Kracauer’s writing about mass culture emerged at a time when social and cultural transformations of the metropolis made the issue of the masses central to political and sociological thought. From the detective novel to photography, film, and advertising in urban space, he was the first to develop an open-ended mosaic of mass cultural forms and technologies in the Weimar years. His essays and reviews for the Frankfurter Zeitung’s feuilleton from the mid-1920s on developed a predominantly leftist but undogmatic critique of mass culture grounded in an argument that new ways of thinking about the social and the political might emerge in the metropolis as a result of the overbearing presence of photography and film.

Scholars have shown how key ideas of Horkheimer and Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment and of Benjamin’s thinking about photography and film were anticipated in Kracauer’s essays from the late 1920s, including the fate of rationality and experience under capitalism, the impact of media on changing modes of perception, and the acknowledgment of distraction as an alternative form of attentiveness (Koch 2000; Hansen 2012). Adorno acknowledged his debt to Kracauer in their correspondence, but never in his published writings. Multiple resonances also connect Kracauer and Benjamin’s literary writings of metropolitan miniatures about Paris, Marseille, and Berlin. It was only with the rise and fall of fascism that the notion of mass society and mass man developed the uniquely sinister connotations that prevailed in post-World War II totalitarianism theory and the Cold War. Much of that debate as well is anticipated in Kracauer’s sociological analysis of the salaried masses, the first succinct analysis of the explosive rise and political makeup of white-collar labor in the late Weimar years, published serially in the Frankfurter Zeitung from December 1929 to January 1930 (Kracauer 1998).

Critical Theory in the 1920s and 1930s occupied the pivotal historical space between notions of mass culture as a potentially emancipatory agent of progressive change or as a de facto homogenizing, enslaving, and ultimately totalitarian force. The two sides of this argument played out in the legendary mid-1930s debate between Benjamin and Adorno, a debate that took on a reductive life of its own in the North American obsessions with the postmodern and the rise of cultural studies in the 1980s, which privileged Benjamin’s political embrace of mechanical reproducibility and condemned Adorno’s elitism. Far from undercutting the traditional distinctions between high and low culture, all too often it
simply reversed its value terms. By contrast, it is in Kracauer’s trajectory from his early
domestic anti-capitalism via his sociological Marxist tinged feuilleton essays and journalist-
ies reviews to his post-war books, written in New York exile, From Caligari to Hitler and the
Theory of Film: The Redemption of Reality, that we can find a model of mass cultural
analysis that sidesteps such ossified binaries while avoiding the inherent depoliticization of
the currently favored term “media culture.” To celebrate Kracauer and Benjamin as early
media theorists today is to sideline the fact that to them thinking about new media was
always part and parcel of social and political understanding. After all, the culture of the
masses for Kracauer did not pertain only to products of the film and publishing industries
nor to media technologies alone. He was anything but a technological determinist. His no-
tion of mass culture included the concrete material aspects of the metropolitan lifeworld,
its social stratifications, and the ways urban dwellers understood and perceived their fast
changing environment. Kracauer spoke of the “thicket of material life” (Kracauer 1997: 48)
to which all his analyses, whether of films, novels, sports, the book market, architecture,
or metropolitan sites, remained bound. He was trained as an architect and employed as
feuilleton editor and writer of that major left-liberal newspaper in Frankfurt, and it is his
attention to the concrete social conditions of a cultural production and stratification in
flux that distinguishes his writings from those of Benjamin and Adorno. Clearly, he kept
his distance from Adorno, whose philosophical rigour about mediation and dialectics he
did not share. And his difference from Benjamin is perhaps best articulated toward the
end of his overall positive 1928 review of Benjamin’s The Origins of Tragic German Drama
and One Way Street where he criticizes Benjamin for “hardly taking into account the
very life he wants to stir up” (Kracauer 1995: 263). At stake is the life of the metropo-
lis, which indeed is rendered very differently in Kracauer’s street texts as compared with
Benjamin’s collection of urban texts, often called Denkbilder (Huysen 2015). And yet, as
Leo Löwenthal, countering Adorno’s condescending essay about Kracauer of 1965, said
in a moving tribute to his friend: “He really was a super-member of our school of critical
thinking” (Löwenthal 1991: 10).

It is not surprising that binary thinking has distorted the complexities of the disagree-
ments between Adorno and Benjamin about mass culture. Binaries indeed are deeply ent-
trenched in the longstanding debate between high and low, elite and popular, art and mass
culture in Western societies. Today, I would argue, this topographical vertical stratification
is both obsolete and up to date. Kracauer’s work embodies this contradiction in nuce. It is
obsolete in that today in Western societies there is a horizontal layering of cultural pro-
duction and consumption. Rather than one mass culture, we have a panoply of subcultures
with multiple crossovers. The cultural capital that identification with high culture used
to provide is mostly exhausted as all cultural products have become commodified (already
Adorno’s insight) and the unquestioned status of a cultured class is no longer being upheld.
High culture has lost its cachet and mark of distinction among the elites. In line with a
post-Fordist economy, consumers are free to choose laterally from cultural offerings, and
many are as invested in certain forms of mass culture as in forms of high art. At the same
time the high/low division is up-to-date in that we still need to distinguish ambitious works
of art from trashy cultural products based on cliché, stereotype, and deadening monotony. If,
on the other hand, one looks at the vertical integration of cultural industries (Sony, Time
Warner, Disney) and corporations like Apple or Google, maintaining a vertical Adornoan
model still seems to make economic sense. The difference with the old high/low model,
however, is that now there is an ever expanding realm of ambitious inter-minglings and
challenging hybrid forms that partake in both realms without being mindless middle-brow
or what Adorno, in a letter to Walter Benjamin of March 18 1936, described as the middle
term between Schönberg and the American film (Adorno et al. 1980: 123). Sometimes this
recent dissolution of boundaries is attributed to postmodernism, but our post-postmodern understanding of modernism itself, especially in its geographic expansion toward the globe, shows that such hybridities were already being explored in the earlier 20th century. In the European context, Kracauer is a case in point.

