"With Skin and Hair": Kracauer’s Theory of Film, Marseille 1940

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The turn to photography is the go-for-broke game of history.

—SIEGFRIED KRACAUER, “Photography” (1927)

The face counts for nothing in film unless it includes the death’s-head beneath. “Danse macabre.” To which end? That remains to be seen.

—KRACAUER, notes toward a book on film aesthetics (1940)

Kracauer’s late work, Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality (1960), has enjoyed a long and varied history of critical rejection, from Pauline Kael’s smug polemics against the author’s German pedantry (1962); through Dudley Andrew’s indictment of the book for its normative ontology (1976) and “naive realism” (1984) and similar charges raised from a semiotic perspective in the pages of Screen; to the standard German argument of the sixties and seventies that, with the shift in emphasis to “physical reality,” Kracauer had abandoned his earlier preoccupation with

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All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
the cinema's relation to social and political reality. No doubt Theory of Film is an irritating book—with its pretense of academic systematicity, its liberal-humanist sentiment and bland universalism, and its grandfatherly and assimilationist diction, to say nothing of the disagreements one might have with its approach to film—yet it's anything but "utterly transparent" or "direct," as Andrew calls it, nor is it "a huge homogeneous block of realist theory."2 On the contrary, much as Theory of Film strives toward systematicity and transparency, the text remains uneven, opaque, and contradictory in many places, defying the attempt to deduce from it any coherent, singular position. The elided trauma that disfigures Theory of Film is that around which Kracauer's From Caligari to Hitler (1947) still revolved in a more direct way: the political, philosophical, and world-historical impact of the Holocaust. As Gertrud Koch and Heide Schlüpmann have pointed out, the object of Theory of Film is neither film in general nor film as a phenomenon of late capitalism but, more specifically, the question of film after Auschwitz. Although Kracauer mentions the death camps as a filmic topic only briefly, in the section entitled "The Head of the Medusa," Koch and Schlüpmann contend that the impossibility of representing mass death—and yet the stubborn hope that film might be just the medium to register that horror—constitutes the epistemic and ethical vanishing point of the book.3

Kael, Koch, and Schlüpmann all have a point, and their arguments are, in a complicated way, interrelated. This link, however, cannot be established solely on the basis of the book as published in 1960. Rather, it emerges from a body of texts that call into question the very status of that


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version: two decades worth of drafts, outlines, and notes that are far more interesting and important than the final product. Indeed, I will argue, the significance of Kracauer’s *Theory of Film* can only be grasped in the tension between the early drafts and the later book, in the process of endless rewriting, systematization, and elimination.

This process can be traced, tentatively, in the vast amount of material relating to *Theory of Film* that Kracauer bequeathed, along with his other papers, to the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach am Neckar. The earliest outline for a book on “film aesthetics,” comprised of three fat notebooks, is dated 16 November 1940, and was written “during those months,” as Kracauer told Theodor W. Adorno in a later letter, “that we spent in anguish and misery in Marseille” (fig. 1). Accompanying the notebooks are handwritten and typed outlines in varying degrees of elaboration and drafts for a chapter on film and theater. Kracauer did not return to the project until November 1948, after his narrow escape to the United States, after difficult years of settling in New York, after the publication of the *Caligari* book. Sources relating to this phase of the project include a “Preliminary Statement on a Study of Film Aesthetics” in English (6 November 1948), a mixed German-English summary from the Marseille notebooks (8–12 May 1949), and a typed “Tentative Outline” dated 8 September 1949, with marginalia recording critical comments by Rudolf Arnheim, Adorno, and Robert Warshow. Kracauer signed an advance contract with Oxford University Press in August 1949. The first full-length draft of the book, 192 typed pages, was probably written in 1954, when Kracauer received another grant. While this lengthy essay contains some of the basic arguments of the later book, it still lacks the attempt to generalize them into systematic oppositions (such as the “realistic” versus “formative” tendencies). Kracauer did not try to systematize his thoughts in this manner until 1955, in response to readings from film historian Arthur Knight and Oxford University Press editor Eric Larrabee. Only then did he begin to organize and reorganize the material in what he referred to as his “syllabus,” of which there are three draft versions and several schematic synopses. During this last phase, the process of revision assumes an anxious if not obsessive quality that contrasts with the final text’s aspiration to a “cool,” Olympian vision and its display of the well-turned, idiomatic phrase.5

What made Kracauer engage in such contortions? What was censored in the process of making the book into a painful caricature of the German

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5. This impression is confirmed by Kracauer’s correspondence with Adorno, Leo Lowenthal, and Rudolf Arnheim, found in the Kracauer Papers, Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar.
Fig. 1.—The first double-page of Siegfried Kracauer’s Marseille notebooks. Photo: Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar.
EINLEITUNG

A) Eine Übersicht über die Objektivität des Films


2) Der Mensch als Filmemacher: Der Mensch ist der Filmemacher, der die Filme schafft. Er ist der menschliche Wahrnehmung der Wirklichkeit.

