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KRACAUER'S WEIMAR GEOMETRY AND GEOMANCY

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SEEING ABSTRACTLY: RATIONAL PATTERNS, IRRATIONAL LIVES

1. Siegfried Kracauer, 'Two Planes', in *The Mass Ornament*, Thomas Y. Levin (trans), Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1995, pp37-39.

In 1926 Siegfried Kracauer wrote an essay titled 'Two Planes'.¹ A contribution to Kracauer's city-sketches, it is a study of two places in Marseilles, the bay and the square. The bay area is described as a rectangle 'paved with the sea' on three sides. This vast space is the focal point of the city. It is flanked by hills that frame it, and the 'churches point to the rectangle as the vanishing point of all perspectives'. Here all the lines meet. But this does not mean that human life is to found there, and it is human life and its presence that concerns Kracauer. The bay, he argues, is simply an example of geometry, an abstract space. The bay has lost the splendour that adhered when it was alive with fishing activities. Now it has 'degenerated' into a rectangle. Human bustle is replaced by geometrics. This urban geometry is 'desolate'. It does not entice the streets' human tide. It is emptiness stretching to the edges. The space has no resonance. It is 'muteness'.

Elsewhere in Marseilles, Kracauer (and his walking companion Walter Benjamin) stumbled upon a second square, which is similarly stark. This one is set apart from surrounding back streets where a quite different order rules. The back streets are barely legible for the walkers. The narrow alleyways are convoluted and complicated by winding stairways, and from the outsider's perspective, equally opaque jumbles of Arabic signs. This is an unstable geography, where unfamiliar walkers traverse the quarter as in a dream, for illogically it seems as if the 'improvised backdrops' are torn down and resurrected in other places. In the midst of all this a square is to be found. It emerges suddenly for the walker released from the clutches of the crinkled alleyways. Against the tangle of back streets this square's lines are drawn with a ruler. Any visitor is compelled to move to the square's centre, into a position of exposure. The visitor feels subjected to the stares of those behind windows and walls. Bundles of stares 'traverse the space, intersecting at its midpoint'. This square is never sought purposefully but once found 'it expands toward the four sides of the world, overpowering the pitiful, soft, private parts of the dream'. The square's geometry is as relentlessly bleak as the bay's.

Typically, as in these examples, Kracauer conceives urban space in geometrical terms. The city is comprised of planes, vanishing points, lines of intersection, squares and rectangles. Geometrical form is especially evident in the parts of the city where power is tangible, where penetrating gazes and unremitting exposure are the order. Behind all this are the twisting back alleys and niches where human life takes place, unmappable and confused. These spaces are leftovers from a previous age it would seem – they are not

contemporary. But in the city of modernity geometry asserts itself in eye-lines and intersections, planes and routes through. Sometimes something akin to teeming human existence is, however, monitored by Kracauer in the modern, mapped, orderly spaces of the city, such as its major shopping routes. Found here, though, it is the blind existence of the masses smashing up against each other like a whirl of atoms, a swarm on the asphalt, a soulless next-to-each-other. Instead of living in connection with things, modern consuming, leisure-seeking people sink into deadened objects: into cars, walls and the neon advertisements, which, irrespective of the hour, flash on and off.² They are consumed in objectivity. The energies of industrial capitalism keep defeating its assertion of geometry and order. Geometry does not manage to generalise itself. It is impeded by the busy teeming on the streets. Life in the big city slips away, overcome in the bedazzle of fleeting impressions on the streets as well as in the cinemas. The self is exposed to a glimpse of its transcendental homelessness, a desolate being, alone in the world but massified endlessly. It stands in the middle of the teeming hollow space of the everyday like the exposed figure at the heart of the Marseilles square. These masses who find it impossible to maintain straight lines and efficient order, instead smashing up against each other and forever de-composing, bear a larger abstract figure. They are the homogeneous cosmopolitan audience in which, according to Kracauer's 1926 essay 'Cult of Distraction',³ everyone has the same responses, from the bank director to the sales clerk, from the diva to the stenographer. To this extent, they form, as a mass, a larger abstracted shape, detracting from their individual or class will. They are the mass consumers of industrialised leisure.

Kracauer observes the geometrics of urban space, but he also interprets human activity in relation to its formation of shapes. In *Analyse eines Stadtplans* (1926),⁴ Kracauer proposes two types of patterning, one encouraged by those with social power, one formed by the masses themselves. Whereas bourgeois society attempts to mark out straight lines in its social forms, the crowds themselves frequently refuse or fail, jostling each other instead and agitating in open spaces, atom-like. Their patterns permanently disintegrate. Those who experience such collapse find evanescence to be a buzz and they enthusiastically submit themselves to the frenzy of city entertainment. More permanent patterns are achieved elsewhere, as part of this same entertainment that distracts the mass, as Kracauer notes in his 1927 essay 'The Mass Ornament'. Geometrics manages to assert itself in another urban space, one that is subjected to the power of choreography and presents itself as spectacle. In 'The Mass Ornament' Kracauer writes of the dance displays in popular revues, where troupes such as the Tiller Girls constituted an 'ornament' made out of countless bathing suited bodies.⁵ This entertainment form had flourished in German cities from the mid to late 1920s. The revue was formatted of short scenes or numbers, maybe sixty in an evening, with sudden changes of mood, stage set and theme. They were huge affairs, for example in the 1926-27 season nine revues played nightly in Berlin to eleven thousand spectators.⁶ All over the world, in identical

2. Siegfried Kracauer, 'Der Künstler in dieser Zeit', in Kracauer, *Schriften 5:1*, Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1990, pp300-308.

