracauer's most important achievements was letting these ambitious manuscripts lie, despite the fact that they would have been within his powers. He made productive use of his insistent reluctance to become the vassal of either his own theory or that of others.

This man who was obsessed with the incommensurable found himself unwilling to violate his own motif by reducing incommensurability to a philosophy. Shrewdly, he recognized that although it may have fed into his doctrine, Marx's idea of man is degraded to something static and the tenor of his dialectic is missed if one gives that idea a positive grounding

in the nature of human beings instead of letting it be illuminated critically through the conditions that have been blighted by human beings and must be altered by them. Kracauer did not expound his existentialist ideas directly, any more than he did his social ideas. He expounded them only indirectly, preferably in the representation of apocryphal phenomena like the detective novel, which he treated as historicophilosophical allegories. This was more than literary caprice. It may have been apparent from the beginning to his materially oriented mode of thought that the so-called great intellectual ideas and ontological structures do not exist in themselves, beyond and independent of the material strata, but instead are inextricably interwoven with the latter; this is what permitted his reception of Walter Benjamin. He directed a very readable polemic, also reprinted in *Ornament*, against Martin Buber, in whom he encountered existentialism in the flesh, where he pointed out the restorationism inherent in Bible translation, a prototype of today's jargon of authenticity. The polemic is based on the insight that theology cannot be restored by sheer will simply because it would be good to have a theology; that would tie theology itself to something internal to human beings, something theology claims to transcend.

Given the tenor of such criticism, Kracauer's emphatic turn to sociology was not a break with his philosophical intentions but rather a consequence of them. The more blindly he immersed himself in the materials his experience brought him, the more fruitful the result. Thus it was he who really discovered film as a social fact. He did not inquire directly into its effects; his flair may have warned him against specifying these effects. They cannot be reduced to individual visits to the movies, perhaps not even to a multiplicity of such visits, but only to the totality of the impulses that were, at least before television, most pronounced in film. Kracauer decoded film itself as ideology. His unstated hypothesis would be objectionable by the rules of an empirical social research that has become highly developed technically in the meantime, but it remains completely plausible even today: namely, that when a medium desired and consumed by the masses transmits an ideology that is internally consistent and cohesive, this ideology is presumably adapting to the needs of the consumers as much as, conversely, it is progressively shaping them.

For Kracauer, plucking the leaves of the ideology of film amounted to describing the phenomenology of a new stage of objective spirit in

the process of formation. This approach was demonstrated for the first time in the series “Die kleinen Ladenmädchen gehen ins Kino” [“The Little Shop Girls Go to the Movies”], which caused a sensation in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Kracauer’s interest in the mass psychology of film, however, was never merely critical. He himself had something of the moviegoer’s naive delight in viewing; he found an aspect of his own mode of response even in the little shop girls who amused him. For this reason if no other, his relationship to the mass media was never as harsh as his reflections on their effects would have led one to expect. His predilection for lower-order things, things excluded by higher culture — something on which he and Ernst Bloch were in agreement — led him to continue to take delight in the annual fair and the hurdy-gurdy even after large-scale industrial planning had long since swallowed them up. In *From Caligari to Hitler* he recounts film plots in all seriousness, without batting an eyelash; and recently, in his *Theory of Film*, he narrates such atrocities as the visible genesis of a piece of music in the composer, the hero, as though something like the technical rationality of the medium were at work in them. The commercial film Kracauer attacked profited inadvertently from his tolerance; at times the latter reaches its limit at the intolerant — the experimental film.

