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Transcoding Kant: Kracauer's Weimar Marxism and After ¹

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Mike Wayne

Abstract

Kracauer's rehabilitation in the 1990s sidelined his Marxist framework of the middle-to-late Weimar era in favour of the then still dominant if decaying paradigms of post-structuralism and post-modernism. It was also silent on the relationship between Kant and Marxism in Kracauer's work. This essay addresses these weaknesses by arguing that Kracauer transcoded the structure of Kant's 'problematic' around reification into a Marxist framework in the middle-to-late Weimar period. The essay considers how Kracauer conceived the mass ornament (photography and film especially) as a site of reification and critical pedagogy. It explores his strategies of de-reification and their overlap with Walter Benjamin and the ruptures and continuities between the radical Weimar work and his later *Theory of Film*. The essay argues that the *Theory of Film* can be better understood as a transcoding of Kant's philosophy of the aesthetic in the third *Critique* into the film camera itself, although the Marxian framework of the Weimar period is now considerably attenuated.

Keywords: Adorno, Film, Kant, Kracauer, Photography, Reification.

¹ I would like to thank the three anonymous external reviewers and the *HM* editorial board for their constructive feedback on earlier drafts of this essay.

The Two Kracaucers

Siegfried Kracauer's reputation, such as it was in the Anglophone world of film and cultural studies, used to rest on his two major film works written in exile in America: *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947) and *Theory of Film* (1960). Yet the reception of Kracauer's work was decisively shaped by the rupture of exile, which seemingly cut both Kracauer and his readership off from an understanding of his life's work and the trajectory of his thinking. For it turned out there were 'two Kracaucers' and the American one could be read in a very different light when viewed from the perspective of the 'Weimar Kracauer' who inhabited a radically different intellectual-political milieu in Germany during the 1920s and early 1930s. The Kracauer who had settled in America in flight from the Nazis seemed to be a sociological reductionist and naïve realist, which made him decidedly out of favor once film studies was institutionalised in the 1960s and 1970s where auteur theory, structuralism and anti-realist theories followed rapidly on from one another (Petro 1991: 135). *From Caligari to Hitler* in particular, by far the most well know of the two film books, came to be viewed as very problematic in its reflectionist and teleological model that purported to map a relationship between the German 'psyche', the films of the Weimar period and the growing receptivity of the German 'nation' towards authoritarianism. *From Caligari to Hitler* cast a long shadow over Kracauer within academia, but gradually, with the aid of the journal *New German Critique* and later in the mid-1990s Thomas Y. Levin's English translation of *The Mass Ornament*, a collection of essays and articles from the Weimar

period, the perception of Kracauer changed. Between 1921 and 1933 Kracauer published approximately two thousand articles, reviews and essays, mostly in the newspaper where he worked as a journalist and commentator, the *Frankfurter Zeitung*.² These writings were, as Elsaesser noted, 'a revelation'.³ For they showed not only Kracauer's links with critical theory, but also suggested that he sketched out many of the ideas in the 1920s that were to be subsequently taken up and developed by Benjamin and Adorno who it turned out must have been influenced by Kracauer (or perhaps that Kracauer formed part of a triumvirate in dialogue with each other) to a degree which they themselves had not acknowledged. Restoring Kracauer's links to German critical theory also opened up the possibility of re-reading his American writings and discerning there more complexity and sophistication than hitherto.⁴

I want in this essay to explore the continuities and ruptures between the Kracauer of the Weimar period and the more philosophical and general account of film that Kracauer offers in his late work, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. One of the problems with the 1990s reassessment of Kracauer's work is that it was largely dominated by the postmodernist and post-structuralist paradigms.⁵ Although disintegrating these paradigms maintained their influence in the 1990s, with their motifs and concerns still in circulation and thus overdetermining, along with the continued hegemony of the French intelligentsia within the Anglophone world, Kracauer's new

² Hansen 2012, p.3.

³ Elsaesser 1987, p.68.

⁴ Petro 1991, 138.

⁵ Koss 1996.

reception.⁶ So Kracauer's interest in the fragment, in surfaces and in spectacle were seen to echo and anticipate key contemporary theorists such as Baudrillard, Foucault and Derrida.⁷ What was downplayed in this reception was how the essays of the Weimar period help us understand Kracauer's relationship to Marxism and to what extent that relationship continued in some attenuated and reconfigured form in the work of the American Kracauer. Or perhaps, as some have argued, Kracauer's engagement with Marxism was completely erased.

To make matters more difficult in assessing Kracauer's relationship to Marxism, Adorno's account of his friend and one time mentor seems to confirm Kracauer's distance from Marxism.

One looks in vain in the storehouse of 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.⁸

Unlike many others in the 1960s when he wrote these lines, Adorno had been very familiar with Kracauer's Weimar writings (and indeed encouraged the German edition of *The Mass Ornament* published in 1963) so this statement is uncharacteristically off-beam, as we shall see. But taking her cue from Adorno, Miriam Hansen is not alone in downplaying Kracauer's Marxist framework. 'Adorno rightly sensed

⁶ Petro 1991, pp.135-6.

⁷ Petro 1991 and Hansen 1992.

⁸ Adorno 1991, p.177.

that his friend's concept of material objects was not dominated by a Marxist theory of reification'.⁹ In his highly problematic assessment of his old friend's work, Adorno used a rather disreputable method of building a psychological profile of Kracauer and then reading his work off from that. According to Adorno, Kracauer was a 'man with no skin'. He had been flayed by a difficult childhood where he has been subjected to anti-semitism that would of course later grow to monstrous proportions under fascism.¹⁰ This left Kracauer constructing defensive barriers to protect himself and according to Adorno this included a certain resistance to commitments, including theoretical commitment. Hence there is in Kracauer's work a lack of rigour, a suspicion of systematicity, an over-valuation of the importance of the individual and a certain tendency towards adapting to situations that suggests conformism. Kracauer had a knack, says Adorno for 'successful adjustment'.¹¹ One of the problems with Adorno's assessment is that he makes no distinction between the Weimar Kracauer and the American Kracauer in exile. Could there in fact be a more radical disjuncture between the milieu of Weimar Germany and 1950s Cold War America? Is it not fanciful to assume the possibility of a seamless continuity between the two Kracauers? But the other major problem with Adorno's assessment is that it is, quite simply, substantively wrong, as I aim to show, on the question of Kracauer's work. For he did indeed have a theory of reification – especially in the Weimar period. However, to really appreciate Kracauer's Weimar Marxism we have understand how he used it to transcode the work of Kant into historical materialist

⁹ Hansen 2012, p.20.

¹⁰ Adorno 1991, p.161.

¹¹ Adorno 1991, p.172.

terms. Viewing Kracauer's social critique from this Kant-Marx nexus will also help us understand how the American Kracauer as the author of *A Theory of Film*, had not abandoned entirely, but rather reconfigured his critical methodology of the Weimar years. As we shall see, Kracauer's theory of reification was closely related to his engagement with photography and film, and one of things that does change in the work of the two Kracauers, is the assessment of these mass cultural mediums and their relationship to the problem of reification.

Transcoding Kant

Despite his highly critical assessment of Kracauer, Adorno acknowledged that it was Kracauer who was instrumental in his appreciation of Kant. For years, he spent Saturday afternoons reading *Critique of Pure Reason* with Kracauer, and it was he who 'made Kant come alive for me'. From Kracauer, Adorno learned not to search for systematic unity in Kant (or any other philosopher's work) but rather to read the work 'as a kind of coded text from which the historical situation of spirit could be read'.¹² In particular Adorno learned how the 'objective-ontological and subjective-idealist moments warred within it'.¹³ This 'war' would be played out in the critical procedures Kracauer, Adorno and Benjamin developed, with Kracauer and Benjamin opting for a historical materialist phenomenology, as we shall see. But while Adorno acknowledges the importance of

¹² Adorno 1991, p.160.