3. Siegfried Kracauer, 'The Cult of Distraction', in *The Mass Ornament*, op. cit., pp323-328.

4. Siegfried Kracauer, 'Analyse eines Stadtplans', in Kracauer, *Schriften 5:1*, op. cit., pp401-403.

5. Siegfried Kracauer, 'The Mass Ornament', in *The Mass Ornament*, op. cit., pp74-86.

6. See Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1993, p167.

7. Kracauer, 'The Mass Ornament', op. cit., p76.

8. Ibid., p77.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., p76.

stadiums, in Australia, India, the US and Germany, 'performances of the same geometric precision' take place. The attraction is the display of 'girl clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics'.⁷ The patterns formed are purely ornamental, 'a linear system'.⁸ They signify nothing but themselves. They 'have no meaning beyond themselves'.⁹ The ornament is a closed system without substance, morality or sexuality. Furthermore, ornaments indicate an imbalance of power. These are not self-animated entities. The ornament is an end in itself. Choreographed precisely, the girls' bodies are the bearers of patterns that the girls did not determine. Kracauer makes an analogy between the dancers and their patterns and the patterns formed by the mass audience, and, by extension, the masses in general. 'The bearer of the ornament is the *mass*'.¹⁰ They bear it but they do not construct it: 'Even though the masses bring it into being, they do not participate in conceiving the ornament.' The ornament can only be understood according to another set of principles, principles that are seemingly abstract, and hence meaningless. These are geometric. This is the language of the ornament and the way in which it must be understood is geometrical.

The ornament, detached from its bearers, must be understood rationally. It consists of lines and circles like those found in textbooks on Euclidean geometry, and also incorporates the elementary components of physics such as waves and spirals.¹¹

11. Ibid., pp77-8.

But the geometrical ornament is, of course, not in actuality without referent and meaning. It has, in fact, a precise historical motivation. A feuilleton piece by Kracauer called 'The Revues', written in 1925, analyses the matter of these displays.¹² Here, as elsewhere, Kracauer sees the revues, and their dance formations, as translations into aesthetic play of the two major impulses or drives of the age – industrialisation and militarisation. 'The Revues' coins an image used again by Kracauer, in 1931 in 'Girls and Crisis',¹³ of the girls on stage as if made by Ford, produced in some factory somewhere in the USA and exported en masse to Europe. The dances sometimes thematised the relationship between their patterns and the world of industrial capitalism, with girls pretending to be automatons, conveyor belts or factory parts. Such figures fitted well with an aesthetic of strictly timed, seemingly mechanised movements. 'Girls and Crisis' described a 'girl contraption' made of parts and the revue as a whole aspired to the 'ideal of the machine'. But alongside the conveyor belt and the factory was another theme of the revues that could also represent an origin. This was the image of soldiers marching to war - the word revue was of military origin - referring to the inspection of soldiers on parade, and the words troupe and troop were connected. The revues made clear their military connections, their debt to the wars that had been, and those to come. (After the Tiller Girls, the Hiller Girls of the 1940s exposed this aspect to a ludicrous degree.) Kracauer notes the uses of history and nationalism as themes of the revues. In their line-ups, it was as if the girls

12. Kracauer, 'Die Revuen', in *Schriften* 5:1, op. cit., pp338-342.

13. Kracauer, 'Girls and Crisis', in Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (eds), *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994, pp565-566.

shouldered arms on stage - and sometimes they did.

In the mass ornament the human element is expunged. This is why Kracauer is adamant that this matter be conceived non-humanly, in terms of 'aerial photographs of landscapes and cities'.¹⁴ Similarly, in the same year, 1927, Kracauer writes a review of the 'neues Bauen' exhibition of new types of flats in Stuttgart and observes that the modern 'American' developments of Mies van der Rohe and others are not designed to be seen from their facades by people at street level, for they are rushing by too quickly, but rather are seen ideally by pilots, from above.¹⁵ The aerial elevation is the significant one. The buildings present themselves as on a plan, shapes in the landscape (and inside too a new spatial language is created as the traditional divisions between rooms are dissolved into a single formation to maximize light and allow mobility). Likewise, the masses as ornament best present their contours to a viewer overhead. The ornament is superior to its object. It is imposed from above. Subsequently, these patterns are appropriately perceived from above by a mechanical eye that broadcasts the spectacular nature of the event to masses in cinemas and stadiums. The audience affirms their regularity, finding it to be good entertainment. The masses arranged in these locations are similarly aligned in serried ranks, all facing in one direction, marshalled by the rhythm of the event. Such revues indicate an embrace of the geometric on the part of the masses. The mass ornament is a logical product of the dominant economic and military aspects of the system.