II

It is important to remember that terms like crowds and masses had already assumed negative connotations in Le Bon's late 19th-century crowd psychology and in the context of a post-Nietzschean German Kulturkritik (Le Bon 2001; Jonsson 2013). Kracauer's early thinking about culture emerged from that context. While he did not use terms like high or low culture, the radical separation of higher and lower spheres, with the human being occupying a middle realm in Kierkegaardian fashion between the divine and the natural, the spiritual and the material, was the starting point for Kracauer's analysis of contemporary culture. It explicitly grounds his reading of the detective novel, his first engagement with a mass cultural form (Kracauer 1971: 103–204). He reads the detective novel not sociologically or literarily, but rather philosophically as an allegory of a fallen world distorted by blind rationality. The detective novel thus confronts the civilized world with a Zerrspiegel, a distorting mirror, “from which a caricature of its own terror stares back at it” (Kracauer 1971: 105, my trsl.). This reading of a popular cultural form was energized by a radical critique of modernity as loss of meaning and disintegration of community (Tönnies), rationalization and disenchantment (Weber), and transcendental homelessness (Lukács). Georg Simmel's critical observation that objective culture was overwhelming subjective culture in metropolitan modernity prompted Kracauer not to abandon the individual in favor of a false collectivity. Indeed, the place of human subjectivity was always of central concern to Kracauer. But then he went much further than Simmel, whose lectures he had attended in Berlin. He fully recognized the structural transformation of individuality itself, brilliantly captured in his novel Ginters, whose protagonist displays the metropolitan subject's deterritorialization and loss of inwardness, making him a precursor to Ulrich in Musil's Man Without Qualities. In The Detective Novel, the lamented loss of meaning is juxtaposed to the hope that the distorted image in the mirror might raise the reader's consciousness about a distorted world and thus lead to action and social change—a structure of knowledge production that we find again later in a different inflection in Kracauer's Marxist analysis of the mass ornament and in his understanding of photography and film. Alienation in modernity—this was his core modernist belief—must be countered by estrangement in strategies of visual or verbal representation. Only the distortion of a distorted world that is no longer accepted as second nature can make it recognizable as distorted and lead to action. If this strategy is to have broad social effect, it implies that the antidote to mass culture must be found in mass culture itself (Hansen 2012: 8).

While strategies of distortion and estrangement were widespread in left cultural thought and practice in the 1920s, in Kracauer it was politically never purely Brechtian. The dimension of romantic anti-capitalism and Lebensphilosophie, tied up with a lapsarian philosophy of modernity and a residual secularized Jewish messianism, resonates through all of Kracauer's work, not just his early pre-Marxist writings. He never fully abandoned the existentialist topographical metaphor of higher and lower spheres. Traditional German high culture with its celebration of Geist, however, was subjected to a withering critique. Low, on the other hand, was meant to open a new and different venue to an alternative culture that would overcome the reciprocal, ultimately class-bound limitations of high vs. low. Kracauer thus turned his attention to forms of life and culture which the German conservatives despised or feared as contaminating authentic culture, early film being paramount among them. As
he put it in the “Marseille Notebooks” written in 1940/41, when he was in mortal danger of being handed over by Vichy to the Nazis:

It [Film] does not aim upward, toward intention, but pushes toward the bottom, to gather and carry along even the dregs. It is interested in refuse, in what is just there—both in and outside the human being. The face counts for nothing in film unless it includes the death’s head beneath. ‘Danse macabre.’ To which end? That remains to be seen.

(Kracauer 2005: 531, trsl. by Hansen 2012: 259)

Against the anthropocentric obsession with physiognomy and the human face in the years following the mass slaughter and mutilations of World War I, Kracauer, like Benjamin, is mindful not just of mortality, but of all that is outside of the human. Especially the world of things can be revealed in its stubborn reality in film in ways only available to this new medium. As a matter of fact, physiognomy is no longer even limited to the human face, when Kracauer writes that “the world itself has taken on a ‘photographic face’” (Kracauer 1995: 59).