If, in criticism of the asystematic experience Kracauer’s sociology offers, strict sociological empiricism tells us that the connection between that allegedly objective spirit and the actual consciousness of the masses, which is supposed to have been precipitated in that spirit, has not been proved, then we must concede that there is something in the criticism. In most countries of the world, for instance, the so-called gutter press hawks extreme right-wing political contraband alongside its sensations without having had much influence on the millions of readers in the Anglo-Saxon countries. Such objections, however, tend to be almost in complicity with film as a commodity, and in general with everything that keeps itself free of suspicion by being labeled “the mass media.” The latter go free because one cannot strictly prove the kind of disaster they create. Analysis of what they offer shows at the least that they could hardly create anything but disaster. It would be more advisable to try to refine the analysis of the stimuli that Kracauer inaugurated, and for which the name “content analysis” has been adopted, and to take it beyond the original thesis of ideological wish fulfillment, than to persist in a study of the effects, which all too easily misses the concrete content of that which creates the effects, the relationship to the proffered ideology. Kracauer’s

stance toward sociological empiricism is ambivalent. On the one hand, he sympathizes with it, in the sense that he has reservations about social theory; on the other hand, judging by the criterion of his conception of experience, he has emphatic reservations about a method that pinpoints and quantifies.

After living in America for many years, Kracauer expounded on this in a penetrating theoretical defense of qualitative analysis. His analysis acquires its true value only when one knows what a challenge it presents to the almost universal practice of academic sociology in the United States. Kracauer's experiential stance remains that of the foreigner, transposed into the realm of spirit. He thinks as though he had transformed the childhood trauma of problematic membership into a mode of vision for which everything appears as it would on a journey, and even what is gray and familiar becomes a colorful object of amazement. This independence of the conventional outer shell has itself since been conventionalized, in the Brechtian term *Verfremdung*, alienation; in Kracauer it was original. Intellectually, Kracauer dresses up, as it were, in sports jacket and cap. There are overtones of this in the subtitle of his book on the white-collar worker, *Aus dem neuesten Deutschland* [*From the Newest Germany*]. What is intended is humanness, not through identification but through its absence; the act of keeping oneself outside as a medium of knowledge.

In that book Kracauer became fully emancipated as a sociologist. His method there has much in common with what in the United States is called the method of participant observation, as used by the Lynds in *Middletown*, for instance. Kracauer was most certainly unfamiliar with their work in 1930. In the book on the white-collar worker he made extensive use of interviews but did not employ standardized questionnaires; instead, he adapted flexibility to the conversational situation. The ostensible rigor and objectivity of one's findings is often purchased at the cost of a loss of concreteness and essential insight; throughout his life, Kracauer tried in his planned but unsystematic way to balance the demand for empiricism with the requirement that the result be meaningful. This constitutes the particular merit of the book, which is once again accessible, thanks to the *Verlag für Demoskopie* associated with the Allensbach Institute.

With more sophistication than contemporary academic scholarship, Kracauer diagnosed what he called the culture of the white-collar worker. He described it in the Berlin Vaterlandshaus, for instance, the

prototype of the synthetically produced consciousness of that new middle class that was not a middle class. Since then that style has spread across the integrated society of the industrialized nations. Phrases like “homogeneous middle-class society” and “consumer society” neutralize its untruth. In its essential ingredients it resembles, as much as it did then, what Kracauer observed in the white-collar workers of 1930. Economically proletarianized, fervently bourgeois in their ideology, they contributed a sizable contingent to the mass basis of fascism.

As though under laboratory conditions, Kracauer’s book on the white-collar worker provides an anticipatory ontology of a consciousness that has been seamlessly integrated into the total system only in its most recent phase. The book is weakened, to be sure, by the ironic tone it takes. After the horrors that consciousness helped to bring into the world, Kracauer’s tone sounds guileless and at the same time a little arrogant, the price of his antagonism to a theory that, if pursued rigorously, would extinguish one’s laughter. Of course Kracauer knew that the spirit at which he was pointing the finger had been aroused, provoked and reproduced according to plan in its bearers; it neither was, nor is, their own spontaneous spirit. But by failing, for whatever reason, to discuss that, and directing himself to immediate contact with those manipulated by mass culture rather than to the system as a totality, Kracauer does occasionally seem to place the responsibility for it on them. Even this displacement has a moment of legitimacy: outrage at the fact that countless human beings who ought to know better and at bottom do know better nevertheless abandoned themselves passionately to false consciousness.