Abstractness and geometry was marked on the cityscape. Kracauer found its tracings in cityscapes and on human groups. But it had signalled its presence most graphically earlier, in war. Conceiving of the mass ornament from the perspective of an aerial photograph has martial echoes. The omniscient airborne vision of the military pilot was linked to photography from the off. The camera was used systematically to gather information from late 1915. Kites, balloons and planes were used to take photographs of the frontlines, so that enemy artillery could plot its path. Aerial photos of the front demonstrate the new perception and experience of landscapes. The landscape captured on film is set out as a series of lines and planes. It is to be analysed. The soldier, down there, on the ground, was locked in a landscape of lines. The war appeared to be reduced to a line searing through (and so abolishing) nature. Artists recognised this aspect. Vorticism's menacing translation of landscape and human form provides an expression of this. Vorticism rejected the blur and dynamic fuzz of Futurism. Lewis, in an attack on Futurism, exclaimed: '*je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes*'.¹⁶ Vorticism was an aesthetics of the line. It demanded contours. The line was like a bar in Wyndham Lewis's paintings. It locked the material into place on the canvas. Lewis's images appeared as a translation of the locked down lines of the battlefield, the only slowly moving frontlines and trench lines. Lewis, as a siege-gunner, was always 'in the Line', he had no spells of rest 'behind the Line'.¹⁷ These lines that had to be held and moved only a few inches over the course of weeks turned into the heavy bars of Lewis's paintings and sketches. Henri Gaudier-Brzeska's letter from the

14. Kracauer, 'The Mass Ornament', op. cit., p77.

15. Kracauer, 'Das neue Bauen', in *Schriften* 5:2, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1990, p69.

16. Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering*, London, Calder and Boyars, 1967, p35.

17. Ibid., p120.

trenches, published posthumously in the second issue of *Blast* (1915), relates the immutability of the landscape even in the context of military assault. The hill's outline is permanent. This experience of the landscape as lines (natural and military) is transmuted into the human self.

ISHALL DERIVE MY EMOTIONS SOLELY FROM THE ARRANGEMENT OF SURFACES, I shall present my emotions by the ARRANGEMENT OF MY SURFACES, THE PLANES AND LINES BY WHICH THEY ARE DEFINED.¹⁸

18. *Blast: War Issue*, London, John Lane, 1915, p344.

The soldier pinches a gun from the enemy and decides to embellish its butt with a design, as an expression of a 'gentler order of feeling'. The design 'got its effect (just as the gun had) FROM A VERY SIMPLE COMPOSITION OF LINES AND PLANES'.

The linearity of war - its attachment to the line, the frontline, the lined up ranks of soldiers - translates in the post-war into entertainment forms, such as are demonstrated in the mass ornament, insistence on linearity and discipline. The revues took their stimulus from militarism, though that did not mean that they were military, cautions Kracauer. Unlike the dance displays, military formation has a purpose outside of itself:

the meaning of the living star formations in the stadiums is not that of military exercises. No matter how regular the latter may turn out to be, that regularity was considered a means to an end; the parade march arose out of patriotic feelings and in turn aroused them in soldiers and subjects. The star formations, however, have no meaning beyond themselves, and the masses above whom they rise are not a moral unit like a company of soldiers.¹⁹

19. Kracauer, 'The Mass Ornament', op. cit., p77.

The drill of the girl-units has a different end: 'to produce an immense number of parallel lines, the goal being to train the broadest mass of people in order to create a pattern of undreamed-of dimensions'.²⁰ The girl patterns are solely about patterning. But, in his formulation, Kracauer suggests that they are also about training and they are about conducting masses of people. They are martial but without any 'moral' aspiration, which is possibly terrifying, because it proposes a marshalling of human 'material' that bypasses human reasoning.

20. Ibid.

Striking for Kracauer is that the revues indicate an embrace of the geometric on the part of the masses. They welcome the geometric because it makes sense. It is a rough acknowledgement of 'undisguised facts'.²¹ The mass ornament is a logical product of the system from an economic and military perspective. In 'Cult of Distraction' (1926) Kracauer stresses the legitimacy of contemporary entertainments. They match the basic structure of the social world, and thereby are true. Truth, for Kracauer is historically contingent

21. Ibid., p78.

Truth is threatened only by the naive affirmation of cultural values that have become unreal and by the careless misuse of concepts such as

personality, inwardness, tragedy and so on, terms which in themselves certainly refer to lofty ideas but which have lost much of their scope along with their supporting foundations due to social changes.²²

22. Kracauer, 'Cult of Distraction', op. cit., p326.

The audience encounters itself in these superficial displays. These mass audiences and, in their daytime existence, mass working classes, are as interchangeable as standard parts of shapes. Kracauer asserts capitalism's international reach, which amounts to the generation of absolute exchangeability, in goods as much as in producers of those goods:

A system oblivious to differences in form leads on its own to the blurring of national characteristics and to the production of worker masses that can be employed equally well at any point on the globe.²³

23. Kracauer, 'The Mass Ornament', op. cit., p77.

Their chosen culture transforms into aesthetic play the reality of their big city lives. Berliners are addicted to distraction, but Kracauer sees this as compensatory, as a response to pressure: 'The response however can only be articulated in terms of the same surface sphere which imposed the lack in the first place.' The rationalisation of the production process and the ordering of spare time mirror each other. Melancholic love songs tapped on the piano are the same in structure as typists tapping out dictations. The mass ornaments of the dancing troupes, such as the Tiller Girls (who Kracauer assumes to be American) are an aesthetic reflex of the conveyor belt.