3) Das Filmmaterial: Der Menh nach der Wahrnehmung der Wirklichkeit.

B) Die Möglichkeit, neue Geschichten zu erzählen


2) Die Geschichten der Erzähler: Die Geschichten der Erzähler sind die Geschichten der Wahrnehmung der Wirklichkeit.

3) Das Filmmaterial: Der Menh nach der Wahrnehmung der Wirklichkeit.
scholarly mind in exile? What in turn is the point of expanding the textual basis of Theory of Film?

These questions pertain to the larger project of historicizing film theory, that is, theories of film, cinema, and mass culture that are no longer current yet are somehow expected to refer to the same phenomena in our time. The word historicize in this context has come to mean a number of things. For instance, alongside the boom of new film theory that propelled the development of cinema studies during the seventies and early eighties, there have been revisionist debates on "classical" film theorists such as Sergei Eisenstein and André Bazin, attempts to reread canonical texts in their contexts of origin and reception and to confront them with contemporary questions. Likewise, there have been efforts to unearth and reprint unknown writings on film and cinema from earlier periods by a wide range of authors including filmmakers, artists, literary and cultural critics, philosophers, and social theorists. Beyond the archeological interest, the historical significance of these writings emerges from their oblique relation to the development of cinema as an institution, and to dominant modes of representation and reception. For writings of a more theoretical, speculative, and polemical nature tend to do more than merely explicate and ratify the logic of institutional development; they also give us a sense of the diverse and diverging possibilities once associated with the new medium, of roads not taken, of virtual histories that may hibernate into the present.

Whether dealing with canonical or archival texts, historicizing film theory requires both reconstructing a historical horizon for the text—the circumstances of its production, its genealogy and address, the discourses in which it might have intervened—and suggesting constellations in which it raises questions relevant to current concerns. Methodologically, the two approaches cannot be separated. Reconstructing a historical horizon is in the end only another form of constructing constellations, in Walter Benjamin's sense of juxtaposing historical images from the perspective of the present. By the same token, this perspective cannot be foreshortened to a discussion of an earlier theory's current use-value. The point is


rather to enlist its historical distance and contingency, its very historicity, in the effort to defamiliarize our own thinking on film and mass culture, to help us formulate questions that will not merely confirm what we already know.

Historicizing Kracauer’s *Theory of Film* involves not only reconstituting the history of the text, as a process rather than product, but also restoring the dimension of history in the text, as a missing term underlying key concepts and arguments. To some extent, Kracauer’s impulse to eliminate that dimension comes with the territory, the genre of “theory,” or at least the kind of theory that pitches its hypotheses at a level presumably above historical variability. One factor contributing to the repression of history in *Theory of Film* may have been Kracauer’s acceptance, late in his life, of the increased institutional division of labor among film critics, historians, and theorists. If his early writings on film and mass culture are distinguished by the attempt to mediate between these approaches (which is one aspect of his affinity with the Frankfurt School), his later works seem to resign themselves to their dissociation. The history that Kracauer tried to bracket from his film theory returns as the elusive subject of the book he considered the culmination of his work, the posthumously published *History: The Last Things before the Last* (1969).9

Let me briefly delineate some of the more specific implications of historicizing *Theory of Film*:

1. The unpublished material furnishes a bridge between Kracauer’s earliest writings on film and his later film theory, a link that is systematically repressed in the book. I am referring here to the hundreds of articles and reviews that Kracauer published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* during the early twenties, when he attempted to theorize the cinema from a historicophilosophical perspective informed by radical Jewish messianism and gnosticism.10 I am setting off this strand of Kracauer’s early film theory from the critique of ideology (roughly Marxist though early on anti-Stalinist) that came to dominate his writings in the late twenties and early thirties and that culminated in his “psychological history of German film”


10. See Levin, Siegfried Kracauer: Eine Bibliographie seiner Schriften (Marbach am Neckar, 1989). The majority of Kracauer’s articles from the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, many of which were published under pseudonyms or even anonymously, can be found in his own scrapbooks in the Kracauer Papers; many of these are reprinted in Kracauer, vol. 5, pts. 1 and 2 of *Schriften*, ed. Mülder-Bach (Frankfurt am Main, 1990). See also Miriam Hansen, “Decentric Perspectives: Kracauer’s Early Writings on Film and Mass Culture,” *New German Critique*, no. 54 (Fall 1991): 47–76.
written in exile, *From Caligari to Hitler*. The link between the unpublished material from the forties and early fifties and Kracauer’s earliest writings on film suggests that even in the book in 1960 he approaches the cinema from the problematic of the *subject*, as both a practical critique of bourgeois fictions of self-identity and a discourse for articulating the historical state of human self-alienation [Selbstentfremdung]. This perspective complicates the habitual charge against *Theory of Film* that its advocacy of “realism” is naively grounded in film’s referential relation to the material world as object.