How far Kracauer dared to venture in his book on the white-collar worker is most evident in his critique of the rationality of the technological rationalization that condemned the white-collar worker to unemployment: “Capitalism does not rationalize too much but too little. The thinking it carries with it resists its completion in a reason that would speak from the ground [*Grund*] of the human being.”¹ Kracauer’s talk of the “ground of the human being,” a phrase that has since become disreputable, is excused by the fact that what he means by it is reason, which such talk usually defames. His *dégoût*, however, is directed against the signature of the whole era: that human beings are not simply

1. Siegfried Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament,” *New German Critique* 5 (Spring 1975): 72 (translation altered).

deceived by ideology but rather obey the Latin saying and want to be deceived; and the more painful it would be to face the situation squarely the more stubborn their desire to be deceived. Furthermore, Kracauer did not limit his critique of ideology to the sphere of the masses. He also practiced it in areas where the more elevated claims of the cultured bourgeoisie lived on but had degenerated unnoticed to a form of trash that takes itself for the opposite. He was the first to bring out the sinister implications of the fad for biography.

I consider Kracauer's most significant achievement to be a work that, paradoxically, itself occupies the no-man's-land between novel and biography, *Ginster* [*Heather*], first published in 1928. The title, after a plant that, as Kracauer once said, following Ringelnatz, blooms on the railway embankments, took the place of the author's name; it was supposed to have been written "by himself," anonymously, not pseudonymously. The aesthetic subject is not sharply distinguished from the empirical person. In form and definition, even the narrative form ends up falling under Kracauer's irony. *Ginster* is not a blind, autarchic work of art; the atheoretical element in it is theoretical. It represents the indissoluble element that Kracauer preaches, if you like; in a manner extremely rare in Germany, and for which Lichtenberg is virtually the only model here, the book represents a new manifestation of a venerable Enlightenment genre, the *roman philosophique*. Kracauer called *Ginster* an intellectual *Schweyk*. The book, which has suffered little from the passage of time, becomes productive by not representing the knot of individuality affirmatively, as something substantial. Through aesthetic reflection, the subject is itself relativized. A refined silliness that poses as nonunderstanding when in fact it does not understand is the mirror image of absolute individuation. *Ginster* cunningly tames the reality he inhabits, just as strutting celebrities shrivel up in front of him. A naïveté that understands and describes itself as a technique for living is no longer naïve. It transcends itself to become the theory at which it thumbs its nose. The possibility of something unmediatedly human is demonstrated and negated at one and the same time. *Ginster* provides fundamental proof that freedom and positivity cannot be posited as such today; otherwise the idiosyncratic moment in Kracauer would inevitably become mania. In the revised edition Kracauer wisely omitted the last chapter of the original, which flirts with this kind of positivity. The book's language is on a par with its conception. With its unquenchable delight in taking metaphors literally and giving them

autonomy à la Eulenspiegel and coaxing them into a second-order arabesquelike reality, it sends roots far into modernism. It is a terrible shame that in his most mature years, under the compulsion to write English but probably also out of revulsion over what had happened, Kracauer became ascetic with regard to his own verbal art, which is inseparable from the German language.

Kracauer's socially critical phase, to which *Ginster* belongs, dates from before his work for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in Berlin. Yet in the last years before fascism he was stimulated by the sharp air of that Berlin. Nevertheless, his social criticism retained a lone-wolf quality, even after he had worked on Marx. Even when it came to extreme conflicts, he could not be maneuvered out of the position of the dogged individualist, no matter how clearly he saw the objections to it. He compensated for this with the things that fell through the cracks of high theory. He looked for humanness in the particular, in the very thing that was intolerable to the adherents of totalitarianism. He came into conflict with Brecht and made his joke about the Augsburger confusion, and when Brecht followed his *Yea-sayer* with the *Nay-sayer*, he declared that he, Kracauer, was thinking of writing the *Maybe-sayer* — not a bad program for someone who had worked out for himself the attitude of someone waiting, and a formula for critical self-reflection as well.