In general, the capitalist epoch elevates the geometric, the mathematical, the abstract, the ahuman. The production process itself is an ornament that arranges humans into interrelating patterns, while abstracting from their humanness, removing their autonomy or decision-making powers. Capital seeks its end in its own reproduction. It is an apparently closed system that 'does not encompass man'. It negates innate human reason in the promotion of abstractness.²⁴ While abstraction, as a part of human rationality is an historically achieved and welcome state, abstractness 'is the expression of rationality grown obdurate'. It is unachieved rationality. It is trapped in mythology (in much the same way as Adorno and Horkheimer would later argue in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the 1940s), because it has not attached the exercise of reason to human self-understanding, but rather abandons it to the logic of the economic system. Nature (including human nature) returns to the realm of the unknowable and impenetrable. It is bare nature, nature unknown. Mathematical abstractness and mysterious nature form the coordinates of the capitalism that Kracauer detests. Excluded is self-motivated, self-reasoning organic life.

24. Ibid., p81.

The 1920s hatch new forms of production, mainly office-based and also sales work. Kracauer's ranks of urban employees cramming the 'palaces of distraction' formed as a direct consequence of technical and administrative rationalisation. They are rootless, a first generation of office workers and sales assistants. Just like the factories before them, these new workplaces centralise

workers, and, at the same time, an industry to service their leisure needs arises: revues, films, radio, illustrated magazines. These urban masses, as workers and as leisure consumers, are inhabitants of what Ernst Bloch, whose take on city life has much in common with Kracauer, terms the 'artificial middle' in 1929.²⁵ The 'artificial middle' is the space of ghostly white-collar workers at the missing heart of the everyday. Capitalism's drive for instrumental rationality manufactures a hollow space in an attempt to purge the world of myth and enchantment, in the making profane of all that is holy, the killing of all superstition and old gods. But, as Marx's schema had already insinuated, under conditions of mystified production (commodity fetishism), myth returns in the form of fetishes, or dreams or desires. Kracauer, like Bloch and Benjamin, identified all of this assumed rationality and objectivity as a cover. In fact capitalism was an irrational system, its hollow space full of the debris of social meaning. In Kracauer's many skits of everyday life, design, entertainment and labour in the modern European city, figures of ghosts and hexes are prevalent, emphasising the irrationality of the system.

Under a new light these ghosts could only be discerned with difficulty. The electric light of the modern city was intense and ubiquitous. It illuminated offices and, even more intensely, in neon gas, the streets at night-time. It seems as if this new gleam had chased out the cluttered, dust-gathering, dim interiors of pre-Weimar, which had been doused in gentler gaslight or a flickery early electric gleam. Kracauer mocked that dusty past too in 1931's 'Today's Furniture'.²⁶ But he also points out that today's remaining starkness is not what it seems. It is not self-explanatory, transparent and without secret. In 'Today's Furniture' descriptions of sleek, hard cornered wardrobes and the reticent bulk of chairs and tables in the new objective style are followed by a reflection on time's passing. Kracauer notes that just as dusty old furniture of a previous style era is laughable now, these new forms will be 'seen through' in time. 'Inside them too ghosts rumble around, which no vacuum cleaner can scare off'.²⁷ In his review of the 'neues Bauen' exhibition in 1927 Kracauer describes a room designed by Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich. It is stripped of 'ornament', a perfectly modern space. This ornament is unlike the mass ornament of human bodies. Or perhaps, rather, the mass ornament is an effort to replace, in vast and unoverlookable form, the architectural ornament excoriated by Modernist architectural discourse - Adolf Loos for one denounced it as criminal. In Modernist space, the ornament is gone - or expelled into the entertainment spaces of the masses. In the new apartment, designed for future heroes, the walls are smooth, of milky and darkly coloured glass. The room's 'glass box' allows the outlines of neighbouring rooms to be dimly perceived. Most interesting to Kracauer is the fact that every object and every movement in the room conjures dancing silhouettes on the walls, and these are 'bodiless'. For Kracauer this is a sign that it is no solution to remove all ornament from taps and fireplaces. According to Kracauer, removed with the ornament is the very thing the ornament represents, which is undefined but whose loss should be mourned rather than celebrated. Mourning attaches itself to these ghostly

25. Ernst Bloch, 'Künstliche Mitte' (1929), in Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1981, pp33-35.

26. Kracauer, 'Möbel von Heute', in Kracauer, *Schriften* 5:2, op. cit., p332.

27. Ibid., p334.

figures on the glass walls, unintentionally.²⁸ Perceiving the future outlines of the ghosts already forming in the now is Kracauer's task. Seeing closely is the only way in which the ghosts might be brought into the visible spectrum. This amounts to a methodology. The geometrics of Weimar and other European capitals appear rational, but, on closer inspection, ghosts are found lurking between the lines. These ghosts are traces of what has been left behind - memory, spirit, reason, aspects of human innerness, now perceived lost. Kracauer seeks its traces elsewhere in a type of geomantic practice. Through a rather magical reading of space, reason can be re-found.