¹³ Adorno 1991, p.160.

Kracauer in his reception of Kant, it does not quite do justice to the influence of Kant within their work. For the contradictions of *The Critique of Pure Reason* were to be a model of the problems of critical reason within advanced capitalism – simultaneously imprisoned within the limits of a capitalist consciousness, and yet at the same time contradictory enough require in many instances only the merest of critical inflections to become a critique of reification rather than a reflector of it.

Yet the influence of Kant is often disavowed. Kant is even highly influential in as self-consciously a Hegelian book as Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*. There Lukács built on Marx's critique of commodity fetishism, where the relations between commodities in the market, for example their rising and falling prices, their availability or scarcity, their embrace of the masses or their exclusivity, acquires the appearance (not an illusion but an institutional reality within the ontologically stratified real) of an autonomous dynamic between commodities themselves and their universal means of exchange, money. The result is that the consciousness and will, the moral and political dimensions of our social being atrophy, becoming increasingly *contemplative*.¹⁴ When the commodity structure becomes universalized through out society (once labour-power has become a universal commodity) its dominance, Lukács argued, pushes the fetishism inherent in it, through-out all institutional arrangements and conscious life. This generalization of fetishism Lukács called reification. As is well know, this generalization was grasped by Lukács through his reading and

¹⁴ Lukács 1971, p.89.

appropriation of Max Weber's distinction between formal and substantive rationality. But this distinction in turn derives from Kant, especially *The Critique of Pure Reason*, which provides the model of the problem for developing a critical consciousness and practice under capitalism.

Firstly within the Kantian faculty of the understanding there is the contradiction between sense-perception (grounded in the empirical individual's sensuous experience) and the universe of empirical concepts, and behind them, the pure a priori categories, which organized sense-perception into meaningful and intelligible arrangements. This structure – already problematic for Kant - had degenerated in the course of bourgeois intellectual history into the empiricism of sense-perception on the one hand unable to deal with the conceptual mediations that can analyze social relations and the abstraction of universal concepts indifferent to the historical specificity of material life on the other. Its terminus was logical positivism. This contradiction within the faculty of the understanding was intimately connected with the contradiction *between* the faculty of the understanding and the faculty of reason. The latter as the expression of our species-being capacity for moral-political Ideas has been incapacitated by the social relations of production. This finds its symptomatic philosophical expression in Kant's work. Without Ideas that can animate reality according to a moral-political compass, material nature (the nature that we make) suffers from 'petrification' (a favourite metaphor of Kracauer's). Thus Kant's aesthetic turn in *Critique of Judgment* enters the Kantian philosophical architecture as a resource by which to reconnect reason with the faculty of the

understanding and turn the dichotomy within the understanding between abstraction and sense-percepts into praxis. The transcoding of the structure of the Kantian 'problematic' on reification into terms congruent with a Marxist framework brings what is *already symptomatically outlined* in Kant's philosophy *to a point of critical consciousness*. Furthermore it grounds the possibility of the consciousness in the historical material reality itself that needs changing.

That Kant was aware of and dissatisfied by the fate of moral-political reason within his philosophy seems to me evident enough from the opening of the third *Critique*. There he makes a devastating admission, one that the bourgeois tradition of analytic philosophy understandably passes over in silence. For there Kant writes of 'an immense gulf'¹⁵ between the faculties of the understanding and of reason, between cognitive judgments according to the visible nature of things and moral judgments according to the supersensible principles of 'the good'. The objects of theoretical philosophy, mapped out in *Critique of Pure Reason* are the '*concepts of nature*'¹⁶ which generates theoretical cognition governed by a priori principles immune to experience and the individual experiencing subject. Practical philosophy, which formed the basis of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, by contrast is governed by the concept of freedom, which negates the given determinateness implied by concepts of nature and 'gives rise to expansive principles for the determination of the will'.¹⁷ Practical philosophy is thus the domain of moral

¹⁵ Kant 1987, p.9.

¹⁶ Kant 1987, p.9.

¹⁷ Kant 1987, p.10

philosophy, because it is only when we can make choices, when freewill becomes a possibility, that the reflection on the moral principles for our practices becomes relevant. But as Kant notes, most practical activity is in fact governed by the a priori conceptual principles of nature (or the transcendental subject). So Kant makes a further distinction within practical activity between the *technically practical* and the *morally practical*.¹⁸ The technically practical comes under the domain of theoretical philosophy (essentially natural science) while the realm of morally practical action is hugely diminished and circumscribed on all sides by the realm of the technically practical. Reason appears to have little to do, it has little scope for 'legislation', when it comes to the domain of the technically practical. All it can do, as Kant puts it:

...with regard to theoretical cognition (of nature)...(given the familiarity with the laws that it has attained by means of the understanding) is to use given laws to infer consequences from them, which however remain always with nature.¹⁹

Thus the shrunken scope of Kant's moral reason stands exposed with courageous honesty and it is this that constitutes the central problem which the *Critique of Judgment* seeks to address, via the aesthetic. Kant's aesthetic turn, as a means of thinking through the conceptual blockages of this reified situation, set the pattern for critical German philosophy in the twentieth century.

¹⁸ Kant 1987, p.10.

¹⁹ Kant 1987, p.13.

For the Weimar Kracauer the division between technical rationality (or the technically practical in Kant) and reason (morally grounded practical action in Kant) was a historical contradiction as it was for Lukács. Under capitalism reason has been hijacked by technical rationality (what Kracauer called the *Ratio*) reducing reason to an empty formalism poorly mediated with the real nature of things and as indifferent to the self as the transcendental Kantian subject. Kracauer's back-story to the way contemporary technical rationality penetrates everyday life and mass media spectacles, is mapped out in his celebrated essay 'The Mass Ornament' (1927). During the early stages of bourgeois/capitalist production (the Enlightenment) reason gradually penetrates nature and breaks down the 'boundaries which nature has drawn' on changing the basis of social life.²⁰ Significantly, from the perspective of the prefigurative role that the aesthetic can play, Kracauer believes that the advance of reason is already latent in pre-modern narratives such as fairy tales with their wish-fulfillment for social justice to triumph over poverty, scarcity and cruelty.

There is a deep historical meaning in the fact that the tales of the Arabian Nights found their way to France during the Enlightenment and that reason in the 18th century recognized the reason of the folk tales as its own. In the early periods of history, pure nature was already superseded (*aufgehoben*) by the triumph of truth in the fairy tale.²¹

²⁰ Kracauer 1995, p.79.

²¹ Kracauer 1995, p. 80.