2. The fact that Kracauer began to conceptualize *Theory of Film* in November 1940 moves the project into closer vicinity with Benjamin, who arrived in Marseille mid-August and saw the Kracauers almost every day until his attempted escape and suicide at the end of September. Kracauer and Benjamin had known, read, and corresponded with each other since 1924 and spent much time together during their years of exile in Paris. Traces of their conversation can be seen, in the Marseille notebooks and subsequent outlines, in Kracauer’s concern with “self-alienation,” a category central to Benjamin’s artwork essay, as in his focus on cinematic capacities that correspond to Benjaminian concepts such as “innervation” and the “optical unconscious.”

What is more, Kracauer makes explicit reference to Benjamin’s 1925 treatise, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*—in particular the key concepts of “allegory” and “melancholy”—and to Benjamin’s work on Baudelaire, in particular the concept of “shock” developed there. It could be argued that *Theory of Film* was designed to resume the allegorical vision of Benjamin’s tragedy book, its implicit analysis of modernity as the petrified, frozen landscape of history. But Kracauer had to rewrite this vision from the perspective of a survivor, both in the literal sense of having survived his friend’s suicide (a fate he had been seriously contemplating himself) and in a more prophetic sense of having to confront life after the apocalypse.

3. The distance between the forties materials and the later writings corresponds, at the level of intellectual history, to the transformation of


a radical Weimar critic into a cold-war liberal humanist. As Kracauer sought to conform to the standards of American academic discourse (or to what he took those standards to be), he successively repressed radical impulses that had motivated his politicophilosophical investment in film throughout: a materialist view of history, a critique of the bourgeois subject on the basis of film's affinity with a world alienated from intention, with human physiology and contingency, nothingness and death. Whether this process was triggered by any specific pressures (a number of Kracauer's friends were either victims of McCarthyist persecution, like Jay Leyda, or feared they would be, like Adorno); whether Kracauer's back was broken by his enforced exile and renunciation of his native language, as Adorno asserts; or whether it was perhaps the reinforcement of a lifelong tendency to collaborate with the status quo, as Adorno insinuates, is an open question.13

4. Because of its peculiar historicity—the adaptation of an interwar iconoclastic, apocalyptic sensibility to a world after the catastrophe—Kracauer's unpublished material may productively confound debates on the modern and the postmodern in relation to the cinema. Unlike Max Horkheimer and Adorno in their essay on the culture industry (also written in the early forties), Kracauer imagines new possibilities surfacing "within a thoroughly alienated environment" (T, p. 218). He can do so, among other reasons, because he sidesteps the opposition of autonomous art and mass culture and discerns in the latter modes of "an aesthetic behavior vis-à-vis the organized drudgery" that elude the criteria of the former.14 Concomitantly, he rejects philosophical assumptions of totality in favor of an emphasis on endlessness and process. Thus, despite apocalyptic residues in his perception and imagery, Kracauer posits film as the episteme of a postmetaphysical politics of immanence. Inscribed in this politics, however, is the hidden perspective of Auschwitz, as a critical standard by which film's engagement with the present—the material reality of the subject in history—has to be measured.

5. More than *Theory of Film*, the early drafts and outlines touch on issues that were to become central to film theory in the seventies and eighties. These include the nature of cinematic reception and subjectivity, the role of the body, the relation of narrative and nonnarrative registers, of verbal and nonverbal elements, the tension between a "classical" norm and an empirical diversity of genres. The point here is not necessarily to align Kracauer with particular positions for the sake of mutual vindication but to read him as a potential interlocutor, one who might raise questions bypassed in the more contemporary debates.

The most controversial aspects of *Theory of Film* are, on the one hand, Kracauer’s notion of reality—as “physical” or “visible” reality—and, on the other, his normative grounding of film in the “photographic approach,” his insistence that film is “essentially an extension of photography” and that “films come into their own when they record and reveal physical reality” (*T*, p. ix). These assumptions have led to the charge that Kracauer disregards other parameters of filmic representation such as editing, framing, and sound, not to mention the constructedness of any photographic image—in short, that he assumes a transparent, iconically motivated relation between sign and referent. The further charge, then, has been that the photographic affinity turns into a prescriptive ontology by excluding as “unfilmic” any film predicated on dramatic narrative and theatrical mise-en-scène. By expanding the textual basis of *Theory of Film* I hope not only to dispel these charges but to elucidate what Kracauer’s notions of “reality” and the “photographic approach” might mean in a historicized rereading of that text. I will draw primarily on the Marseille notebooks and attendant outlines, with a brief detour through Kracauer’s 1927 essay on photography.