III

Kracauer articulated his position on mass culture in famous essays from 1926 to 1927: “The Cult of Distraction,” “Photography,” “The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies,” and “The Mass Ornament” (Kracauer 1995). Before engaging his thinking about these mass cultural phenomena, we need to sketch whom Kracauer had in mind when he spoke of the culture of the masses. Key here is his sociological study entitled “Die Angestellten,” hitting the pages of the Frankfurter Zeitung less than two months after the October 1929 crash before being published as a book (Kracauer 1971: 205–304; in trsl. Kracauer 1998). In its literary montage of interview, reportage, distanced observation, irony, and narrative construction, this work still stands as one of the most incisive analyses of the rise of white-collar employees in the Weimar Republic. Kracauer sees mass man neither as proletarian working class nor as completely unmoored from class, as Arendt did later in her analysis of totalitarianism. Instead, he sees white collar as a new social stratum wedged between the working class and the bourgeoisie, proletarianized by the economic crisis of the late 1920, but holding on to the pretense of higher cultural standing which then could become captive to Nazi nationalist and racist propaganda, as the economic crisis and mass unemployment deepened. As a highly literary text—some compared it to a novel—it occupies a place beyond new-matter-of-fact journalistic reportage and Soviet style operative writing both of which Kracauer criticized in his reviews of the late 1920s. Neither Hans Fallada, the popular new-objectivity novelist, nor Sergei Tretyakov, the Soviet avant-gardist influential with the radical Weimar left, provided a model for his writing. Kracauer’s text mixes a dramatizing present tense that suggests immediacy and immersion of the narrator in his subject with the past tense of distanced observation. It offers fragments of interviews, clinical dissection of petit-bourgeois ideology, and ironic if not satirical commentary. His position vis-à-vis his material was that of distanced but engaged observer, not that of revolutionary operative participant, and he marked his distance from reportage in the first segment entitled “Unknown Territory”:

Writers scarcely know any higher ambition than to report; the reproduction of observed reality is the order of the day. A hunger for directness that is undoubt-
edly a consequence of the malnutrition caused by German idealism. Reportage, as the self-declaration of concrete existence, is counterposed to the abstractness of idealist thought. […] But existence is not captured by being at best duplicated
in reportage […] A hundred reports from a factory do not add up to the reality of the factory, but remain for all eternity a hundred views of the factory. Reality is a construction. Certainly life must be observed for it to appear. Yet it is by no means contained in the more or less random observational results of reportage; rather it is to be found solely in the mosaic that is assembled from single observations on the basis of comprehension of their meaning. Reportage photographs life; such a mosaic would be its image.

(Kracauer 1998: 32)

Mosaic instead of photography then as method to create an appropriate image of reality. Mosaic as an image that captures life beyond the static indexicality of the photograph. This takes up his critique of photography, as articulated in the famous essay of 1927, but it also points to that which goes beyond photography and *neuschlich* reportage: the mosaic as an inevitably open-ended construction subject to temporality. The image of reality emerging from a mosaic is neither close to photomontage nor to avant-garde abstract film of the 1920s since it contains a strong narrative dimension rather than just spatial juxtaposition or rhythmic movement. Film at its best, however, transforms the static image, even the mosaic, into a world in motion in which perspectives constantly change, thus allowing the spectator reorientation in the world in its dialectic of immersion and distancing. Kracauer’s ultimate point, however, is not distanced analysis of white-collar labor but political intervention in a moment of extreme crisis after the 1929 crash. The last lines read: “What matters is not that institutions are changed, what matters is that human individuals change institutions” (Kracauer 1998: 106). Institutional change comes not from abstract demands, but only after individual human beings engage in changing institutions. All his writing aims at such change and film, and photography, are to play a key role. Film especially is able to capture human beings “with skin and hair” in totally embodied fashion (Kracauer 2005: 559). This was also the goal of his feuilleton pieces as they created an image of white-collar metropolitan life deploying filmic strategies of narration and text manipulation like close up, slow motion, direct dialogue, panoramic shots, and narrative montage.

“The Cult of Distraction,” written a few years before *The Salaried Masses*, did not limit the urban mass to white-collar employees but offered a broader notion of the mass as experienced in the metropolis. As his subject in that essay was the audience of the big film palaces of 1920s Berlin, he argued that even the educated classes are being absorbed by the masses, a process that creates the *homogeneous cosmopolitan audience* in which everyone has the *same* responses, from the bank director to the sales clerk, from the diva to the stenographer.

(Kracauer 1995: 325)

The suggestion of responses transcending class and gender is questionable. He himself argues more subtly about gender, film, and working women in “Mädchen im Beruf” (Kracauer 1990: vol. 3: 60–66). But he is right to see metropolitan Berlin as the center for the emergence of such a mass audience:

It cannot be overlooked that there are *four million* people in Berlin. The sheer necessity of their circulation transforms the life of the street into the ineluctable street of life, giving rise to configurations that invade even domestic space. The more people perceive themselves as a mass, however, the sooner the masses will also develop productive powers in the spiritual and cultural domain that are worth financing.

(Kracauer 1995: 325)
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Clearly, the appended reference to financing must be read here as referring to the film industry and might thus be a sly ironic damper on what preceded. Yet it is here that Kracauer's hope for real social change appears. Film becomes an agent in the critical self-perception of the masses. It is the medium that represents the "ineluctable street of life" in moving images. Indeed, central to Kracauer's emerging understanding of film were the street films of early cinema and of the Weimar Republic, films such as Karl Grune's Die Strasse. Time and again, Kracauer comes back to the centrality of the metropolitan street as public space of experience both in his critical and his literary writings. Similar to Kafka's notion of Verkehr, a German word that refers to traffic as well as to sexual intercourse, Kracauer's urban imaginary sees the street as a site of circulation, sexual desire, and unfulfilled longings. Street life is the street of life is the "flow of life" is the cinema. Metropolitan environment, human imaginaries, and the new medium are umbilically linked with each other. The only other space that comes close to the street in his definition of film is the Jahrmarkt, the popular fair prominent in early film, equally contingent as the street, full of motion, itself a space of urban leisure activities, and a site of grotesque performances and freak shows. It is part of the Abhub, the refuse of contemporary city life to which Kracauer's eyes are invariably drawn.