The aesthetic of the mass ornament, preserves the pre-figurative role it had within the fairy tales and ‘represents form-bursting reason in a purer way than those other principles that preserve man as an organic unity’.²² What a wonderful phrase that is: ‘form-bursting reason’, and how apposite to the cinema as we shall see, and to editing in particular, which disassembles and reassembles spatial and temporal relations and how they relate to material nature. Yet the promises of the Enlightenment to fulfill the utopian images of fairy tales went unrealized as capitalism more and more captured reason for its own purposes and turned it into technical rationality. This too finds its expression in the mass ornament. Taking the Tiller Girls as his example, Kracauer associated the abstract formal rationality of *Ratio* with ‘linearity’ as opposed to the unity of genuine reason – thus once more echoing the distinction between the mechanical sequencing of matter in Kant’s faculty of the understanding and the moral consciousness of the world to be found in the faculty of reason:

The more the coherence of the figure is relinquished in favour of mere linearity, the more distant it becomes from the immanent consciousness of those constituting it.²³

The masses on whom the system is based are the servants of the system not its masters. Linearity, the mechanical and mathematical organization of matter dispels consciousness from the arrangement in favor of the abstract *Ratio*, thus leaving reason marginalized from

²² Kracauer 1995, p.83.

²³ Kracauer 1995, p.77.

material reality just as it was for Kant. Even prior to reading Marx around the mid-1920s, Kracauer grounded the Kantian realm of reason in collective practice rather than individual conscience in 'The Group as the Bearer of Ideas' (1922). Ideas, Kracauer argues, invoking the Kantian realm of moral reason, exist in a state of 'should-being', longing to realize themselves in a material reality that resists transformation. Ideas of moral (or political) reason long to do more than merely, as Kant lamented in the third *Critique*, 'infer consequences' from the laws of material nature. Although the 'individual does generate and proclaim the idea...it is the group that bears it and makes sure it is realized'.²⁴ This collective focus derives from Kracauer's reading of Kant and points to another point of possible transcoding between Kant and Marx. For Kant's transcendental subject and moral reason, whatever else can be said about them, are precisely attempts to push philosophy beyond the implicit individualism of empiricism and explicit moral-individualism of bourgeois homo-economicus. Implicitly the collective struggle against reification, which Kracauer evokes below is already acquired from Kant:

It is always in periods of highest intensity that the soul goes beyond the merely – extant, beyond what is rule-governed and necessary, and becomes part of the realm of freedom. But its wings cannot bear it aloft very long and, exhausted, it tumbles down toward reality...²⁵

²⁴ Kracauer 1995, p.144.

²⁵ Kracauer 1995, p.166.

Perhaps Kracauer had in mind here the 1917 Russian revolution, or other cases when the promises of revolutionary change, the realm of freedom, settled for something less than the Ideas originally enunciated. In so doing, the Idea becomes 'pure decoration', a façade to disguise the 'partly rotten interior' with which power and extant reality have diverged from the Idea without admitting it. The Idea has 'been engulfed, raped, and abused by reality instead of transforming that reality according to its terms'.²⁶ Crucially, Ideas do not manifest themselves on the surface of material phenomena (and in their linear spatial-temporal relations), for material phenomena are subsumed under the abstraction of universal concepts. In this guise material phenomena, under the spell of *Ratio*, is enveloped in a new kind of nature – only superficially banished by abstract reason – so that mythology reasserts its power over man. 'In spite of the rationality of the mass pattern, such patterns simultaneously give rise to the natural in its impenetrability'.²⁷ However, just because the 'mass ornament is the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires'²⁸ did not mean for Kracauer that the mass ornament could be wholly dismissed, anymore than Kant's partial internalization of bourgeois ideology could. On the contrary, mass culture was the very site where a critical pedagogy had to be launched.

²⁶ Kracauer 1995, p.167.

²⁷ Kracauer 1995, 84.

²⁸ Kracauer 1995, p.79.

Mass Culture and Pedagogy

In his posthumously published book *History: the last things before the last*, Kracauer writes in Kantian fashion that institutionalization of an Idea inevitably means that 'clouds of dust gather about it'.²⁹ Institutionalisation is equivalent to the universe of dominant concepts whose abstractness does (ideologically motivated) disservice to the Ideas they have appropriated. Thus Kracauer declares that he has always been interested in ferreting around amongst the rubbish of history, those things that have been marginalized and overlooked, that might speak more authentically about an epoch than the dominant voices, the legitimated cultural modes and the prevailing concepts of the time might. Here at least there is a strong continuity between the late and early Kracauer. 'The Mass Ornament' opens with what amounts to a foundational statement on the rationale for the study of popular culture in the twentieth century:

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 judgment about itself.³⁰

It is only the powerful who are in a position to make such judgments that silence and erase those voices that have been robbed of a say. Yet their *presence* and a more profound account of an epoch may be

²⁹ Kracauer 1969, p.7.

³⁰ Kracauer 1995, p.75.

found paradoxically in the apparently superficial mass cultural expressions of the day. 'The fundamental substance of an epoch' says Kracauer, 'and its unheeded impulses illuminate each other reciprocally'.³¹ If for the later Kracauer the unheeded fragment becomes uncoupled from the 'fundamental substance of an epoch' here at least they are dialectically related and construct something like a totality, although a provisional one closer to that imagined by Benjamin and Adorno, than Lukács.

Kracauer articulates a powerful democratic interest in the culture of the masses and a healthy skepticism of the pretensions of 'art'. He is scathing of the intellectual class who flee the mass ornament and prefer 'art' that is largely cut off from the dynamics of contemporary reality. He is also dismissive of any attempts to give film or photography cultural pretensions by association with the legitimate arts of theatre or painting. Such strategies are really aimed at prising the new media out of the material nature of industrial modernity, which precisely gives them their political and pedagogic potential. 'It would be well worth the effort to expose the close ties between the prevailing social order and artistic photography' remarks the Weimar Kracauer.³² Kracauer is able to cross the lines of cultural demarcation separating the intelligentsia from the culture of the masses in a way that makes him close to Benjamin and Brecht and which distinguishes him from Adorno's mandarin distance from the popular. Hansen suggests that this is evident in Kracauer willingness to shift to the first-person when discussing the reception of the mass

³¹ Kracauer 1995, p.75.

³² Kracauer 1995, p.53.

media, either the singular or plural first person, implicating himself in the reception of mass culture in a way that Adorno could not contemplate.³³ Adorno recognized Kracauer's distinctive methodology but denied it the originality it deserved, as a precursor to ethnographic participant-observation in the field of cultural studies. Instead, he notes rather sourly: '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'.³⁴

What artistic attempts to boost the cultural legitimacy of the mass culture conceal is what is most important to learn: the essential emptiness of life under capitalism. The internalization of the logic of commodification within mass culture, both empties the mass ornament of an older connection to human feeling, psychology and the individual subject, and in so embodying reification provides an aesthetic experience of the core socio-economic conditions that predominate in contemporary society.

When Kracauer uses one element of the mass ornament or spectacle (photography) as a metaphor to critique the social conditions which the spectacle as a whole represents, he demonstrates its potential political and educational value:

The ornament resembles *aerial photographs* of landscapes and cities in that it does not emerge out of the interior of the given conditions but rather appears above them.³⁵

³³ Hansen 1991, pp.72-3.

³⁴ Adorno 1991, p.166.

³⁵ Kracauer 1995, p.77.

Mass culture as a pedagogic vehicle for critiquing the very reified conditions it expresses: this sums up Kracauer's highly dialectical reading of the situation. Here mass culture, as the embodiment of the *Ratio*, takes up the same position as the transcendental subject in Kracauer's critical reading of Kant. The subsumption of empirical experience to a rigid and abstract transcendental subject that is external to experience and dominates the individual subject from 'above', is graphically translated into this image of the aerial photograph.