Looking at the Marseille notebooks, one cannot help being amazed by the fact that they were written at all, considering the uncertainty, poverty, and danger that confronted Jewish refugees stranded in Vichy France. Almost as amazing as Kracauer’s determination to begin a major book on film aesthetics while waiting for escape or deportation is the way in which, in the outline toward an introduction, he reframes his interest in film. The perspective of life after the apocalypse that informs the project, paradoxically, as early as 1940 seems to have warranted a deliberate break with the writer’s concerns of the preceding fifteen years. During that period Kracauer, responding to the accelerating political crisis, had subjected the ongoing film production to a poignant critique of ideology. Now that the crisis has become an ongoing catastrophe, he retreats onto a more general, philosophical plane. Criticizing Béla Balázs’s neoromantic Marxist determinism, Kracauer rejects modes of interpretation that reduce both film history and film theory to political and social causality.

The dimension which defines the phenomenon of film at its core lies below the dimension in which political and social events take place. No doubt the mission of film is bound to a particular time but in that it does not differ from any other technical invention or planned economy which seems to prevail everywhere.


16. Marseille notebooks, Kracauer Papers, 1:3; hereafter abbreviated M. Kracauer’s
The topography matters here. Kracauer situates his project on a level "below," not above, the social and political dimension. On the same page, he anxiously notes the importance of taking into account the contingency [Zeitbedingtheit] of the interpretation itself.

What is this dimension "below" the social and political concerns that, after all, were so central in Kracauer's own writings on film from the late twenties through the thirties? And why and how does film have a privileged access to this dimension? The section on the introduction concludes with the following "anticipatory" remark:

Film brings the whole material world into play; reaching beyond theater and painting, it for the first time sets that which exists into motion. It does not aim upward, toward intention, but pushes toward the bottom, to gather and carry along even the dregs. It is interested in the refuse, in what is just there—both in and outside the human being. The face counts for nothing in film unless it includes the death's-head beneath. "Danse macabre." To which end? That remains to be seen.17

This passage telescopes key arguments of Kracauer's program of cinematic materialism: (1) that film has the ability to grasp the material world in all its elements; (2) that it engages these elements in a form of play; (3) that the direction of this engagement is downward, gravitating toward the lower regions of existence, toward phenomena that elude intentionality and interpretation; (4) that this turn to materiality corresponds to the allegorical impulse to see the death's-head beneath the human countenance, to deflate the image of the sovereign individual; and (5) that this vision

marks a decisive break with a particular kind of history, but not the end of the world.

In the first three chapters, Kracauer was planning to develop these arguments with recourse to early film history. The way early cinema figures here is quite different from the analogous move in Theory of Film, in particular the infamous and influential section on the “two main tendencies” (realistic versus formative, the Lumières versus Georges Méliès). Already the chapter headings signal a more inclusive, less dogmatic approach: “Pferdegalopp” (the galloping of horses), “Archaisches Panorama,” and “Film d’Art” (fig. 2). The example of films showing galloping horses, reminiscent of the locomotion experiments of Jules-Étienne Marey and Eadweard Muybridge, serves Kracauer to highlight the cognitive, gnoseophilic dimension of film, its ability to expand our knowledge of the material-dynamic world beyond the range of the human eye, beyond the spheres of intention and consciousness. He notes that early film’s interest in material movement (“for its own sake”) does not center on “the human” but includes animals on an equal scale, nor is it bound to the reproduction of the body as an integral shape. The motif of discovery is linked to the recording and inventory function of film, the messianic motif of gathering and carrying along [mitnehmen] the material world in all its fragments and elements—this is the sense in which Kracauer uses the word redemption that has survived in the subtitle of the book.