IV

The essays on the movie palaces and distraction, on film and photography, and on film experience and spectatorship have mainly been the subject of film and media theory. A broader picture emerges if we read them together with all the other essays, reviews, metropolitan miniatures and other short prose pieces written for the Frankfurter Zeitung in the late 1920s and early 1930s (Kracauer 1990). His feuilleton production of course ceased during the exile years in Paris when he no longer had access to the German press; but the essays and reviews from the 1920s still resonate strongly with the 1940/41 "Marseiller Entwurf" for his later film theory. His early pre-Marxist cultural vision of modernity as catastrophe came close to reality again with the outbreak of World War II and the Nazi occupation of France which now threatened his own life. The "Marseille Notebooks" were written in the desperate months in Marseille just before his and his wife's escape from Nazi occupied France to the United States.

Such a synthetic reading of the film essays with his other feuilleton output and even the later "Marseille Notebooks" makes it clear that all of his critical writing for the feuilleton and its mainly middle class readers is energized by the desire to construct a broad provisional mosaic of cultural phenomena that would stimulate change in the public sphere. The function of his journalism was, as he put it in an essay of 1931 "Über den Schriftsteller," "to intervene and bring change to current affairs" (Kracauer 1990, vol. 2: 344). Clearly, this desire for intervention addresses change in modes of thinking and perceiving the world, change in human consciousness as a prerequisite for action. In an essay on travel literature of 1932, he advocated journeys of exploration into an "unknown terrain," title of the first fragment of The Salaried Masses, sociological expeditions into the urban present in the interest of social enlightenment (Kracauer 1990, vol. 3: 88–89). In this spirit, he reviewed German, American, French, and Russian novels by authors such as Julien Green, Céline, Sinclair Lewis, Ehrenburg, Scholochov, Heinrich Mann, Döblin, and of course Kafka. He wrote about Scheler, Husserl, Benjamin, and Jünger, discussed the crises of narrative and subjectivity, problematized bestsellers and the bourgeois fashion for biographies, criticized the reportage obsessions of Neue Sachlichkeit, commented on modernist architecture and urban planning, and analyzed the intellectual situation of the writer in capitalist society as compared with the situation in the Soviet Union. Several reviews of Sergei Tretyakov betray
both Kracauer’s fascination with the Soviet author and his critical distance from Brecht and Benjamin’s full embrace of Tretyakov’s operative writing (Kracauer 1990, vol. 2: 308–311 and vol. 3: 26–29). A simultaneous critique of Döblin, on the other hand, showed him close to Brecht and Benjamin’s attacks on the writer of Berlin Alexanderplatz as bourgeois intellectual (Kracauer 1990, vol. 2: 301–308). At the same time, he took issue with Brecht’s essay “Der Dreigroschenprozess,” sharply criticizing it for “inverted idealism” (Kracauer 1990, vol. 3: 33–39). It all betrayed his fiercely guarded intellectual independence that put critical consciousness of real conditions above any fixed political position, be it liberal or communist.