Kracauer's reading of the mass ornament means he reinterprets the by then popular concept of 'distraction' as a description of mass culture, dialectically. While in one important sense it is 'distraction' in the negative sense (diversion, compensation) the mass spectacle is also the place where:

...the audience encounters itself; its own reality is revealed in the fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions. Were this reality to remain hidden from the viewers, they could neither attack nor change it: its disclosure in distraction is therefore of *moral* significance.³⁶

This from the 1926 article 'Cult of Distraction' summarises Kracauer's key concerns: the potential for the audience to encounter itself in the distinct aesthetic form which bears the trace of their presence, their reality and their alienation, and from that to draw

³⁶ Kracauer 1995, p.326.

moral-political conclusions in the name of reason against the abstract *Ratio*. The 'Cult of Distraction' essay focuses on the Berlin picture palaces which 'raise distraction to the level of culture: they are aimed at the *masses*'.³⁷ Kracauer finds in the spectacle the quantitative presence of the working class in Berlin and their demand to be culturally satisfied that has eclipsed the traditional middle class culture. The older sites of middle class dominance, such as the churches are displaced by the new sites of worship just as the churches are also displaced by the new commodified urban spaces such as the hotel lobby. In his essay 'The Hotel Lobby' Kracauer in Kantian fashion juxtaposes the moral and spiritual collectivity of the House of God with the hotel lobby - that transit station for atomized beings going about their private lives and desires. The House of God for Kracauer is structured around a *tension* between its spiritual yearnings and residual collectivity and the material reality of modern capitalism, whereas the space of the hotel lobby has dissolved all tension into an indifferent relaxation that obscures the fundamental exploitation on which the system based:

In tasteful lounge chairs a civilization intent on rationalization comes to an end, whereas the decorations of the church pews are born from the tension that accords them a revelatory meaning.³⁸

This invocation of the material object (in a work written between 1922-25) as potentially releasing a revelatory meaning is strikingly

³⁷ Kracauer 1995, p.324.

³⁸ Kracauer 1995, p.178.

similar to Benjamin's thinking, although whether this reflects Kracauer's influence on Benjamin or Benjamin's influence on Kracauer, is difficult to say.

By 1926, with the urban masses now taking centre stage in his thinking, Kracauer explores the space of the Berlin picture palaces. This too is a commodified space, like the hotel lobby, but unlike the hotel lobby, populated by its bourgeois customers, the picture palaces sustain that same *tension* between utopian longing and material reality that Kracauer spied in the house of worship. Here one pole of the tension lies in the working day of the workers 'which fills their day fully without making it fulfilling'.³⁹ This is matched by an aesthetic which is equally frenetic and shaped by similar imperatives: 'The form of free-time busy-ness necessarily corresponds to the form of business'.⁴⁰ But here Kracauer detects a fragility in the aesthetic, a sense that the emptiness of the forms and the reality they are trying to conceal, is ever present: 'Like *life buoys*, the refractions of the spotlights and the musical accompaniment keep the spectator above water'.⁴¹ Although the philosophical framework is radical and coherent the argument is highly impressionistic and somewhat poetic. There is a tension and potential weakness between what the framework insists is the potentiality of distraction and the sense that the overwhelming tendency of the spectacle obeys the interests of capital. Berlin is the 'home of the masses – who so easily allow themselves to be stupefied only because they are so close to the

³⁹ Kracauer 1995, p.325.

⁴⁰ Kracauer 1995, p.325.

⁴¹ Kracauer 1995, p.326.

truth'.⁴² Stupification and revelation seem jammed together in a startling juxtaposition but it is hard to see in concrete terms how the passage from one to the other can be achieved. In part this is a gap between the philosophical framework and practical film criticism. For when Kracauer comes to view the empirical reality of German cinema, just two years later in his essay 'Film 1928' the sense of potentiality and optimism that 'someday all this will suddenly burst apart'⁴³ has evaporated entirely. German cinema is seen as shoddy, poorly executed, contemptuous of its audience, reprehensible in its evasiveness, escapism and 'avoidance manoeuvres'.⁴⁴ Although film and photography may be emblematic of a new form of consciousness able to round on the alienation which it expresses, like Benjamin, Kracauer finds this potential realized less in empirical film examples than in his own modes of decoding strategies – and it is this which closes the gap between potentiality and actuality.

Aesthetic Strategies of De-reification

In his 1928 review of Walter Benjamin's recently published books, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and *One Way Street*, Kracauer identifies Benjamin's strategies of de-reification. Against the Kantian transcendentalism of the first *Critique* with its subsumption of the particular (sense-impressions) under the universal, Benjamin pursues a 'monadological' approach that is strikingly similar to Kracauer's materialist phenomenology. Benjamin's approach (and by

⁴² Kracauer 1995, p.328.

⁴³ Kracauer 1995, p.327.

⁴⁴ Kracauer 1995, p.312.

implication Kracauer's) is 'the antithesis of the philosophical system, which wants to secure its grasp of the world by means of universal concepts, and the antithesis of abstract generalization as a whole'.⁴⁵ Yet if Benjamin and Kracauer are critical of Kant's transcendental subject from the first *Critique*, they both use the overall *structure* of his problematic in which the division between objective material reality and moral-political reason is addressed via the mediating role of the aesthetic. Even within the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant acknowledges the limits of the faculty of understanding, with its linear sequencing of sense impressions (synthetic judgments) subsumed under logical relations (a priori synthetic judgments). Besides the painful fissure between understanding and reason, another site where Kant's misgivings emerge is in the distinction between phenomena and noumena, the latter functioning as a rebuke to the limitations of Kant's own empiricist philosophical structure. Of course this distinction anticipates Marx's later distinction between phenomenal forms, critiqued as suffering from an extremely restricted cognitive reach, and real relations. Yet Kant also flips the critique around and reminding reason of its tendency towards idealism⁴⁶ identifies reason and rationality as a problem when it becomes too uncoupled from the experiential life of the subject. Marx too, it should be remembered, started *Capital* with a thing perceptible to the senses: the commodity. With the degeneration of neo-Kantianism into logical positivism, both Kracauer and Benjamin were drawn to a materialist phenomenology that would recover

⁴⁵ Kracauer 1995, p.259.

⁴⁶ Kant 1996, p.50/B9.

experience from the abstractions of theory and the thinness of the merely empirical. As even Adorno noted:

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.⁴⁷

If the embryonic outlines of a future logical positivism are retrospectively discernable in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, the origin of the dialectical image, where the experiential is mediated with a critical philosophy that illuminates its social conditions, may equally be discerned in the *Critique of Judgment*. Kant's aesthetic turn is an attempt to link the empirical and experiential to that which transcends the empirical and the experiential (the noumenal essence of things) and that in turn requires a mediating subject of moral reason to mobilize principles and Ideas (or critical theory) to represent supersensible realities. The experiential/empirical, the noumenal/real essences and a critical framework mobilized by the moral-political subject are the three points of a triangle that constitutes Kracauer and Benjamin's materialist phenomenology. Quite explicitly, Kant's methodological shift in the third *Critique* is the aesthetic strategy of metaphor (what will become the dialectical image), which he calls reflective judgment:

⁴⁷ Adorno 1991, p.163.

‘To reflect...is to hold given presentations up to, and compare them with, either other presentations or one’s cognitive power [itself], in reference to a concept that this [comparison] makes possible.’⁴⁸

At a stroke Kant here opens up a legitimate space for a critical subjectivity that suspends the reified power of universal concepts and makes it possible, through analogy or metaphor to *think* a concept through comparison that it was not possible to think before, under the model mapped out by the faculty of the understanding in the first *Critique*.