Even before the Berlin years, however, something essential, if difficult to specify, began to change in Kracauer; as though, like Hans Sachs ordering the shops closed tight before he enters the fairgrounds, he had decided to abjure his capacity for suffering and vowed to be happy. *Ginster* had already let fall, after the scene with an officer, the maxim — ironic, of course — that one has to become fireproof. The man who had no skin grew himself a coat of mail. And from the day he was no longer willing to be delivered over to the world defenseless, and leaned back into himself instead, his relationship with the world improved. The “I am this way and no other” stance harmonized quite well with successful adjustment, for the world is for its part “this way and no other,” on the principle of unenlightened, expansive self-preservation.

With Kracauer there was always some clowning in the stance. One of its aspects was always a deliberate head-in-the-sand policy. And so, when we first saw each other again in emigration in Paris, he received me in his modest hotel like Stauffacher in his. In his melancholy way, he experienced prewar France, which was already falling apart, as just as well suited to him as America, where, having managed to get there,

he was in fact surprisingly successful. He reflected on this aspect of his fate and character in an unpublished novel whose hero's needs and inclinations are at cross-purposes with the changing situations he gets into, until he finally loses his job because of his left-wing political views. There was always cunning in Kracauer's adaptive strategy, a will to be done with what was refined and powerful by outdoing it in his own consciousness and thereby detaching himself from it even while he compulsively identified with it. In conjunction with the theme of David and Goliath, he smuggled a manifesto for himself into his theory of film: "All these characters seem to yield to the powers that be and yet manage to outlast them."²

To do justice to what Kracauer, or many other exiles, produced after 1933, means to speak more plainly about the situation of the émigré intellectuals than is usually the case in Germany, without wanting to impugn gratitude for asylum by doing so. Currency regulations and special taxes forced the intellectuals to emigrate literally as beggars. The Nazis' idea that this would keep those they hated from being viewed with favor in the places they found refuge was not far from wrong. The fact that some nations accepted only those who had useful practical skills says something about even those that did without this kind of barbed-wire fence. If he had not established his qualifications in scholarly circles through so-called positive achievements or at least come from a place in the university hierarchy, the intellectual felt superfluous wherever he went. Probably the compulsion to fit in was worse than in earlier emigrations. In the most important countries of refuge the social net was very tight and thought control all too rigorous. The threat of unemployment made potential competitors unwelcome. Emigrants who had no friends in solidarity with them had to capitulate in order to live.

In the economic domain everything proceeds on course, in accordance with the bourgeois rules of supply and demand. That these rules should extend to the spirit, and the spirit ultimately be absorbed by the functional complex, is one of the fixed consequences of the system, but it also stands in irreconcilable contradiction to the principle of spirit itself, which is not meant to be absorbed into the reproduction of life, and which by creating awareness of what exists outlines, negatively, a possible

2. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (London: Oxford UP, 1960) 281.

Other. When spirit complies with a logic that is suspended only in the fortunate exceptional case, it negates itself by doing so; for spirit, more drastically than elsewhere, the primacy of the relations of production fetters the forces of production. I will never forget the occasion when, during the first months of emigration, a famous German sociologist who has since died encouraged me as I mangled the English language during a discussion: in the Anglo-Saxon countries, he said jokingly, I should never try to express more than what I had just stammered out. Although I did not follow his advice, it nonetheless kept me from feeling superior to the others.