A key factor in Kracauer’s thinking about the topography of culture was the urban terrain itself, its streets and public squares, its shop windows and electric advertising, its chaos of moving people and traffic. A mode of distanced observation is in play as cultural and political differences between France and Germany crystallize around comparisons between Paris and Berlin. Kracauer sees Berlin, similar to the Benjamin of the surrealism essay, as the frontier of coming “struggles in which the human future is at stake” (Kracauer 1990, vol. 2: 375). Paris, by contrast, is not an alternative to modernity, but a city that still preserves residues of a fast fading earlier time of civility, memory, and aesthetic surplus. Berlin, not Paris “represented the inescapable horizon within which the contradictions of modernity demanded to be engaged” (Hansen 2012: 69). Poetic street miniatures such as “Schreie auf der Strasse,” “Das Quadrat,” “Erinnerung an eine Pariser Strasse,” or “Die Unterführung” articulate a haunting experience of urban terror emanating from architectural space itself which is imbued with sexual desire, class distinction, and an insidious overpowering rationality (all in Kracauer 1990). In a completely different vein of writing, there is the mode of irony and whimsy in those wonderful metropolitan miniatures, in which he writes about modern objects like umbrellas, suspenders, and typewriters as if they were human and had a social biography, a kind of vision enabled by the stop-motion animation technique of the cinema of attractions and its obsession with the social life of objects. In all of these texts written in different narrative and descriptive modes, he has an eye for moments of strangeness, both Entfremdung and Verfremdung, for distortion, capricious humor, and the vicissitudes of a subjectivity under siege. The basic gist of this journalistic endeavor, however, is one of enlightenment, awakening his readers from metropolitan dreamworlds, making them see the world anew. It is remarkable to note how close Kracauer is to the notion of urban dreamworlds, first developed by Benjamin in the 1920s under the influence of Aragon’s surrealism. In the 1931 miniature “Aus dem Fenster gesehen,” Kracauer states programatically: “The knowledge of cities depends on deciphering its dream-like articulated images” (my trsl., Kracauer 1990, vol. 2: 401). Kracauer deciphers uncanny images of urban space, but Benjamin, in One Way Street focuses on script in the city, taking print advertising, announcements, names of stores and buildings as stimulus for his reflective wanderings up the one-way street. Quite distinct from Kracauer, he wrote “as if the world were script,” as Ernst Bloch had it in a comment on this work (Bloch 1968: 17). And yet deciphering that which could not be simply read or seen due to its compromised or even hidden visuality is what they had in common. Also, common to both was the idea that deciphering would lead to a political awakening. Reading spatial images such as mass ornaments as embodying the dreams of society required an awakening to that other, still undetermined reason which would free the mass ornament from its mute abstractions and keep it from relapsing into mythology (Kracauer 1995: 84). Freud’s work on dreams, on mass psychology and the pathologies of everyday life hovers in the background of Kracauer’s detective penetration of the unconscious surfaces of the metropolis. Here is that explicit call for another expansive form of reason which also lies hidden at the bottom of Horkheimer/Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment. Of course, the entanglement between enlightenment and myth has become almost total in Horkheimer and Adorno’s work. The
difference lies in the fact that in the late 1920s, the political situation still seemed to harbor possibilities that had been closed down when Horkheimer and Adorno wrote their book in Californian exile. To Kracauer in the late 1920s, an enlightenment beyond myth still seemed possible based on self-reflexivity and grounded in strategies of modernist art and critical thought, strategies Kracauer saw potentially at work in the new media of photography and film, i.e., in mass culture itself. Already by the mid-1930s, however, the mass ornament was no longer mute, but loud and propagandistic in the service of Nazi mass organization and myth-making. Kracauer already lived in exile in Paris, when Riefenstahl gave it visual perfection in *Triumph of the Will*.

V

The unresolved dialectic between a utopian hope for mass culture and its dimming prospects can already be seen in the constellation between the photography essay and the essay on the mass ornament, both of them published in the *FZ* in 1927. Kracauer never saw photography simply superseded by film as media historians might suggest. Structurally, he insisted, film emerges from photography set in motion. In light of his conviction that in order to understand film the critic has to go back to the “childhood” (Kracauer 2005: 539) of the medium, it is not surprising that his perhaps most salient essay on the nature of the new visual media is the essay on photography, an essay in which film only emerges at the very end as a game changer. This essay contains in purest form Kracauer’s argument about the radical potential of the visual media. No surprise that its arguments were reprised in the later *Theory of Film*. Many have read the essay as positing an anti-technological critique of the photograph and, by contrast, a celebration of the image preserved in human memory. True enough, if one focuses on the first five chapters of the essay and ignores the radical turn in the latter part, Kracauer seems to inscribe himself in an anti-photography tradition that reaches back to Proust, Rilke, and Baudelaire. But this is where Kracauer’s dialectical thinking emerges at its best. The critique of modern illustrated magazines, in which “the blizzard of photographs betrays an indifference toward what the things mean” acknowledges that “the flood of photos sweeps away the dams of memory” (Kracauer 1995: 58). Key here is Kracauer’s critique of mere indexicality as a limiting condition of photography: “The resemblance between the image and the object effaces the contours of the object’s ‘history’” (Kracauer 1995: 58). Effacing history and temporality, in turn, means effacing mortality: “That the world devours them [snapshots, AH] is a sign of the *fear of death*. What the photographs by their sheer accumulation attempt to banish is the recollection of death, which is part and parcel of every memory image” (Kracauer 1995: 59). Less than ten years after the end of the Great War, such sentences speak of a society bent on forgetting. Kracauer, however, is not interested in moralizing. He is interested in the structure of the photographic image. Enter his philosophy of history: “No different from earlier modes of representation, photography, too, is assigned to a particular developmental stage of practical and material life. It is a secretion of the capitalist mode of production” (Kracauer 1995: 59). Historians of technology might quibble with this definition. But in the context of his critique of illustrated papers and the commercial press in the Weimar Republic, it makes perfect sense. Politically, then, to paraphrase the final argument from the “Mass Ornament” essay, the process leads directly through the center of photography, not away from it. Photography, i.e., mass culture itself, contains the seed of its transcendence: “The turn to photography is the go-for-broke game of history” (Kracauer 1995: 61). This stunning claim ends Chapter 7 of the essay. What follows as Chapter 8 lays out in partly cryptic language how this go-for-broke game might succeed. The basic idea seems simple enough if one reads “nature” as a negative term referring to the second
nature of habit and its understanding of reality. Photography enables social self-reflexivity on a large scale:

A consciousness caught up in nature is unable to see its own material base. It is the task of photography to disclose this previously unexamined foundation of nature. For the first time in history, photography brings to light the entire natural cocoon; for the first time, the inert world presents itself in its independence from human beings. Photography shows cities in aerial shots, brings crockets and figures down from the Gothic cathedrals.