Similarly, Kracauer and Benjamin turn their critical gaze against the transcendental subject of the understanding and evoke instead a radically reconfigured Kantian subject of political-moral reason – the subject of Ideas which are a ‘discontinuous multiplicity’ to be found in ‘the murky medium of history’.⁴⁹ The murky medium of history must be recovered from the phenomenal world as it is presented according to the faculty of the understanding whose combination of empirical immediacy and abstract universalization reveals virtually nothing of the essentials of social life, but is instead a model of ideological thought. As Kracauer puts it: ‘he who faces the world in its immediacy is presented with a figure that he must smash in order to reach the essentials’.⁵⁰ The aesthetic is the methodology of ‘smashing’ and allegorical reassembling. In ‘The Hotel Lobby’ the reassembling seems to lean towards a traditional aesthetic of unity.

⁴⁸ Kant 1987, p.400.

⁴⁹ Kracauer 1995, p.259.

⁵⁰ Kracauer 1995, p.260.

The more life is submerged, the more it needs the artwork, which unseals its withdrawnness and puts its pieces back in place in such a way that these, which were lying strewn about, become organized in a meaningful way. The unity of the aesthetic construct, the manner in which it distributes the emphases and consolidates the event, gives a voice to the inexpressive world, gives meaning to the themes broached within it. ⁵¹

After his Marxian turn however the reassembling that is envisaged does not aspire to aesthetic unity: ‘the façade must be torn down, and form cut to pieces’. ⁵² Film provided the philosophical justification for this aesthetic as Walter Benjamin was to later suggest in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’:

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling. ⁵³

Here Benjamin stresses the potentialities of the medium as a productive cognitive augmentation of the human eye which in

⁵¹ Kracauer 1995, p.173.

⁵² Kracauer 1995, p. 261.

⁵³ Benjamin 1999a, p.229.

transforming our relations to material nature is at the same time registering new social meanings, relations and possibilities slumbering within that material nature but unrecognized because we are 'locked up hopelessly' within it. Film explodes this reified world, turning it into 'ruins and debris', which is to say montage elements that can be reconfigured dialectically for cognitive travelling.

The terms 'ruins' and 'debris' reminds us that for Benjamin the inert qualities which reified material nature acquires under capitalism can be counteracted when that material nature breaks down in some way. A key term through which we can understand Benjamin's conception of the dialectical image is *decomposition*. This is a double death: the death which the commodity brings to the living and the potential to in turn bring the living back to a more authentic life via the death of the commodity. Decomposition as death in this double sense and as a methodology are linked for example in Benjamin's theory of the collector. The collector lovingly brings back obsolescent commodities whose original uses and exchange values have died, reconstructing their history as a 'magic encyclopedia' that traces the 'fate of his object'.⁵⁴ (Benjamin 1999a: 62). The collector has an intense personal relationship with the commodity ambiguously different from the way the commodity interpellates the subject when the commodity is in its full glory as the 'prodigies' of their day⁵⁵ Death makes the commodity more receptive to the living, its powers over the living weaken with its historical displacement into the collector's arrangement of artifacts. Benjamin quotes Marx in the

⁵⁴ Benjamin 1999a, p.62.

⁵⁵ Benjamin 1999b, p.203.

Convolute on The Collector in *The Arcades Project*: 'I can, in practice, relate myself humanly to an object only if the object relates itself humanly to man'.⁵⁶ The possibility of a human relationship (of the kind found today through Freecycle and using second hand shops) opens up only with the obsolescence of the commodity. At that point the object becomes meaningful, which is to say, through decomposition, the object from history becomes allegorical. As Benjamin cryptically puts it in *The Arcades Project*: 'Broken-down matter: the elevation of the commodity to the status of allegory'.⁵⁷ The collector and the allegorist share an interest in recovering meaning from history and this means disrupting the positivist cataloguing of history as a linear sequence of events. Their *modus operandi* is close to Proust's *mémoire involuntaire*, where a 'productive disorder'⁵⁸ predominates. Here memory plays the central role in recovering Ideas from the 'murky medium of history'.

All these quintessentially Benjaminian themes around death, montage, the commodity, memory and history are to be found in Kracauer's brilliant 1927 essay 'Photography'. The essay begins with a juxtaposition, or what Benjamin would call, a constellation, between two photographs. One is a contemporary photograph of an unnamed film star, a public property who everyone 'knows' and the other is from the personal family album, a picture of 'grandmother' taken in 1864, about whom family members know rather little, except for a few scraps of information and rumor. Unlike the film star who is alive, the body of the grandmother, because it has no indexical

⁵⁶ Benjamin 1999b, p.209.

⁵⁷ Benjamin 1999b, p.207.

⁵⁸ Benjamin 1999b, p.211.

relation to a living body, seems to dematerialize leaving only something of a museum piece – a mannequin in a glass, labeled, telling the viewer ‘how women dressed back then: chignons, cinched waists, crinolines, and Zouave jackets’.⁵⁹ The fashions of the time captured in the photo, now dated, suddenly seem funny to the grandchildren whom Kracauer here introduces as amused consumers of this ‘relic’ from 1864. Interestingly, although Kracauer makes no further reference to it, the Zouave jacket was modeled on the uniform of the French colonial army partly composed of Berber tribes recruited during the annexation of Algiers by France in 1830. It is not then just the ‘cultural treasures’ of the past that come down to us with an underside dripping in blood and barbarism, as Benjamin noted⁶⁰ but the frivolous and transient products of mass culture, such as fashion.

Although Kracauer ignores the colonial dimension, he notes the theme of death and obsolescence that still ‘protrudes into our own time like a mansion from earlier days that is destined for destruction because the city centre has been moved to another part of town’.⁶¹ The children laugh, but they also ‘shudder’ in the presence of this double death (of the grandmother and of the fashionable commodities no longer fashionable). The contemporary image of the film star is by contrast bolstered in its apparently self-sufficient meaning by the fact that the film diva herself is still alive – her ‘corporeal reality’⁶² conceals the hollowness that Kracauer wants us

⁵⁹ Kracauer 1995, p.48.

⁶⁰ Benjamin 1999a, p.248.

⁶¹ Kracauer 1995, p.55

⁶² Kracauer 1995, p.54.

to confront via the 1864 photograph. 'The old photograph has been emptied of the life whose physical presence overlay its merely spatial configuration'.⁶³ In so doing the public photograph is revealed to be enshrouded in the secrets of private property while the private photograph reveals something interesting about our historical condition.

This phenomenological materialist constellation of photographs bursts out of the historicism which Kracauer sees photography ordinarily buttressing. Historicism of the kind advocated by Dilthey, expresses the logic of capital and understands events according to a linear succession of causes and effects. Historicists believe that 'they can grasp historical reality by reconstructing the course of events in their temporal succession without any gaps'.⁶⁴ Photography provides the spatial equivalent of this temporal conception, while the moving image equivalent would 'be a giant film depicting the temporality of interconnected events from every vantage point'.⁶⁵ Confronted with this mechanical conception of historical time in which events are only externally related according to immediate cause-effect relations, Kracauer anticipates Benjamin's strategy of trying to 'blast open the continuum of history'⁶⁶ with its myth of progress. The 1864 photograph is used to trigger what Kracauer calls 'memory images' in much the same way that Benjamin looked to Proust's *mémoire involuntaire* to disrupt official history based on empirical recording and cataloguing. 'Photography grasps what is given as a spatial (or

⁶³ Kracauer 1995, p.54-5.

⁶⁴ Kracauer 1995, p.49.