The second chapter, “Archaic Panorama,” was to pursue film’s erosion of intention and anthropocentrism from a wider perspective, emphasizing the diversity of genres and appeals that distinguished early cinema from later, more homogenized and integrated forms of cinema. For Kracauer, the mixture of actualities, scenes, trick films, broad physical comedy, filmed vaudeville acts, passion plays, and pornographic films conveyed a vision that treated the human figure as only one among a variety of objects or sights, a jumble of animals, children and adults, of things (like the pumpkins in La Course aux potirons), crowds, and streets. The “archaic camera,” Kracauer asserts, is “indifferent vis-à-vis objects”: while not excluding the consciously acting human being, it displays an equal interest in the “holdings” or “inventory” [Bestände] of the material world, be they factual or imagined, human or nonhuman. The appeal of such films, however, extends to more than the viewer’s scientific curiosity; before anything else, they stimulate the senses with thrills of movement, speed, and physicality. Like more recent film historians, Kracauer associates the specific appeal of early films with the milieu of popular entertainment, in particular fairgrounds, vaudeville, and variety shows, from which they emerged. A “cinema of attractions,” to use Tom Gunning’s phrase, early films not only borrowed subjects, performers, and venues from this milieu, but also an aesthetics of astonishment, sensationalism, and
Fig. 2.—Draft table of contents for Kracauer’s book on film aesthetics. Photo: Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar.
display. For Kracauer, this aesthetics is significantly inflected toward the experience of “horror” [Gruseln, Grauen] and “shock,” toward rehearsing threats to the viewer’s sense of identity, stability, and control. The third chapter was to be devoted to the genre of the film d’art, promoted by the company of the same name. This type of film, of which Assassination of the Due de Guise (1908) is the best-known example, epitomized for Kracauer a tendency antithetical to the materialistic capacities of film. In its bid for the “privileged” and “educated strata,” he charged, the film d’art imposed upon film the aesthetics of the bourgeois theater, the ideal of the “classical tragedy.” In particular, he objected to a dramatic form that implied a heretically closed, purposefully organized, and meaningful world, sealed by the inexorable law of fate in the fifth act. In Kracauer’s view, such closure “forestalls the breakthrough of material events” that film is capable of staging, and which includes the element of “chance” [Zufall], the unpredictable turn that might avert the catastrophe.

In the book, the discussion of film d’art has been moved to the section on “Composition” (T, pp. 216–18), with an emphasis on the stylistic incompatibility of theatrical and filmic registers. In the Marseille notebooks, however, this incompatibility is more prominently discussed in social and ideological terms. The theatricality of film d’art becomes a metaphor for a form of subjecthood inherited from the nineteenth century: “The subject to which the theater refers [das Bezugssubjekt des Theaters] . . . I call . . . the ‘human being in long shot’ [den Menschen der Totale]” (M, 1:13). Punning on Totale, the German word for long shot (referring, in the first instance, to the tableau style of film d’art), Kracauer gives this subject the traits of the Hegelian bourgeoisie: dominant and representative, part of an achieved, static order defined by individual consciousness, interiority, and identity. The bourgeois subject requires a distance from material realities that only the wealthy can afford (“the poor are forced to break down the long-shot perspective” [M, 1:4]). The cinema is antithetical to this perspective because of its capacity to confront “intention with being,” manifested in early films’ penchant to debunk humanistic sentiments, social conventions and hierarchies (“film looks under the table” [M, 1:5]), for which Kracauer uses the shorthand dégonflage. More fundamentally, film’s
affinity with the pulsations of material life undercuts the identical subject on the level of reception by assaulting the viewer, as it were, below the belt. If the theater garners emotional responses through the mediation of conscious understanding, the cinema affects its viewer physiologically, by means of "shocks." In other words, the "human being assigned to film" has a body, and a sexual and mortal one at that.

It should be noted here that Kracauer does not simply engage in a variant of "antitheatrical prejudice." He exempts comedy and vaudeville as genres that are "closer to the material sphere" than drama, and he finds in experimental theater a line of attack similar to that of cinema. Nor is his critique of film d'art necessarily anti-illusionist; even in the book he prefers Méliès for creating transformational effects by means of specifically cinematic devices. Rather, the aesthetic principles he ascribes (rightly or wrongly) to film d'art and classical tragedy—closure, linearity, intentionality—are by and large identical with the principles of the classical narrative film as they were being formulated between 1907 and 1917, primarily in the United States: principles of clarity, compositional unity, and thorough motivation centering on the actions of psychologically delineated, individualized characters. The polemic against film d'art is thus only a prelude to the more productive discussion (which takes up much of the second of the Marseille notebooks) dealing with the "antinomies of the narrative film." It should also be noted that Kracauer, in the early stages of the book, cautions against generalizing about the narrative film, and insists on the necessity, for any film theory, to differentiate among a variety of narrative, as well as nonnarrative, genres (see M, 1:2).