And then a seemingly totaling claim emerges from his lapsarian critique of modernity, but now turned in a different direction:

All spatial configurations are incorporated into the central archive in unusual combinations which distance them from human proximity. [...] The photographic archive assembles in effigy the last elements of a nature alienated from meaning. (Kracauer 1995: 62)

From this central archive, in which a mute and base nature is warehoused, Kracauer expects a confrontation of consciousness with reality. It is the historical process itself that plays this go-for-broke game. Only once nature has been fragmented into millions of photographic configurations will human consciousness have the ability “to establish the provisional status of all given configurations and perhaps even to awaken an inkling of the right order of the inventory of nature” (Kracauer 1995: 62). Perhaps the Jewish notion of the shattering of the vessels that could not hold the light of God lurks behind this image of a fragmentation to be overcome, of the shards or fragments of a disenchanted meaningless world to be reassembled. The first step toward that job—and here comes another surprising move—has been taken by Franz Kafka, in whose works “a liberated consciousness absolves itself of this responsibility by destroying natural reality and scrambling the fragments.” Kafka’s novels, which Kracauer was one of the first to review in the FZ, do indeed “suspend every habitual relationship among the elements of nature” (Kracauer 1995: 62). The shift to Kafka is significant in that Kracauer finds the model for his go-for-broke game in the realm of radical literary modernism. Just as any discussion of mass culture cannot be uncoupled from a social and political understanding of the masses, it cannot be uncoupled from its relationship to modernism as the major formation of high culture in the twentieth century. Actually Kracauer was the first, before Benjamin and Adorno, to notice Kafka’s affinity to the visual. In his review of Kafka’s first novel Amerika he cites a passage about a New York street in motion that points to Kafka’s cinematic style of writing (Kracauer 1990, vol. 2: 186). Kracauer’s own literary street miniatures betray their intense negotiation with photography and film (Huysen 2015: 118–154). If Kafka appears at the end of the essay on photography, Proust is conjured up at the beginning where Kracauer discusses two photographs, one of the film diva, the other one of the grandmother. The latter clearly resonates with a famous scene in Proust’s The Guermantes Way where the narrator sees the grandmother as if through the camera lens feeling alienated from her. These framing references to major literary modernists in the essay on photography suggest that literature itself can “awaken an inkling of the right order of the inventory of nature” by scrambling the fragments.

Right after mentioning Kafka’s anticipatory role, he shifts back to mass culture: “The capacity to stir up the elements of nature is one of the possibilities of film.” Film of course could reach mass audiences whereas Kafka’s novels did not find many readers at the time. So how does film perform the work Kafka, himself deeply affected by photography and film, had
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initiated in literature? Ultimately, it does so by using modernist and avant-gardist strategies of distorting and estranging reality which as a result assumes a dreamlike quality:

If the disarray of the illustrated newspapers is simply confusion, the game that film plays with the pieces of disjointed nature is reminiscent of *dreams* in which the fragments of daily life become jumbled.

(Kracauer 1995: 63)

What films might Kracauer have had in mind beyond those that made up the very early cinema of attractions? Film historians have pointed to the films of René Clair, Sergei Eisenstein, Jean Vigo, Dziga Vertov, and Luis Buñuel, films now considered as canonical works of modernism, not mass culture. But this shows precisely that the boundaries between high and low, avant-garde and mass culture, were much more porous already in the 1920s than post-World War II historians of modernism or film theorists ever dreamt. Miriam Hansen has suggested the term vernacular modernism to capture this porosity and interpenetration in German, Soviet, and American cinema’s project of a mass production of the senses (Hansen 1999). At the same time, we must also remember that Kracauer was very critical of certain other experimental films of an allegedly absolute cinema that to him celebrated experiment for experiment’s sake, losing a grounding relationship to reality and to narrative, such as the films by Richter, Eggeling, and Ruttmann (Kracauer 2005: 721–737).

It may be hard today to share Kracauer’s theologically tinged secular belief in the emancipatory dimension of modernist strategies in mass culture, but such hopes were widespread in the 1920s, when, in the context of massive social transformations, both modernism and metropolitan mass culture promised new departures before they too came to be politically exploited, domesticated, and canonized.