28. Kracauer, 'Das neue Bauen', op. cit., p74.

MEMORY AND ECONOMY

In November 1931, Kracauer gazes out of his window in Charlottenburg, Berlin. The city lies condensed before his eyes. He notices the railway tracks that intersect with a subway. Shooting lines of metal hurtle through this city and all the other connected ones, while below an underpass straight as a die allows the rapid passage of vehicles, its pacing as continuous as a conveyor belt. A vertical axis is formed by the radio-tower whose mast cuts into the sky. Chance patterns are formed and these are 'glorious like a show staged by nature', but nature is banished from view here.²⁹ This is an utterly urban space dissected by lines. It is, Kracauer notes, 'unposed' Berlin. Nobody designed this aspect, in the way that squares and streets and grand buildings are usually planned. It emerges out of the complications and needs of the metropolis. It is without intention, though it may become legible for a city analyst such as Kracauer. The 'soft' parts of the dream that have been obscured by oppressive urban planning can be recovered with effort. The built environment is a site for dream-work. The arbitrary formations of the city offer clues.

29. Kracauer, 'Aus dem Fenster gesehen' in Kracauer, *Schriften* 5:2, op. cit., p399.

This landscape is unposed Berlin. Unintentionally, its contradictions are expressed in its objects, which have been formed by itself ... Knowledge of the city is tied to the decipherment of its dreamily uttered images.³⁰

30. Kracauer, *ibid.*, p400-401.

Similarly in his piece 'On Labour Exchanges: Construction of a Space', from 17 June 1930, the former architect Kracauer notes how the arrangement of space speaks more truth than statistics or government reports. Here the landscape is 'posed' but not by planners who consciously manipulate space. The 'space of the labour exchange is posed by reality itself':

Every typical space is brought into being by typical social relations that express themselves in it without the interfering intervention of consciousness. Everything denied by consciousness, everything that is otherwise intentionally overlooked, participates in its construction. Spatial images are the dreams of society. Wherever the hieroglyphs of a spatial image are deciphered, there the foundations of social reality may be identified.³¹

31. Kracauer, 'Über Arbeitsnachweise: Konstruktion eines Raumes', in *ibid.*, p186.

Dreams are liable to be lost as the day progresses. All that is unconscious or overlooked can by definition not be in memory. To that extent, Kracauer's efforts to read the unconscious expressions of the city is an attempt to re-introduce memory into this space. This is analogous to his efforts in 'The Mass Ornament' to analyse the 'inconspicuous surface-level expressions', which are 'by virtue of their unconscious nature' able to provide 'unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things'.³² There is, he notes, no knowledge of the fundamental state of things without knowledge of these insignificant surface details.

32. Kracauer, 'The Mass Ornament', op. cit., p75.

Through his analysis of the usually unobserved details of the city, its interiors, its decorations and intersections, its geometry and chaos, Kracauer reveals the fundamental state of Berlin to be a memory-less place. Berlin has an unhistorical nature. It is permeated by a formless disquiet. Kracauer fears that all traces of history and memory are being eradicated from the streets. They will become streets without memories. The essay 'Street without Memory' (1932) exposes the fetish of novelty, which permeates the atmosphere like frenzy swallows up a gold rush town. Amnesia in the city is Kracauer's permanent phobia. In 'Repetition' (1932) Kracauer writes of how the city eradicates all memories, leaving only the present-day. Existence is newly formed each day, starting from scratch but always similar, like newspapers. It permanently substitutes itself. The transformations of the past are burnt out of memory in the frenetic-ness of daily living. People believe themselves to be packing twice as much life in, when really they are living purely in the present, permanently vanishing. In Kracauer's diagnosis, something has happened to memory historically. In the context of rapid changes, the overwhelming presence of the current moment and the temporary nature of existence, memory is actively expunged in the name of 'now'. There is an architectural complement to this. The new buildings on the Kurfürstendamm no longer bear ornamental twiddles on their facades. Such ornamentation once appeared to be a bridge to yesterday. The stripping of ornament from the façades signals for Kracauer a frightening loss of memory. It represents the 'embodiment of empty flowing time, where nothing is permanent'.³³

33. Kracauer, 'Straße ohne Erinnerung', Kracauer, *Schriften* 5:3, Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1990, p170.

The ornaments, which formed a bridge to the past, have been stripped from many houses. Now the plundered façades remain with nothing to fix them in time. They constitute the symbol of the unhistorical change, which is occurring around them.³⁴

34. Kracauer, *ibid.*, p173.

Now, in Kracauer's epoch, ornament is out of fashion, just as are the cluttered and decorative interiors of the late nineteenth century, no longer favoured in the super-modern times of the 1920s and 1930s. Modern times are seemingly days without sentiment, without ties that bind to yesterday. These modern days are rational, objective, progressive and forward-looking. That is the ideology of the modern, its self-justification and its advertising copy. But Kracauer discerns another motivation, an underlying drive, which concretely

undermines the physical traces of the past, forcing them out of the present. It is the end of 1932. Germany is no longer in the grip of the hyperinflation of the mid-1920s, but it is in the grip of a worldwide depression since the Wall Street Crash of 1929. In the new Berlin of crisis, businesses can but be improvised, temporary. That the buildings change their function, their décor, their clientele so rapidly, Kracauer notes, is a sign of economic failure. Kracauer links memory (and its loss) to economy.³⁵ Ornament and memory are driven out by crisis. The same crisis seeks its solution in rationalisation (lay-offs and closures). Crisis finds expression in a new ornamentation, the patterning of the masses, which amounts to their disciplining in order to bear the tasks of a new efficient economy, and then later, war, which hopes to capitalise on the forgetting of the last one.