There is all the less cause for indignation, in that what those who are spared the test so readily characterize as lack of character contains for its part a moment of bourgeois respectability, the determination not to live on alms but to earn one's living on one's own. But strength is necessary for cynicism, for a two-sided production in which one retains one's intellectual integrity while writing commercial books on the side, a strength that is clearly not granted to just anyone, any more than any musician has yet been able to compose avant-garde music and earn money with popular hits, one right after the other. Brecht's pleas for consideration should be extended to this set of issues.

The American government was superior to that of many European nations during the Hitler era in that it granted all emigrants the possibility of working and did not reduce any of them to the permanent status of welfare recipients. Conversely, the burden of conformity, which weighed upon the natives as well, was especially harsh. Intellectual immigrants who were already successful were enthusiastic advocates of that conformity. Adjustment became again the norm it had been in the early development of most of them, internalized by all those who would hardly have been able to cope with their external and internal difficulties other than through the psychological mechanism Anna Freud called identification with the aggressor.

One cannot get an intellectual transfer, as one person who had made the adjustment once triumphantly said of this unfortunate situation. Bringing back after the fall of Hitler precisely those émigrés whose quality consisted in something that was not directly interchangeable and convertible would have served as a corrective to this. A few universities did indeed do so, like the University of Frankfurt, or, more decisively than any hitherto, Adolf Arndt in his capacity as *Kultursenator* in Berlin. This did not generally occur, however. That this kind of reparation was not

made for the damaged intellectual life is irresponsible not only to the victims but especially to what likes to present itself as representing the best interests of Germany. The good a man like Kracauer could have done in a trend-setting position, as *Kulturpolitiker*, someone who deals with the politics of culture, for a large paper, for instance, cannot be overestimated. It is enough to recall how Kracauer defined Heidegger's language with the German proverb, "Die Eifersucht ist eine Leidenschaft, die mit Eifer sucht, was Leiden schafft."³ Kracauer's stubborn refusal to let the wool be pulled over his eyes would have been a salutary antidote to the synthetic atmosphere of Germany's resurrected culture.

Immune to the techniques of domination that in Germany are so readily equated with greatness and have made the very concept of greatness deadly, Kracauer opposed both Brecht and Heidegger. A large part of the responsibility for the illusory and, in the bad sense, affirmative aspects of the current objective spirit is borne by the vacuum created by the absence of the émigré intelligentsia. The guilt is intensified by those who would like to make the exiles responsible for the fall of the Weimar Republic because they recognized it as it was occurring. The catastrophe of the fascist dictatorship has consequences that extend beyond the fate of those who were murdered, although that consequence makes reflection on others impossible. One might well ask, in a variation on the cabalistic saying, whether the country that drove its Jews out did not lose as much as the Jews did.

No one should read Kracauer's *Offenbach*, which was reissued in Germany under the title *Pariser Leben* [*Parisian Life*], or *From Caligari to Hitler* without bearing that in mind, and there ought not to be the slightest bit of patronizing mixed in. With a Kracauerian wink, *Offenbach* falls into the genre of literary biography of which Kracauer had presented a ruthless X-ray image; at the same time, it hopes to rise above the pseudo-individualization of such products through the idea of "social biography." The social problematic of the Second Empire, to which the great operetta was responding, was to be revealed. The book's limitations are to be found in the restraints its author had to practice with regard to Offenbach's music.

The Caligari book, rich in detailed technical analyses, develops, revealingly enough, the history of German film after the First World

3. "Jealousy is a passion that eagerly seeks what creates pain." Kracauer uses the German saying to parody Heidegger's practice of philosophizing by expounding on the component parts of compound words. — Translator's note.