In the first three chapters, Kracauer develops key motifs of his theoretical program—discovery, inventory, shock, dégonflage, chance—from the phenomenal diversity of the ways in which early cinema engages the material world. In the subsequent chapters he was planning to adumbrate,
in a more systematic way, his notion of the material world or material dimension and the repeated assertion that “film enacts the historical turn to materiality.” This seems to have been the task of the two rather huge, partly overlapping chapters entitled “Mit Haut und Haaren” [with root and branch; literally, with skin and hair] and “Die Grundschicht” [the basic layer]. While the former explores the material dimension in terms of the aspects of materiality involved in film, the latter does so through an enumeration of genres, techniques, and motifs in which “film is in its basic layer” (M, 1:30). The overlap between the two chapters points to a certain circularity, if not tautology, in Kracauer’s argument: the material dimension is that which film has the ability, and therefore obligation, to grasp; film comes into its own when it grasps the material dimension. In the process of revision, he seems to have dealt with this problem by distilling the chapter entitled “With Skin and Hair” into “The Spectator” and by reifying the notion of a “basic layer” into basic “properties of the medium,” “functions,” and “affinities” of film.

While clearly somewhat underconceptualized, the notion of the material dimension outlined in these chapters is far more comprehensive and complex than the concept of “physical reality” that appears to govern the later book. For one thing, the material dimension does not reduce to the “visible world around us” (T, p. ix) but involves other senses as well; some of the most interesting notes concern the “acoustic basic layer,” the materiality of sound, of music, noise, and speech, a topic to which Kracauer had devoted several important essays in the early thirties and to which he returns in chapters 7 and 8 of Theory of Film. For another, the status of the material dimension in the Marseille notebooks is not merely that of an object of representation, let alone that of a referent to which film relates in a presumably analogical, unmediated manner; as I will elaborate, the material dimension crucially includes the subject and the subject’s relation to the Other.

To the extent that the material world does figure as a representational object, it is an object without telos, a virtually endless, open field—an object that may exist on a real or an imaginary plane. “In contrast with the theater . . . film mixes the whole world into play, be that world real or imagined.” Hence trick films and animation are as much part of the project at this stage as live-action film. Even more surprisingly, Kracauer goes on to qualify the standard of totality not, as one might expect, in terms of the possible contents of that world but in terms of the materials of representation: “the whole world in every sense: from the beginning film aimed to include sound, speech and color” (M, 1:16).

Throughout the Marseille notebooks, Kracauer discusses the

23. The definition Kracauer gives in Theory of Film seems deliberately confusing: “Physical reality will also be called ‘material reality,’ or ‘physical existence,’ or ‘actuality,’ or loosely just ‘nature.’ Another fitting term might be ‘camera-reality’” (p. 28).
materiality of filmic representation in terms of specifically cinematic techniques such as variable framing, lighting, montage, slow motion, time-lapse and trick photography, and sound. What is more, when it comes to the question of decor or setting, he does not seem to worry too much about whether the materiality conveyed is that of a real object or its substitute: “As much as film in representing the real world demands material authenticity in the interest of conquering the material dimension, what matters is not an authenticity of objects but the impression of authentic objects” (M, 2:8).24 While in a historical spectacle, for instance, even authentic settings may look staged and theatrical, the opposite may be the case in films that portray imaginary phenomena such as dreams, visions, and fantasies, or animated films and films using trick photography (for example, Death riding through the clouds in Jean Renoir’s La Petite Marchande d’allumettes [1928] or the concluding scene of Fritz Lang’s Liliom [1935]).25 The issue is not reality or realism, but rather materiality, more specifically “the process of materialization” (M, 2:9).

This process of materialization presumes a cognitive interest directed, paradoxically, against the imposition of conscious, intentional structures on the material world. This world, however, is not an untouched, objective reality out there, but rather an alienated historical reality, a reality that comprises both human and nonhuman physis. For Kracauer, the materialist gaze reveals a historical state of alienation and disintegration, giving the lie to any belated humanist efforts to cover it up and thus promoting the process of demythologization. This is why Kracauer, even in the later book, insists on the “photographic approach.” He does so in full awareness of the many ways in which photographic images are constructed and manipulated; he warns, for instance, of the ideological function of filmic images claiming to be showing a “real event,” asserting the status of “indisputable evidence (or rather pseudo-evidence)” (M, 1:27). If he seeks to ground his film aesthetics in the medium of photography, it is not because of the iconicity of the photographic sign, the referential illusion it creates, but because of its temporality, the arbitrary moment of the snapshot or “instantaneous photograph” [Momentaufnahme] and the deferred-action status of all its meanings. For Kracauer, the politicophilosophical significance of photography does not rest with the ability to reflect its object as real but rather with the ability to render it strange.

24. See also the first full-length draft in English (1954), pp. 39–40. Similar formulations can be found in Theory of Film, but the emphasis on indexical materiality has given way to iconic similarity: “recourse to staging is most certainly legitimate if the staged world is made to appear as a faithful reproduction of the real one” (p. 34).