35. *Ibid.*, p170.

MEANINGFUL SURFACES

From 1921 onwards, Kracauer was cultural editor of a newspaper, the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. In 1930 he took over the Berlin Feuilleton office. Day after day he wrote a piece about life in the metropolis or the life of the metropolis. Baudelaire's comment, 'I want to date my anger', seems appropriate to Kracauer's rapid daily production of feuilleton, (or what Gerwin Zohlen titles 'street texts', 'town images', 'diagnostic portraits' and 'philosophical illuminations'³⁶), for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. To date is to remember. It aids the recovery of memory in the memory-less cityscape. Kracauer marks out Berlin at a very specific time. His texts are melancholic, permeated by a comprehensive sense of loss. Kracauer's textual practice is appropriately modernist, its own categories of formation mirroring modernity's structure of transience. It emulates the forgetting, the impermanence. But, in fixing as tableau, it also makes permanent. It exposes chance configurations in a new light. Kracauer's throwaway aesthetics are appropriate to the sense of speed in modernity. More than this, Kracauer's look is modernist in that it is filmic, ideally an exact observation and a cognitive penetration. Combining Kracauer's film fascination and his training as an architect, Marc Katz has noted Kracauer's

36. Gerwin Zohlen, *Notes to Straßen in Berlin und Anderswo*, Berlin, Arsenal 1987.

scenographic form of cultural critique, one which employs filmic methods of cross-cutting to suggest movement through the built environment of the city.³⁷

Kracauer's emphasis on spatial dimensions, the unlocking of the town through topography, is imbued with a photographic and cinematic quality. Film becomes for him an organising feature in the comprehension of reality. Kracauer constructs his streets in text according to the aesthetic remits of film. The city sketches are like short films, mini-sequences, panning, focusing, fading out. It is a filmic method that allows for the presentation, observation and dissection of contemporary spaces. In the labyrinth of the

37. Marc Katz, 'The Hotel Kracauer', *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 11, 2 (1999): 136.

metropolis, Kracauer detects fragments of lost experience that a filmic method is particularly suited to record. The unposed nature of city actuality - the unintended intersections of lines and squares, streets and buildings - is well captured in photography, which is likewise 'unposed', and whose format led Walter Benjamin to derive an 'optical unconscious'. For Kracauer, the shock-factor of every-day life is reproduced in the apparent lack of intentionality of the photographic medium, its arbitrary snatches out of time. On celluloid a chance moment is caught. The cognitive moment of photography and film is its exposure of the illusory and arbitrary nature of reality, the fact that, as Kracauer argues in *The Salaried Masses*, all reality is a construction. The city is enstaged, but not in theatrical terms, not as dramas with fully-rounded characters bumping around between heavy props. Rather it is conceived as the site of an interplay of lines and surfaces, chaotic whirls and collisions. The streets are a montage. On them each person is exposed to effects and caught up in a constant, dynamic movement. To capture this, Kracauer writes mini-scenes, which are palpably graphic. Recognisably modern characters, such as the masses, swarm and disintegrate. Isolated figures flash up onto the screen, emblems of alienated big-city lives - Dodo the ladies' man or the swindler Harry Domela. City spaces are described in detail, and these are the grim spaces that Walter Benjamin thought so perfectly represented in film, which opens up the everyday spaces of the world to vision and analysis. Cinema detonates a 'prison-world', so that the audience, from the comfort of a plush seat, may take extraordinary adventures amongst its widely scattered ruins:

To put it in a nutshell, film is the prism in which the spaces of the immediate environment - the spaces in which people live, pursue their avocations, and enjoy their leisure - are laid open before their eyes in a comprehensible, meaningful, and passionate way. In themselves these offices, furnished rooms, saloons, big-city streets, stations and factories are ugly, incomprehensible, and hopelessly sad. Or rather they were and seemed to be, until the advent of film.³⁸

38. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927-1934*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1999, p17.