War as the history of the developing ideology of totalitarian power. This tendency was by no means limited to the German film, of course; it may have culminated in the American film *King Kong*, which was truly an allegory of the unrestrained and regressive monster into which the public sphere developed, to say nothing of the rehabilitation of Ivan the Terrible and other monsters in Stalinist Russia. But there is a truth to be learned from the very thing that on the surface seems debatable in Kracauer's thesis, namely, that the dynamic that exploded in the horror of the Third Reich extended down into the winding-shafts of society as a whole and for that reason was reflected even in the ideology of nations that were spared the political catastrophe. A general social factor is readily mistaken for the sole responsible factor when one has experienced it; even Hölderlin's invective against the Germans was in actuality a denunciation of the deformation of human beings through the bourgeois form of the division of labor everywhere. Kracauer gradually turned back to the things that had originally inspired him — to film, whose constituents he set about distilling theoretically, and finally, in an ambitious project, to the philosophy of history.

If one is to risk an interpretation of the figure of Kracauer, which is so resistant to interpretation, one must look for the words to describe that realism of a special coloration which has as little to do with the customary image of a realist as with a transfiguring pathos, or with the firm conviction of the primacy of the concept. Using spirit to protect spirit from its own self-idolization was probably Kracauer's primary compulsion, a compulsion produced by the suffering of someone who had had it etched into his awareness so early on that there is little spirit can do in the fact of mere existence. But this account of Kracauer's realism does not add up. The latter was reactive, and one cannot rest with the notion of disillusionment. Even where Kracauer agitates against utopia like a defeatist, he is actually attacking something that animated him, as though out of fear. The utopian trait, afraid of its own name and concept, sneaks into the figure of the man who does not quite fit in. In the same way, the eyes of a child who has been suppressed and badly treated light up in moments when, suddenly understanding, the child feels understood and draws hope from that. The image of Kracauer is that of someone who just barely escaped the most fearful thing of all, and just as the hope of humankind is encapsulated in the chance that it will avoid catastrophe, so the reflection of this hope falls on the individual who anticipates, so to speak, this event.

"Nothing but desperation can save us," reads a sentence by Grabbe. For Kracauer, individuality enclosing itself within itself to the point of inaccessibility, an individuality impervious to hope, becomes the mask of hope. It evinces this eccentric man's yearning to be able to be as unconventional, without fear, as he had been made to be by fear. Kracauer once told a story from his childhood about being so obsessed with Indian stories that they overflowed into reality. One night he awoke abruptly from a dream, saying, "A foreign tribe has robbed me." This outlines his rebus, the horror that became literal in the deportations, along with a yearning for the unpunished and more innocent barbarism of the natives he envied.

Freud's idea that the decisive points in the genesis of the individual occur during childhood is certainly true of the intelligible character. The childhood image survives in the futile and compensatory determination to be a real adult. For it is precisely the adult that is infantile. All the more reason for the sadness whose lament sounds in mimicry, assuring us with a forced smile that everything is in the best of order. For a temperament like this, remaining a child means holding on to a way of being in which less happens to oneself — the expectation, however disappointed, that such ineradicable trust will be rewarded. How uncertain a matter that is, is expressed by Kracauer's intellectual existence.

In Kracauer the fixation on childhood, as a fixation on play, takes the form of a fixation on the benignness of things; presumably the primacy of the optical in him is not something inborn but rather the result of this relationship to the world of objects. One looks in vain in the storehouse of Kracauer's intellectual motifs for indignation about reification. To a consciousness that suspects it has been abandoned by human beings, objects are superior. In them thought makes reparations for what human beings have done to the living. The state of innocence would be the condition of needy objects, shabby, despised objects alienated from their purposes. For Kracauer they alone embody something that would be other than the universal functional complex, and his idea of philosophy would be to lure their indiscernible life from them. The Latin word for thing is *res*. Realism is derived from it. Kracauer gave his theory of film the [English] subtitle *The Redemption of Physical Reality*. The true translation of that into German would be *Die Rettung der physischen Realität*: so curious is Kracauer's realism.

Translated by Shierry Weber Nicholsen

*Address upon Accepting the
Theodor W. Adorno Prize on 1 October 1989*

Leo Lowenthal

I would like to thank my hometown of Frankfurt and especially the members of the selection committee for awarding me the Adorno Prize. I am especially pleased that you gave me the prize this year, since several months ago comments were made in the various media by different people about my friends Adorno and Horkheimer, comments so contemptible that I want to take this opportunity to protest yet again against the misrepresentation and distortion of these men and their work.