25. Also see the German-English summary, 1949, p. 5: “The unreal, consciously ironical [quality] of dream scenes in Chaplin and René Clair is much better than Disney’s attempt to make his imagined settings look real.” In his earliest reviews, Kracauer made a point of endorsing films that used fantasy and fairy-tale elements and stressed the irreality of the material world; see Hansen, “Decentric Perspectives,” p. 55.
The section on the photographic approach in Theory of Film (pp. 13–18) belongs to the earliest layers of the text and provides the strongest link with Kracauer’s work of the twenties. 26 To illustrate his notion of the photographic approach, he quotes a passage from Marcel Proust’s The Guermantes Way in which the narrator, after a long absence, enters, unannounced, the drawing room of his grandmother. Instead of the beloved person, he sees, “‘sitting on the sofa, beneath the lamp, red-faced, heavy and common, sick, lost in thought, following the lines of a book with eyes that seemed hardly sane, a dejected old woman whom I did not know’” (T, p. 14). Proust’s narrator compares this terrifying sight of his grandmother to a photograph, as the antithesis of a vision charged with familiarity, intimacy, and memory. The arbitrary, split-second exposure of the photographic apparatus that for a moment suspends habit, interpretation, and intention epitomizes the view of a stranger, of “eyes that obviate our love.” 27

This is not the first grandmother that Kracauer makes into an exemplum of the historicphilosophical significance of photography. The image of the grandmother evokes Kracauer’s great essay “Photography” of 1927, a text that entwines both the philosophy of history perspective and the critique of ideology approach of Kracauer’s early film theory. 28 In that essay, Kracauer compares two kinds of photographs, that of a “demonic diva” on the cover of an illustrated magazine and that of an unspecified grandmother, possibly Kracauer’s own. Both images show women twenty-four years old; both images, but especially that of the grandmother, undergo a dialectical transformation in the course of the essay.

The photograph of the film star figures as a synecdoche for the new culture of industrial image making that Kracauer sees proliferating in the


analyzing photographic illustrated magazines and newsreels. This “blizzard” [Schneegestöber] of photographic images is indifferent toward the particular referent, toward the meanings and history of the things portrayed; rather, it extends laterally to create a presence effect of imperial, global dimensions. But the more the illustrated magazines purport to show their readers the whole world, the less those readers will be capable of perceiving that world. In analyzing this process of social blinding, Kracauer does not suggest that photography is encroaching on a presumably unmediated reality. Rather, “photographability” has become the condition under which reality is constituted and perceived: “the world itself has taken on a ‘photographic face’” (“P,” p. 433). Like later theorists of photography, Kracauer reads the increased circulation of photographic images as a sign of both the fear of death and its repression. Seeking to eternalize its objects in all spatial dimensions, however, the photographic present does not banish the thought of death but succumbs to it all the more.

The photograph of the grandmother both extends and complicates this argument. Kracauer contrasts the photographic image of the grandmother with the “memory image,” which is ultimately condensed in the “monogram of the remembered life” (“P,” p. 429). For those who still knew the grandmother, the memory image fleshes out and revises the photographic image. But later generations perceive in the photograph of the grandmother only a specter in an outmoded costume, a bad amalgamation of disintegrated elements. It is not the preserved presence of the grandmother that moves the beholder but, on the contrary, her reduction to a spatialized configuration of time. This is what makes the beholder of old photographs shudder (“P,” p. 431)—and makes the grandchildren giggle in defense. Like Proust’s involuntary sight of his grandmother, Kracauer’s photograph is disturbing because it alienates both object and beholder, because it ruptures the web of intimacy, memory, and interpretation.

For Benjamin, in his essay on photography written four years later and in awareness of Kracauer’s, there is still something in the figures of early photographs “that cannot be silenced”; something that compels the beholder “to look for that tiny spark of chance, of the here and now, with which reality has, as it were, seared the character in the picture; to find that imperceptible point at which, in the immediacy of that long-past moment, the future so persuasively inserts itself that, looking back, we may rediscover it.”29 The grandmother in the photograph that Kracauer is looking at does not return the gaze across generations. For Kracauer, less overtly messianic than his friend, the breeze of the future that makes the beholder shudder is that of his own material contingency: “Those things once clung to us like our skin, and this is how our property still

clings to us today. We are contained in nothing and photography assembles fragments around a nothing” (“P,” p. 431). The photograph thus in fact enables, rather than prevents, a momentary encounter with mortality, an awareness of a history that does not include us.30

It is in such moments of almost physical recognition that Kracauer grants photography the potential to offer an antidote to its own positivist ideology, its complicity with the social repression of death. By the end of the essay, the very negativity of photography, its role in the erosion of the “memory image,” assumes a key function in the historical confrontation of human consciousness with nature (which for Kracauer, as for Benjamin, comprises both inner and outer, first and second nature). For photography provides a “general inventory,” a “central archive” that assembles, “in effigy the last elements of nature alienated from intention” (“P,” p. 435). In this inventory the image of the diva will take its place next to that of the grandmother and the former’s bangs will provoke a similar reaction as the latter’s chignon.