Kracauer's texts ape cinema's intimacy with abject spaces, seeking there the secret motive forces and expressions of the age. This reference to film contains a critical and theoretical significance. The principles of film become the organising principles of capitalist society as a whole. Film and cinema are core spaces of representation of modern life for Kracauer. Cinema is the space of the new archetypal city-dwellers: the white-collar employees, whose movie-culture turns into entertainment and distraction the dark realities of their city lives; depersonalisation, violence and the drill and routine of the working day. Film is bound up intimately with technology. Modern industry inhabits the technology of cinema in its organising principle of standardisation. Film emerged in an epoch characterised by the standardisation of products. Standardisation was the precondition for the interchangeability of identical component parts. Moving assembly-line manufacture and the factory system

division of labour lent themselves to the new mass production economies of scale. Cinematic equipment was a product of such a manufactured assembly of interchangeable parts. The film product was standardised too in its capacity for infinite reproduction. That is the rationalistic basis of film. But more noticeably film and cinema, like the city bathed in neon after dark, participate in dream worlds. Both city, cinema and film are platforms for imaginary relations to brute social relations. Film clarifies as it mystifies. Its mystification is its revelation, once decoded by the critic's eye. 'On Employment Agencies: Constructions of a Space' begins with a reference to the capacity of film to mould spaces into *Raumbilder*, spatial images. Film makes spaces '*sinnlich erfahrbar*', 'available to sensuous experience'. As a mimetic technology, the invention of film facilitated an expressive medium adequate to a sense-perception transformed by industry.

More than this, film presents the possibility of remaking the world again, just as did industry, and this is conceived quite consciously by theorists as a second nature. Film is a synthetic reproduction of time, of space, tone and colour. Film reinvents in its refusal of the physical laws of the cosmos. Animation takes this even further in its veritable critique of physicality of the non-drawn universe - this is why for Walter Benjamin Mickey Mouse was an absolute utopian and why for Kracauer *Dumbo*, with its deployment of magic and increased sense of physics and bourgeois emotion, was such a disappointment.³⁹ Social dreaming is displaced into film, and cinema provides its home.

For Kracauer, as a reader of spaces, film's home was as important as film itself. In cinemas light swamped the auditorium's scenery with colour. It redefined shapes and form and spaces. From 1921 onwards, until his move to Berlin, Kracauer made frequent trips to the capital to view the latest cinema architecture, renowned for its innovation. In Germany there were huge cinema-complexes long before anywhere else. These picture-houses were the new spaces of entertainment. (and they replaced the revues in time). The buildings were palaces of distraction, whose ornamentation, light and shadow-plays fired rounds of emotional bullets at the cinema-goers. Architecture and illumination found their first fusion in the new cinema buildings. The cinemas experimented with external lumination to create a magical dream-reality of presence, once darkness fell. Berlin was punctuated by neon castles of light, floating above pavements at night-time. The Lichtburg (fortress of light), designed and built in mid to late 1920s by Rudolf Fränkel, was just one example. In the daytime it was an ultra-modern dynamic architecture of cylinders and curves. At night it shone out with powerful white beams. The columns of luminosity which shone out through the windows seemed, paradoxically to be the only substantial part of the building. It was like a vast camera obscura, radiating from the surrounding blackness an illusion in stone. In 1927, an advertisement at the building site of the Mercedes-Palast in Berlin-Neukölln promised light-effects such as had never been seen before. Once upon a time, evening illumination had been an embellishment,

39. For more on this, see my *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant Garde*, London, Verso, 2002.

a strange and curious addition. Now, it was a central element of architecture. Light was a new material for architects. Erich Mendelsohn designed Berlin's Universum cinema, which was a palace of light inside and outside, where floodlights, special effects and signage twinkled in the evening. Light makes this architecture and this experience. The lights on the cinema's façade drew the public into the auditorium where all surfaces, curves, organ tune rolls and waves of light on the ceiling flow towards the screen, and draw the audience into the flickering image and thereby into the Universum, or universe.⁴⁰ The flat screen inside with its dramatic light, the dance of lighting effects in the auditorium, the outside play of architectural light effects and the flashing advertisements: all contribute to a spectacular bright and colourful surface, or what Kracauer calls 'optical fairylands' in 'Cult of Distraction'.⁴¹

Kracauer observed how the neon light of city advertisements and shop signage battered the senses of city dwellers. In 'Picture Postcards' from 1930, Kracauer writes of the ways in which the lights of the neon advertisements bathe the Kaiser Wilhelm church in the centre of Berlin's West End in a glow that replaces any divine type of spark or illumination. In the same sketch he details:

The glassy columns of light, as tall as houses, the bright overlit surfaces of cinema posters, a confusion of gleaming neon tubes behind mirror panes combine to lead an assault against tiredness, which wants to crash in, against the emptiness which must be avoided at all costs. They bawl, they drum, they hammer on the crowd with the brutality of madmen. This is all an uninhibited spark, which does not only serve advertising, but is also self-serving. [It is] a flaming protest against the darkness of our existence, a protest of a lust for life, which as if of its own accord ends up in the desperate acknowledgement of the entertainment industry.⁴²

In the city the lights substitute for an animated life. Lighting and advertisements, celluloid and colour become the very components of an illusion that sustains the social world as is. In Weimar criticism, film and the cinema space are as much praised as attacked for their dreaming qualities, and on-screen activities are seen as tools for knowledge as much as major deceivers. For Kracauer, inside the cinema there is little chance of learning anything about the world. Film is increasingly unsatisfactory. In a piece from 1937, called the 'Aesthetics of Colour Film', Kracauer observes how film has pursued certain directions above all. Colour was one imperative. But apart from the inventive and implausible colour schemes of Disney cartoons, colour in the movies, he says, is dead ballast, making nature look as if it has been painted. In striving to look natural, colour actually produces a fake that is untrue. Coloured film is a lie posing as truth. Like neon light, which emits no illumination as such, instead blinding crowds on the dark night streets, colour becomes a drapery that has the tendency to obscure more than it reveals. According to Kracauer, black and white film could capture what he calls the

40. Erich Mendelsohn, 'Zu Eröffnung des 'Universum', in Mendelsohn, *Gedankenwelt: Unbekannte Texte zu Architektur, Kulturgeschichte und Politik*, Ostfildern, Ruit, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2000, p110.