⁶⁵ Kracauer 1995, p.50.

⁶⁶ Benjamin, 1999a, p.254.

temporal) continuum; memory images retain what is given only insofar as it has significance'.⁶⁷ Yet it is through photography that photography can be made to speak, to unseal its muteness through memory images that are premised not on an ambition of empirical completeness but on 'a jumble that consists partly of garbage'.⁶⁸ Once again *decomposition* recommends itself as a way of counteracting the meaninglessness of mute nature and recovering a real history buried in the photographic image 'as if under a layer of snow'.⁶⁹

Unaided by a critical philosophy that can reconstruct what the photograph conceals, photography will follow 'natural necessity' which is one reason perhaps why fantasy genres, going back to Kracauer's interest in fairy tales, has long had an appeal to Marxists. 'In order for history to present itself, the mere surface coherence offered by photography must be destroyed'.⁷⁰ Here it is decomposition which counter-attacks photography as 'a secretion of the capitalist mode of production'.⁷¹ Thus the grandmother's dress achieves 'the beauty of a ruin'.⁷² Recently outdated it is caught between still wanting to make a claim on us in terms of its newness and the fact that it is effectively cast aside by the 'march' of history. Disrupting that linear march Kracauer's juxtaposition works to expose the vacuousness and emptiness of the commodity world we

⁶⁷ Kracauer 1995, p.50.

⁶⁸ Kracauer 1995, p. 51.

⁶⁹ Kracauer 1995, p.51.

⁷⁰ Kracauer 1995, p. 52.

⁷¹ Kracauer 1995, p.61.

⁷² Kracauer 1995, p. 55.

have surrounded ourselves with: 'Those things once clung to us like our skin, and this is how our property still clings to us today'.⁷³

Rather than having an uncritical investment in the 'benignness of things', as Adorno thought⁷⁴ Kracauer argues that these are things whose depersonalization forces us to take a lesson in the indifference of the commodity to human life, but it is a lesson we can only be receptive to when the human figure is displaced by death. Death drives a wedge between the image and that which it resembles and in effect opens the image up to a genuine historical consciousness. Death/displacement hollows out the unity and linearity of the image: 'The *contiguity* of these images' says Kracauer, again evoking Kant's sequential ordering of sense-percepts under abstractions, 'systematically excludes their contextual framework available to consciousness'.⁷⁵ Thus death and displacement is in a dialectical relationship with a genuine living historical consciousness at the point of reception, and this again suggests how wrong Adorno was in arguing that dialectical thought for Kracauer 'never suited his temperament'.⁷⁶ Conversely the photographs that the new mass media mobilize is 'a sign of the *fear of death*' which is dialectically related to a fear of a genuine life beyond reification:

In the illustrated magazines the world has become a photographable present, and the photographed present

⁷³ Kracauer 1995, p. 56.

⁷⁴ Adorno 1991, p.177.

⁷⁵ Kracauer 1995, p. 58.

⁷⁶ Adorno 1991, p. 165.

has been eternalized. Seemingly ripped from the clutch of death, in reality it has succumbed to it.⁷⁷

Just as the proletariat are both commodity and the potential destroyer of commodity society, so mass culture is both the production of commodity consciousness and the potential place where a commodified consciousness can see this reification at work and work against it. Kracauer extended Lukács' analysis into the sphere of the new industrial culture that Lukács consigned only to the realm of reification and in so doing, required a very different philosophy of the aesthetic. The engagement with mass culture as the dialectical staging ground for both reification and its critique was for Kracauer 'the *go-for broke game* of history'.⁷⁸ It was to be a game that the left decisively lost with the rise of the Nazis and the death of the Weimar Republic.

Theory of Film: continuities and ruptures

Miriam Hansen has reconstructed the process of production of *Theory of Film* (repressed in the finished product) noting its long genesis from draft outlines written as far back as 1940 where Kracauer was still strongly influenced by the radical Weimar culture of the 1920s and 1930s, to the finished product completed during the 1950s, when Kracauer's transformation into a liberal humanist conforming to the cold-war American scene was seemingly complete.⁷⁹ Yet traces of the earlier Kracauer still remain here and

⁷⁷ Kracauer 1995, p.59.

⁷⁸ Kracauer 1995, p.61.

⁷⁹ Hansen 1993.

there in *Theory of Film: the redemption of physical reality*, and not only in the subtitle of the book which indicates that reality *needs* to be de-reified or redeemed. They burst out of the page in passages that seem a world away from the overall de-politicised framework and empirical methodology. For example, in the references to Proust and more surprisingly to Benjamin, the flaneur and ‘the streets’ of modernity – all look back, or seem to look back to the radical culture of the 1920s and early 1930s.

However Inka Mülder-Bach argues that the appearance of continuities between the Weimar and American Kracauer is deceptive:

figures of speech, motifs, and images – are preserved, but the structure in which they are embedded has changed. They alter their positions, which become elements of completely different theoretical moves.⁸⁰

Mülder-Bach reads Kracauer as reversing his earlier critique of photography as the imagistic equivalent of historicism and instead he now celebrates its apparent bracketing of subjectivity in the name of a frozen objectivity divorced from the subject. This combined with the eclipse of any critique of abstract rationalism in the later writings and his apparent fetishism of the fragment or what Mülder-Bach calls the ‘*totalization of the periphery*’⁸¹ in contrast to the dialectic between the inconspicuous and marginalized fragment

⁸⁰ Mülder-Bach 1991, p.153.

⁸¹ Mülder-Bach 1991, p.152.

and its relationship to the totality – the ‘fundamental substance of the epoch’ as he put it in ‘The Mass Ornament’ – would seem to confirm that a chasm exists between the two Kracaues. Broadly I think Mülder-Bach is right to stress a disjuncture, but nevertheless, some genuine continuities remain and a little more nuance is required. Remembering Kracauer’s relationship to the Kantian problematic might also aid us here.

We may recall that Kracauer did in fact make the displacement of subjectivity part of his critical method in the ‘Photography’ essay. Although that essay is ‘inseparably bound to the transformative powers of subjectivity’⁸² those powers could only be generated via the displacement of the subject *within the image* (the film star, the grandmother). There are thus two models of the subject that Kracauer is working with: a bourgeois model of the subject that puts the subject at the centre of things to the detriment of history and material structures and processes and a critical subject alive to historical materialism. We have seen that Kracauer consistently attacked any attempt to prise both photography and film out of their embeddedness in industrial modernity by associating them with ‘legitimate’ cultural practices such as painting and theatre. For this reason Kracauer dismisses those elements of the architecture of the Berlin picture palaces that give film high cultural pretensions as ‘if designed to accommodate works of eternal significance’.⁸³ In *Theory of Film* Kracauer continues to make the same argument against the work of Moholy-Nagy and Mary Ann Dorr for example,

⁸² Mülder-Bach 1991, p.142.

⁸³ Kracauer 1995, p. 327.

where the 'expressive artist' pushes photography back towards painting.⁸⁴

However, if one reads *Theory of Film* either as a complete rupture from the Weimar Kracauer or without any knowledge of the Weimar writings, then it would be easy to think that Kracauer's polemic against bourgeois subjectivity has been turned into a polemic on behalf of a naïve theory of realism (the expression of bourgeois materialism rather than bourgeois subjectivism). Thus Kracauer's critique of artistic over-composition could be read as a hymn to the mechanical objectivity of the camera which should be left to 'catch reality in its flux' as he put it.⁸⁵ Yet at one level Kracauer very clearly rejects such a model of realism:

Actually, there is no mirror at all. Photographs do not just copy nature but metamorphose it by transferring three-dimensional phenomena to the plane, severing their ties with the surroundings, and substituting black, gray, and white for the given color schemes (Kracauer 1997: 15).