**VI**

Central to Kracauer’s dialectical thinking about the masses is the essay “The Mass Ornament.” In its often abstract and elliptical theorizing about reason, nature, and abstraction, and with its broad historic-philosophical claims, the essay speaks the language of another time. And yet, once deciphered and historicized, it may be closer to our own cultural dilemmas of the digital age than Lukács and Adorno’s theories of totalizing reification, or Benjamin’s about politicizing the aesthetic. Kracauer insists on the ambivalence of the social transformation to a mass society and consumer culture. As critical consciousness of material conditions and a heightened self-reflexivity were key demands of Kracauer’s intellectual project, he had to address the question whether and how the metropolitan masses might gain such self-reflexivity and become critically conscious of themselves as mass. The “go-for-broke game of history” and the positioning of a “homogeneous cosmopolitan audience” defined the arena where such a process could be nurtured. The impetus, at any rate, had to come from the masses of the republic, not the “Volk,” nor the proletariat. Celebrating the individual flaneur’s merging with the masses in Baudelairesque fashion clearly would not achieve a self-consciousness of the mass. Nor would the mass audience of the big Berlin film palaces gain such consciousness automatically. Kracauer sees clearly how spectators got caught in the dream machine of capitalist film production and in the new form of seductive film exhibition he described as that of the Gesamtkunstwerk of effects in the “Cult of Distraction.” In order to find an answer Kracauer turns neither to the cinema, nor to the metropolitan street. He focuses instead on a neglected surface phenomenon of metropolitan culture—the assembly of a mass of spectators in the tiers of sports stadiums watching geometrically organized ornamental clusters of human bodies performing gymnastics or rhythmic patterns on the field such as we still see them
at the Olympic games or the American super bowl. On a smaller scale, he discusses the mass ornament in cabaret and revue performances as they have survived to this day with the performances of the Rockettes in New York's Radio City Music Hall. With his focus on the Tiller Girls, an English dance troupe that had become famous in America, Kracauer frames his argument with the mid-1920s obsessions with Americanism. When he describes their precisely patterned movements, comparing their synchronized legs to the workers' hands on the assembly line, he draws on the contemporary technology cult in both its utopian and dystopian versions. Key to both examples of the mass ornament, the stadium and the revue, is the mechanization of the human body—deindividuated, fragmented, desexed, and part of a calculated machinery of geometric spectacle. To be sure, the stage of a dance revue is not the same as the factory floor, but it is precisely the comparison of leisure performance and Taylorized production, chorus line and assembly line, that enables Kracauer to develop his dialectical argument about the ambivalence of the mass ornament which matches his analyses of the ambiguities of film and photography. Underneath this description of Taylorized reification, there lies a reassertion of the human and of human pleasure.

Interpreting such a surface phenomenon present in metropolitan culture also required a new method of reading. Choosing surface and externality rather than depth and interiority was a calculated provocation to German Geist and its representatives who denounced the superficiality of modern culture. Yet surfing the surface was not sufficient to Kracauer:

The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch's judgments about itself. [...] The surface-level expressions, however, by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things.

(Kracauer 1995: 75)

Just as the Raumbilder of metropolitan space can only be deciphered as one breaks through their unconscious nature grounded in habitual perception, the mass ornament, too, must be durchdrungen, penetrated by reason in order to reveal its true nature. The challenge is this: “Although the masses give rise to the ornament, they are not involved in thinking it through” (Kracauer 1995: 77). As he then thinks it through by emphasizing its still deficient ratio, present in its lines and circles, waves and spirals, all elements of a Euclidean geometry, he concludes: “However, the Ratio of the capitalist economic system is not reason itself, but a murky reason. Once past a certain point, it abandons the truth in which it participates. It does not encompass man” (Kracauer 1995: 81). His emphasis on man points to a humanism that still resonates with Lebensphilosphie and Simmel, but is now inspired by the early humanist writings of Karl Marx. Kracauer’s philosophy of history comes to bear as he claims, in line with a Weberian argument about the inevitable disenchantments of modernity, that “the capitalist epoch is a stage in the process of demystification” (Kracauer 1995: 80). The mass ornament then not only appears as part of this insidious demystification process, but its very structure “reflects that of the entire contemporary situation” (Kracauer 1995: 78). This may sound totalizing, but it does not take away from the ambivalence of the mass ornament which mirrors that of an enlightened reason captive to capitalist instrumentalization. In its pure capitalist form, the mass ornament, as part of the then fashionable Körperkultur which Kracauer subjects to a withering critique, reveals itself as “a mythological cult that is masquerading in the garb of abstraction” (Kracauer 1995: 83). Rather than advocating a return to older cultural forms and genres, however, Kracauer argues for a way forward, resulting in the provocative claim that capitalism “rationalizes not too much but rather too little” (Kracauer 1995: 81)—a claim that seems perversely over the top if compared with other
radical critiques of capitalist modernity at the time. It seems we have here yet another go-for-broke game of history. Just as he saw photography as a secretion of the capitalist production process, so, it seems, is the mass ornament in the realm of aesthetic consumption. But under present conditions, he argues, it remains mute. He concludes rather abstractly: “The process leads directly through the center of the mass ornament, not away from it” (Kracauer 1995: 86). Thus, he begs the question what an alternative form of rationalization might be or who would implement it. Leaving out this all important answer inscribes this text in a tradition of utopian thought about an alternative reason. What that reason might be is only hinted at in an earlier passage in the essay:

_Reason_ does not operate in the circle of natural life. Its concern is to introduce truth into the world. Its realm has already been intimated in genuine _fairy tales_, which are not stories about miracles but rather announcements of the miraculous advent of justice.

(Kracauer 1995: 80)

Justice rather than redemption—this is closer to the secular Blochian idea of _Vorschein_ (anticipation) than to Benjamin’s messianic intervention. The reference to fairy tales in this essay as well as in the epigraph of the photography essay also illuminates Kracauer’s ambivalence in 1927, years before the mass ornament became a tool in the machinery of Nazi propaganda.