Allow me to take advantage of this opportunity to remind myself of the potential historical continuity of a human life — to reminisce, that is, in an emphatic rather than a sentimental or idealizing way, to recollect what is still worth remembering about a person, along with his weaknesses, even those that could have been avoided.

I want to try to explain what in particular moved me today to remember Adorno, something that has become a daily occurrence for me. It was more than anything else the spirit of collegial and intellectual solidarity that bound us together. For example, when I was analyzing the work of Knut Hamsun in the 1930s and had detected, by way of a textual analysis, a sympathy for National Socialism on Hamsun's part that had as yet gone unrecognized, Adorno contributed to my diagnosis by suggesting a comparison between Hamsun and Sibelius, in whose music he found similar cynical motifs which, whether expressed verbally or in music, glorified a rigid concept of nature with pantheistic overtones.

Our cooperative efforts came to fruition in the theses on anti-Semitism in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and in studies of the authoritarian personality and of the demagogic techniques of agitators. Both of us believed

that modern anti-Semitism and the culture industry were in the final analysis part and parcel of the same social configuration, even if they may occasionally serve different political functions. What they have in common is the blockage of genuine experience that was paradigmatically apparent for us in the encounter with art. Here we found especially significant the unavoidable paralysis of the productive force of the imagination that ultimately leads to the transformation of the knowledge-expanding functions of consciousness into mere market psychology. The culture industry both persistently supplies the commodity character of its products *and* imperceptibly blurs any difference between these products and the political or commercial propaganda purposes for which they were produced. We shared the conviction that the cultural establishment evades any responsibility, in that it ignores the influence and importance of the culture industry and thus is content with condemning the technology that supposedly gives rise to its products alone. We remained in agreement that the line of demarcation between art and commodity culture must not be blurred, and that the unholy alliance of social domination and pure profit motives prevents a condition of consciousness in which, in Adorno's words, "leisure time" could "become freedom" (*Freizeit zur Freiheit*).¹

For the last several years I have devoted my scholarly efforts to an analysis of the intellectual mentality that has been widely designated as "postmodern" in the cultures of the western world and particularly that of the Federal Republic, a mentality that has a penchant for invoking the authors of Critical Theory, especially Adorno and Benjamin. It has become fashionable to assert the disappearance of the subject, and to contest both the possibility of binding historical experience and that of a world organized in accordance with the principles of reason. I will return to this point. Certainly, the powerlessness of the subject in the modern world was an important theoretical concern of Critical Theory, and one that Adorno in particular stressed. In our theoretical and empirical work, we always pointed to how an uncontrolled instrumental reason had become the cause for the catastrophes of civilization. I would like to remind you, however, that the rudiments of Critical Theory were formulated against the backdrop of a constantly maintained, if also desperate, hope for a better society. Wherever this perspective is

1. The reference is to the concluding lines of Adorno's 1969 radio address, "Freizeit," reprinted in Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 10. II, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1977) 645-55. — Trans.

relinquished, our intentions are reversed into their opposite.

When I had the honor of speaking here in 1982 on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Goethe's death, my topic was that false subjectivity Goethe combatted in the name of an individual activity that was oriented towards the whole. He clearly didn't mean by this the liquidation of the subject, but rather its critical and, if you will, dialectical enhancement. I would like to present this problematic today, fable-like as it were, as the conflict between the small Ego and the big Ego.