Kracauer was a very 'curious realist' as Adorno rightly noted. The idea of the camera as intrinsically about the morphing of matter, as a matter-morpher, is something I would like to elaborate on. It would seem to suggest a position quite close – if also stripped of the radical critical framework – of the Weimar years and Benjamin's position that with allegory, history (and nature) decays into images and thus

⁸⁴ Kracauer 1997, p.19.

⁸⁵ Kracauer 1997, p.19.

become subjectively appropriable once more. With the camera, reality is de or recomposed into images which can then acquire allegorical meaning. Yet Kracauer's position it must be admitted remains undeveloped and very ambiguous. The general context of his discussion of photography is one that tries to establish what kind of subjective disposition the image producer ought to have vis-à-vis the camera given the latter's own essential characteristics and qualities. The camera he suggests has certain built-in 'affinities' with aspects of reality that give it a materialist orientation. For example it has an affinity towards 'unstaged reality' which does not at all mean that Kracauer believes that film is or ought to be unstaged, but rather that within that process of staging there will also be a dynamic that testifies to the independence of material nature from our shaping activity. Linked with the unstaged dimension within the staged, is the camera's sensitivity to the fortuitous, the random and the accidental – all those contingent dimensions of independent material nature that cannot be predicted. This then links with a third characteristic, that of incompleteness, the fragmentary and open-ended nature of the reality it reproduces. Finally the photographic is marked by a certain indeterminateness in terms of its meaning – and here we can see an example of how Kracauer might be read in relation to a post-structuralist notion of polysemy.

⁸⁶ It perhaps ought to be noted that Kracauer's prescriptions here are also echoed to some degree by Adorno in his *later* essay 'Film Transparencies', but then we have already seen that his assessment of Kracauer was not Adorno's finest hour.

⁸⁶ Kracauer 1997, pp.18-20.

We may get a better sense of where Kracauer is coming from if we understand his discussion of the camera and its objectively structuring characteristics which turn out to have some of the characteristics often associated with subjectivity (the accidental, the incomplete, the indeterminate) if we see the whole discussion as a transposition of Kant's transcendental subject. For Kant, as we have seen, the transcendental subject of the first *Critique* is an objective structure independent of the empirical individual and providing the conditions for their sense-perceiving activity. The camera may thus be seen as something like the Kantian transcendental subject, its social-technical basis, derived from industrial modernity resists excessive artistic over-composition that tries to pull 'camera-reality' back to painting. Yet at the same time the camera is *not* associated with the kind of reified objectivity that Kracauer's Weimar self once ascribed to it as the metaphorical realization or material embodiment of an abstract universalism that mimics the transcendental subject of the first *Critique*. Instead he now seems to give the photographic image some of the qualities that he once suggested could only be generated by a subjective re-appropriation of photography by the radical critic adopting de-reifying strategies that could break down the false immediacy of the image. In short he is modifying the Kantian transcendental subject of the first *Critique* by giving it (the camera) features that seem to be *objectively subjective*. Kracauer's trajectory thus parallels Kant's own aesthetic turn, where in the third *Critique* Kant explores the possibility of an interpenetration between the objective and the subjective that modifies both, de-reifying the transcendental subject and socializing the individual subject by introducing culture and the aesthetic.

If the Weimar Kracauer grounded his critical practice in the theoretical potentialities of industrial mass culture, there was nevertheless, as we have seen, a gap between that potentiality and the actual practice of mass culture, as Kracauer's disillusioned essay 'Film 1928' suggested. The American Kracauer then seems to reverse the terms of the problem by now grounding in a much more detailed way, the characteristics of decomposition more readily *within* the medium of the image itself rather than the critical discourse or interpretation, but at the risk of severely attenuating the radical philosophical framework which the critic brings. Nevertheless this objectively subjective quality of the photographic image, or what Kant called the 'subjectively universal' in aesthetic judgment ⁸⁷ may be rephrased as nothing more than saying that the camera is fundamentally about perception and meaning, but perception and meaning is not to be understood here as subjective in the sense of the empirical individual, but instead it is meaning and perception that is social and cultural in its implications and origins.

Here we must return in more detail to Kant because in essence the passage from the first to the third *Critique* is, as I have indicated, precisely a search for an aspect of the transcendental subject that operates somewhere between the reified universal of nature as given, the abstract principles of moral reason where free will is posited but unrealized and unrealizable, and the subjective, empirical and experiential world of the individual subject. Kant finds this aspect of the transcendental subject in the aesthetic, a

⁸⁷ Kant 1987, p.89.

mediating or middle ground judgment between the dualities of Kant's philosophical architecture. In the 'Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment' in the third *Critique* Kant asks how an aesthetic judgment, which involves subjective play can also have characteristics associated with objective concepts (of either the understanding or reason) which 'demand' agreement? His answer effectively is that the aesthetic is a mode of judgment that is both objective and subjective, but the meaning of each term changes when brought together.

A judgment of taste is not based on *determinate* concepts...A Judgment of taste is indeed based on a concept, but on an *indeterminate* one (namely, that of the supersensible substrate of appearances).⁸⁸

The aesthetic then has certain qualities that lift it beyond the merely private and subjective assertion of judgment and insofar as that is true it is based on a concept. But this concept is not a determinate one of the kind that governs the faculty of the understanding where cognition is shadowed by reification. The concept is an indeterminate one, not bound by empirical proofs yet still open to inter-subjective assessment and re-assessment. Moreover the aesthetic judgment is based, like moral reason, on the supersensible substrate that underpins appearances. Kant is here referring explicitly to the supersensible substrate of humanity where this power for aesthetic judgment resides. But we can easily extend the concept of the supersensible substrate out towards the world

⁸⁸ Kant 1987, p.213.

around us, given that for Kant the noumenal dimension includes both that which is within us and that which is outside us, i.e. that which underpins the world of appearances that do come to our sense apparatus for cognitive judgment in the faculty of the understanding. Thus we have the basis in Kant for thinking of the aesthetic in a way that became common within 20th century Marxist cultural theory: namely as a critical resource within a reified society. To be sure I am constructing a genealogy that is only tacitly and rarely self-consciously articulated in the work of Kracauer himself, but so foundational is Kant for him (as for Adorno) that we cannot really understand the play of his thought and development without shading in the great dramatic struggle against reification that Kant himself undertook.

In Kracauer's late work the qualities of the aesthetic are lodged within the camera itself and not merely the philosophical framework of the critic. It is in this sense that the camera is matter-morphing, it has a social-technical built-in predisposition to allegorise in the Benjaminian sense. One example of the way camera-reality is subjectively universal is the way it can intervene and re-shape our unconscious interaction with our environment. When our everyday surroundings, objects and people become 'part of us like our skin...they cease to be objects of perception'.⁸⁹ It is clear that our habitual and unconscious activity within this material environment is a socially determinate one in that the familiar world conditions 'our involuntary reaction'⁹⁰ Cinema can defamiliarise this environment to

⁸⁹ Kracauer 1997, p.55.