41. Kracauer, 'Cult of Distraction', op. cit., p323.

42. Kracauer, 'Ansichtskarten', in Kracauer, *Schriften* 5:2, op. cit., pp184-185.

'blue distance' better than a film that only seemingly reproduces the blue of the distant mountain range. This blue distance is not just a colour, of course. It is a Romantic idea - the 'blue distance' is the name for longing, nostalgia, something authentically experienced. In colour film of the regular kind, Kracauer says, there is no blue distance. In colour film, there is only artifice masquerading in the garb of the real. The situation is even bleaker. Kracauer observes how once colour came filmmakers abandoned montage, satisfied as they were with the illusion of flowery meadows. With the loss of montage comes the loss of modernist defamiliarisation. Pudovkin's black and white representation of the façade of a Tsarist court building, for example, has a 'Sprachgewalt', 'the power to speak'.⁴³ Without colour, film is compelled to be independent of the object. 'With colour, there is no 'act of sabotage against the conventional connections between phenomena'. Now all is surface without rips, without tears in the fabric of the fantasy. The surface substitutes for the whole, and seems to be presenting actuality. The synthetic world of colour film does not make visible its synthesising activity - it passes off a kitschified reality as the real thing. Kracauer's view of film turned pessimistic: film worked on the masses, rendering them half-conscious and atomised in their numbers. This art of light and colour gave substance to the thin veneer of glamour and entertainment's distraction becomes intoxication. Class consciousness is replaced by mass consciousness. Consciousness is replaced by oblivion. Class consciousness becomes mass oblivion. The calibre of the audiences was visible on the streets. Where in Berlin's proletarian areas class-conscious street demonstrations weld together, through the acting out of solidarity, masses with a purpose, in the West End, there where the white-collar workers throng for their entertainments, only a disintegrating, disunited crowd flows, directionless, irrational. Kracauer's 'The Subway', printed 11 March 1932, reflects on the crowds of people, each a tiny little part of something undefined, each an uncoordinated splinter of a whole that cannot be formed.⁴⁴

Nazism, of course, moulded the mass into a co-ordinated whole. Its rallies were the uncanny echo of Kracauer's 'mass ornament'. Where the entertainment industry led, social and political life followed. The masses were formed into geometric, disciplined ranks. This casts perhaps another light on Benjamin's famous phrase about the 'aestheticisation of politics'. Social and political life in the Third Reich, which is to say, all public life in the Third Reich, was shaped into an ornament, an ornament of the masses, whose patterning - in the rallies, in sports, in the cinema - detracted from the loss of self-willed rationality, in as much as the masses' 'representation', as a dramatic enstagement, took centre-stage. The spectacle of the entertainment industry, which had accustomed the masses to regimentation, morphs into the spectacle of politics. Certainly such a parallel could have been observed in architecture, which turned spectacular and monumental. Albert Speer adopted and adapted light in architecture, combining the ephemeral and the monumental into dazzling spectacle. In the Nazi harvest festivals from 1933-1937 near Hamelin, Speer began to experiment with light, projecting

43. Kracauer, *Kino*, Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1979, p50.

44. Kracauer, 'Die Unterführung', in Kracauer, *Schriften* 5:3, op. cit., pp40-41.

columns of luminosity into the sky. At first, he only had movie-lights at his disposal - this renders the connection between fascist display and the products of the culture industry. But movie lamps were not bright enough. To generate a greater illusion, more power was needed. When Hitler asked for a monster-scale design for the Zeppelinfeld rally stadium in Nuremberg, Speer devised a vast spectacle, magnificent pure light, pure fantastical insubstantiality. He installed 150 searchlights projected 15 kilometres into the night sky. The fantasised ceiling appeared miles away. This 'building', an architecture of light, would disappear at daybreak. It was described as a blue-tinged Gothic 'cathedral of ice'. Modernist functional transparency is reinvented as the sensational.

In 1927, in 'The Mass Ornament', Kracauer claims that capitalism does not rationalise too much, but rather too little.⁴⁵ This is because it 'does not encompass man'. Capitalism is still mythic, irrational. The human who is excluded finds an inhuman double in the ghosts that haunt modernity. But in the Third Reich the ghosts are no longer secret. They burst out everywhere in the forceful return of myth. Modernity's repressed residue of humanity is marshalled for Nazism's sinister ends, as Ernst Bloch had warned in *Heritage of Our Times* (1935).⁴⁶ The ghosts within, which Kracauer had discerned in the 1920s, triumph in the death-regime of the 1930s.

45. Kracauer, 'The Mass Ornament', op. cit., p81.

46. Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990.