**VII**

Engaged ambivalence pervaded Kracauer’s analysis of film from the start. If film was the key new medium that both attracted and represented the masses, creating new ways of being in the world, then the rise of film contained the possibility to challenge the traditional hierarchy of high and low, providing a path toward genuine cultural democratization. Indeed, it was the rise of film as modern vernacular in the public sphere that made the class-bound hierarchies of high and low seem exhausted, if not obsolete. Sure, you had the rearguard attempt to elevate film (and photography, for that matter) to the level of art, thus shoring up the high/low divide, an argument Kracauer always rejected as forcefully as Benjamin did. On the other hand, major literary and visual artists at the time incorporated the new media into their work, thus fundamentally changing literature and painting itself in a reciprocal interweaving of the verbal with the visual, the technological with the organic. Kracauer’s privileging of modernist techniques in film shows that within modern culture, the two realms were already reciprocally linked with each other. It was that interpenetration of high and low, elite art and mass culture, that brought a new form of the public sphere into being, reflecting the experience of mass existence in the metropolis.

Recent work on Kracauer’s American writings on film has emphasized how the political hopes he placed in the new media during the late 1920s faded and were transformed in the post-World War II years in New York. After Auschwitz and World War II, the time for another go-for-broke-game-of-history was used up. With his work on Nazi propaganda films, on German film from Caligari to Hitler, and on film theory, there is also a narrowing of mass cultural forms to film alone in Kracauer’s writing. The earlier assessment of the dialectics of the mass ornament now reappears in weakened form in a reading of film as creating a new kind of spectatorship, described with the term “redemption of physical reality,” subtitle of the _Theory of Film_. Both Miriam Hansen and Johannes von Moltke argue correctly that this is not, as so often claimed, a celebration of naïve realism or, worse, political defeatism (Hansen 2012; von Moltke 2016). Instead, film precisely as a mediating
mode of representation is held to counter that loss of experience in modernity lamented by early Kracauer and later by Benjamin. The notion that modernity is characterized by abstraction, alienation, and fragmentation after all was never abandoned. Thus Hansen argues that rather than offering a theory of film in general, Kracauer gives us “a theory of a particular type of film experience, and of cinema as the aesthetic matrix of a particular historical experience” (Kracauer 1997, X). For both Hansen and von Moltke, it is the historical experience of Nazi terror and of totalitarianism that shaped Kracauer’s notion of spectatorship in Theory of Film.

Von Moltke also shows how Kracauer had to confront yet another version of the high/low debate that all his work of the 1920s had aimed to undercut. Here in New York it was Clement Greenberg, Dwight Macdonald and other New York intellectuals (with Robert Warshow as only exception) who raged against kitsch, mid-brow, and mid-cult, condemning popular culture in ways we usually associate with the Eurocentrism of Adorno. Against this American trend of the 1940s and 1950s, Kracauer posited his validation of film experience and spectatorship that still held a promise of enlightened consciousness enabled by the medium.

VIII

The term mass culture sounds slightly quaint today, conjuring up the interwar period in Europe with its hope for mass democracy as well as the post-World War II period in the United States and in Europe with its predominantly negative notion of the masses in the context of totalitarianism theory. We no longer use terms like “the masses” or “mass culture” at a time when culture and society have become ever more fragmented in a post-Fordist economy with hundreds of TV channels and social media laid on top of the digitalization of many of the traditional segments of the culture industry: publishing, print journalism, music, image worlds. Inundated as we are 24/7 with information, communication, and social media, it no longer makes sense to entertain a hierarchy of high and low culture, which Kracauer already had dismantled de facto in his attack on traditional bourgeois understandings of high. By validating complex representational strategies in film, he generated a kind of leveling of cultural topography without denying quality differences among cultural products. That move makes his thinking about topographies of culture pertinent for our time. Such quality differences in Kracauer were never only aesthetic; they pertained centrally to how aesthetic strategies articulated social and political realities. He advocated a realism within modernism (Hansen 2012), and film, that he hoped might be its main agent. The topography of culture became horizontal with Kracauer, not with Benjamin who linked film single-mindedly to the proletarian masses, nor with Adorno who insisted on the vertical division between culture industry and modernism, nor with the New York intellectuals. At the same time, the Kierkegaardian upper and lower spheres with the human being in the middle were never abandoned in Kracauer’s language. The topographical metaphor of high and low runs through many of his feuilleton essays throughout the years. It even colors the concluding passage in his 1960 Preface to his Theory of Film where he shares a boyhood reminiscence of his first film:  

What thrilled me so deeply was an ordinary suburban street, filled with lights and shadows which transfigured it. Several trees stood about, and there was in the foreground a puddle reflecting invisible house façades and a piece of the sky. Then a breeze moved the shadows, and the façades with the sky below began to waver. The trembling upper world in the dirty puddle—this image has never left me.

(Kracauer 1997: LI)
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The higher sphere mirrored and transformed in the lower—what could be a better image for Kracauer’s upending of the dogmatic vertical structure of high and low culture? It captures in a topographical image how the high/low divide is both obsolete and up to date. The name Kracauer gave to this experience which was to become his first literary project was “Film as the Discoverer of the Marvels of Everyday Life.” It is up for debate if there are marvels to discover in our negotiations with digital media and what realism could mean in the world of the virtual that is fast becoming second nature. Film as providing a global archive that redeems reality in its multiple temporal and spatial instantiations may be more pertinent than ever at a time when fragmentation and alienation have overtaken the media world in simulacral ways that threaten experience in qualitatively and quantitatively entirely new forms.

References


Further Readings

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