⁹⁰ Kracauer 1997, p.57.

some extent and renew our perceptual engagement with it because its 'raw material' is precisely unknown perspectives. 'Unlike paintings, film images encourage such a decomposition because of their emphatic concern with raw material not yet consumed'.⁹¹

Habitualised modes of seeing are thus subjected or at least can be subjected to decomposition by the camera and editing's predisposition towards seeing things from new angles and perspectives, from 'raw material not yet consumed'. Kracauer discusses the relationship between material reality, conventional figure-ground optics and the decomposition by recomposition possibilities of the camera:

Imagine a man in a room: accustomed as we are to visualize the human figure as a whole, it would take us an enormous effort to perceive instead of the whole man a pictorial unit consisting, say, of his right shoulder and arm, fragments of furniture and a section of the wall. But this is exactly what photography and, more powerfully, film may make us see. The motion picture camera has a way of disintegrating familiar objects and bringing to the fore – often just in moving about – previously invisible interrelationships between parts of them.⁹²

This example of how structures of perception (the transcendental subject) may be reconfigured by the camera as a *aesthetic*

⁹¹ Kracauer 1997, p. 56.

⁹² Kracauer 1997, p.53-4.

transcendental/social and technical augmentation of the subject also illuminates Kracauer's interest in how material objects partially displace or relativise the centrality of the individual human subject presumed by bourgeois culture. Here Kracauer compares cinema to the bourgeois theatre and notes that where the actor is to fore on the stage, in the cinema, the object may vie with the actor as a co-protagonist. Kracauer cites mad automobiles in comedy films, the cruiser *Potemkin* in Eisenstein's film and the dilapidated kitchen in *Umberto D* as examples where 'a long procession of unforgettable objects has passed across the screen'.⁹³

This foregrounding of the inanimate materiality that makes up the environment, contrasts favorably with those 'films in which the inanimate merely serves as a background to self-contained dialogue and the closed circuit of human relations'⁹⁴ Here we certainly see a flash of the radical Kracauer from the Weimar years. Hansen sees the impulse to 'deflate the image of the sovereign individual' as the central allegorical meaning in Kracauer's interest in the materiality of physical things.⁹⁵ Discussing the close-up in the films of D.W. Griffiths, Kracauer argues that this disclosure of new aspects of material reality penetrates down into the inner dynamics of reality and thus 'leads us through the thicket of material life'.⁹⁶

The *thicket of material life* – that is a suggestive metaphor and one in which the physical and the signifying converge in much the same

⁹³ Kracauer 1997, p. 45.

⁹⁴ Kracauer 1997, p.46.

⁹⁵ Hansen 1993, p.447.

⁹⁶ Kracauer 1997, p.48.

way that Kracauer thought of the hotel lobby as both a real space and an iconic image for detective fiction. When Kracauer talks of the camera metamorphosing nature, he is precisely talking about its cultural mediation by the sign, by *matter-morphing*.

Conclusion

Kracauer's rehabilitation in the 1990s rather sidelined his Marxist framework of the middle-to-late Weimar era in favour of the then still dominant paradigms of post-structuralism and post-modernism. It was also silent on the relationship between Kant and Marxism in Kracauer's work, which I have characterized as a transcoding of the Kantian problematic of reification into a Marxist framework that historicizes the problematic and subjects it to a dialectical critique while still maintaining the structural positions of 'universal' concepts that must be called into question, moral-political Ideas that must do the questioning and be activated in relation to the sense-percepts of the empirical individual immersed in history, and, crucially the aesthetic, which in the third *Critique*, functions as a point of mediation between them.

Now, it perhaps has not escaped the reader's notice that there is a argument going on here about the place of Kant in Marxist cultural philosophy that goes beyond how far we can discern the influence of Kant on Kracauer from the words of Kracauer himself. As Robert Kaufman has noted, Kant's influence on Marxist thinkers such as Adorno and Benjamin do not fit the standard Marxist interpretation

of Kant's philosophy and aesthetic as the acme of bourgeois thinking.⁹⁷ Typically Kant's influence is disavowed by various strategies. For example, in discussing Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragedy*, Jameson implies that Benjamin goes beyond and effectively repudiates the Kantian relationship between concepts – which are concerned with knowledge of objects – and Ideas which are concerned with the moral/political evaluation or truth of concepts. As Jameson notes, Benjamin proposes, very explicitly in *The Origin of German Tragedy*, that Ideas are the *mode of configuring* concepts in particular ways. Ideas have no content in their own right but are instead 'the relationship between a group of concepts'.⁹⁸ But this sounds to me strikingly like Kant's argument that Ideas provide, or *ought* to provide (were it not for the problematic of reification that Kant is struggling to evade) the moral/political inflection of concepts. They are not, for Kant, as with Benjamin, concepts themselves. This denial by Jameson of the proximity between Kant and Benjamin is typical of the Marxist consensus on Kant. Elsewhere I have suggested that Kant's aesthetic, routinely lambasted for its supposed elitism, formalism and subjectivism, has been fundamentally misunderstood by Anglophone Marxism which has made it virtually synonymous with ideology.⁹⁹ A more complete and productive re-reading of Kant's aesthetic from a Marxist perspective obviously lies outside the scope of this particular essay but the argument concerning the Weimar and American Kracauer's transcoding of Kant is obviously an attempt to rehabilitate the latter as much as cast new light on the work of the former.

⁹⁷ Kaufman 2000.

⁹⁸ Jameson 2007, p. 54.

⁹⁹ Wayne 2012.

In his Marxist Weimar period, Kracauer read Kant's transcendental subject as the sign of *Ratio*, rationality abstracted from reason, materiality (with its linear sequencing of natural cause-effect relations) divorced from a critical subjectivity, and abstract concepts resistant to their inflection by moral-political Ideas. Scathing of middle class culture, Kracauer critically engaged with the mass ornament and its immersion in the life and culture of the masses in the industrial age. It is precisely the mass ornament's embodiment of the logic of reification that gives it a pedagogic value, while its form bears within it the trace of that form-bursting reason disavowed by the *Ratio*, and even has the potential to foster critical reflection on the condition of reification.

The concept of distraction is one example of how Kracauer approached the mass ornament as a contradictory affair. Distraction could be a strategy by which the mind might settle on something apparently marginal that could in fact turn out to be the thread that leads to cognitive revelation. In the quasi-poetic linkages within Kracauer's thought, appropriate to a philosophy suspicious of what had become of 'logic' and 'concepts', distraction converges with the notion of decomposition. De-reification of the commodity-image requires the decomposition of history, a productive distraction from the main event. Memory-images are indicative of a cultural resource that can feed a critical philosophy reconstructing what theory and the mass media miss.

The American Kracauer is certainly distant in significant ways from the Marxist Kracauer of the Weimar years. There is no dialectic in the later Kracauer between fragment and social totality, no critique of abstract rationalism, no linkage of that to the mass media and no explicit critical framework for de-reification. Nevertheless there are some continuities which suggest a proximity to Benjamin and Kracauer's Weimar self. There is a still evident interest in the relationship between the camera and material nature; an underdeveloped and incomplete but still suggestive model of the camera as a matter-morpher. It's own 'objective' qualities have an affinity with the objective qualities of material nature and both are understood to be already mediated by the cultural and the subjective, understood as collectively produced. The transcendental camera is thus predisposed towards decomposing the reality it transforms. This is all part of a continuing subterranean interest in displacing and critiquing bourgeois subjectivity. Kant and Marx still seem to be active ingredients fermenting away in the late work; the Weimar Kracauer has not been completely repudiated by his American other.

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Biography

Mike Wayne is a Professor of Screen Media at Brunel University. His book *Red Kant: Aesthetics, Marxism and the Third Critique*, will be published by Continuum Press in 2014.