The small Ego is the instrumental one, the crudely hedonistic subjective desire that is — as Adorno often put it in conversation — oriented toward the “next best thing,” and that seeks to confirm itself narcissistically as a monad in a society that is no longer conceived in terms of solidarity. The big Ego exposes the blindness of the monad as a delusion. A theoretically as well as morally dubious manifestation of such a delusion is of particular consequence today, if, under the slogan of postmodern trends, reality is being denied outright in an artful and often ludicrous semantics. But the denial of reality means — and this lies at the heart of the theoretical orientation of our group — a turning away from the real suffering of human and non-human life. The replacement of reality by the concept of the simulacrum, the flippant liquidation of a critical attitude toward the here and now, is, I am tempted to say, an ontological resistance to change. Thus any effort that is aimed at a radical critique — any political intent, in other words — is implicitly exposed to ridicule. This is a travesty of what Adorno meant when he spoke of damaged life. Such moral-political indifference is extended to the concept of the subject itself, whose alleged total fragility — or, rather, superfluity — is continuously proclaimed anew. The fact that the concept and the ideology of the individual need to be problematized is not something we had to be taught in the postmodern salons. This problem lies at the heart of the entire corpus of Critical Theory. The disavowal of any intersubjective critical interpretation, and thus of the possibility of a society that is potentially free of suffering is an explicit and implicit component in the discourse of the liquidation, death, dwindling, and disappearance of the subject. The indifference toward man blocks any consciousness of historical continuity, and history becomes a mere product of decay, a supermarket of arbitrary and noncommittal interpretations.

The triumph of this instrumental relativism (and how else is one to understand the popular phrase “anything goes”) is celebrated at the

parties of the postmodern. There one now finds the curious monstrosity of *posthistoire* — a peculiar and much abused concept by which one is no longer able to really imagine much of anything. If a pre-history has come to an end, is it therefore no longer worth it to turn to history as a primer for moral and political action, as the textbook for a humane future? The concept of *posthistoire*, as it is used in the current debates, implies a disavowal of the heritage of Jewish messianism with which we have been entrusted, of any utopian hope which, however problematic the concept of utopia may have become, is nonetheless still discernible in concepts such as the “Now-Time” (*Jetztzeit*) and “dialectics at a standstill” (I am thinking here of Benjamin and Bloch), and I am not even speaking here of loyalty to the classical obligation to heal the damaged life of which Adorno speaks.

Last but hardly least, this instrumental relativism undermines that which conducts itself most recalcitrantly against it — the aesthetic, or, to be more specific, not so much the aesthetic, about which people like so much to talk today, but rather the irreplaceability of art itself. It has now become fashionable, even “chic,” to condemn any connection between art and the critique of social norms, between art and reconciliation, between art and redemption. In dialectical critique, art is a phenomenon hovering between the forces of ideology, phantasmagoria, and manipulated leisure time, on the one hand, and, on the other, the productive power of the imagination and its drive toward liberation and freedom. In postmodern discourse, however, art enters into a seamless context of simulation with the culture industry, which pulls us all into its flow and endeavors to carry us away from that genuine experience that I referred to earlier as that of the big Ego.

I bear witness today to the theoretical and moral imperatives of Critical Theory that bound our group together from the very beginning, not because I have represented for six decades the position that you have just heard expressed in my angry comments, but because its unchanging relevance compels me to do so within an altered social constellation. And it is with this conviction in mind that I suggest that the prize that has been awarded me today is not mine alone: it belongs to our group.

Translated by Jamie Owen Daniel

The English-Language Reception of Kracauer's Work: A Bibliography

Thomas Y. Levin

The following preliminary survey of the English-language secondary literature on the work of Siegfried Kracauer is divided into three sections: A) reviews of Kracauer's books, B) obituaries, and C) more general essays on Kracauer. It is meant to supplement my bibliography of primary texts entitled "Siegfried Kracauer in English: A Bibliography" (*New German Critique* 41 [Spring-Summer 1987]: 140-50). For a more detailed, international, and indexed overview of Kracauer's extensive corpus, see *Siegfried Kracauer: Eine Bibliographie seiner Schriften*. Edited and with an introduction by Thomas Y. Levin. (Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 1989).

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