The “unexamined foundation of nature” that photography enables us to confront corresponds to the historical state of industrial capitalist production that has created, as a seemingly autonomous reality, a society that has reverted to the state of nature:

One can well imagine a society that has succumbed to mute nature that has no meaning no matter how abstract its silence. The contours of such a society emerge in the illustrated journals. Were it to last, the consequence of the emancipation of consciousness would be its own eradication; nature that consciousness failed to penetrate would sit down at the very table that consciousness had abandoned. Were this society not to prevail, however, then liberated consciousness would be given an incomparable opportunity. Less enmeshed in the natural bonds than ever before, it can prove its power in dealing with them. The turn to photography is the go-for-broke game of history [das Vabanque-Spiel der Geschichte]. [“P,” pp. 434–35]

Photography, while complicit with the blind reproduction of nature, also has “provoked the decisive confrontation in every field.” For its inbuilt alienation effect ruptures the ostensible coherence of dominant publicity and reflects the disintegrated fragments of nature as detritus and disorder. Thus it assists consciousness in pointing up the “provisional status of all given configurations,” “the suspension of every habitual relationship among the elements of nature.” If Kracauer finds a model of such photographic negativity in the writings of Franz Kafka, he conjoins both—along with the logic of dreams—in his projection of the radical potential

of film: “The capacity to stir up the elements of nature is one of the possibilities of film” (“P,” p. 436).31

This is the perspective Kracauer resumes in the Marseille Notebooks. The paradigm of photography informs his project of film aesthetics in basically two directions: toward an emphasis on the recording or inventory function of film (the documentary function of discovering, commenting on, and “carrying along” the disintegrated elements of the material world), and toward an emphasis on the messianic-materialist task of “[stirring] up the elements of nature,” of “bringing them into play,” of breaking up an anthropocentric worldview and confronting the viewer with the actual state of disorder and crisis.

Much more than in the book, Kracauer stresses the active, interventionist manner in which film translates the photographic approach into cinematic terms. Among the “chances of alienation” available to film, he lists framing, the choice among different distance ranges, angles, and static versus mobile shots, along with the “multiplicity of perspectives” provided by the principle of montage (M, 1:19–20, 2:2). Using the example of Soviet cinema, he draws attention to the link between cinematic framing and sociopolitical positions suggested by the German word Einstellung (which means both “shot” or “frame” and “attitude”). Just as the close-up can isolate fragments and details that elude our habitual attention and thus lends material presence to the small and insignificant, extreme long shots and mobile framing can bring into view complexes that exceed the range of the human eye: the masses, the street (with all its “annexes”), wars and disasters—complexes that belong to the unexamined natural foundation of the contemporary political crisis (“P,” p. 435).

If in the book the various ways in which film engages material reality (for example, in the sections called “Recording Functions” and “Revealing Functions” and in a chapter called “Inherent Affinities”) often read like a catalog of aesthetic motifs or a celebration of the “marvels of everyday life” (T, p. xi), in the Marseille notebooks they still appear under the perspective of phenomena that push the boundaries of individual consciousness. Kracauer distinguishes between phenomena that do not usually enter consciousness—the random and ephemeral, refuse and the obsolescent, the familiar and habitual—and phenomena that demolish consciousness: material sensations and shocks, vertiginous angles and motion; sights of horror, torture, executions, catastrophes. “The representation of hor-

ror in film is legitimate because film has the capability and therefore the obligation to reveal the material dimension in its utmost limits" (M, 1:36).

In the book, the relation of film and horror plays a relatively minor role and is explicitly addressed, only briefly, in the section entitled "The Head of Medusa." In the Marseille notebooks, however, the dimensions of horror and catastrophe constitute a framing assumption of Kracauer's concept of the material world; everything in that universe is, before anything else, a fragment of a fallen world, a landscape of ruins and corpses reminiscent of Benjamin's book on the Baroque tragic drama. As in the photography essay, this world of death "in its independence from human beings" ("P," p. 435) is not just an objective correlative of an existential human condition manifesting the distance from a hidden God; it is, above all, a historical configuration that makes human beings in the twentieth century confront their social reality as second nature, as seemingly independent, alien and monstrous, intransigent to political argument and agency.

If film makes us confront this historical physis, it does so not only on the level of representation and subject matter but, more fundamentally, on the level of reception, through the ways in which it engages the viewer as subject. As I said earlier, the discussion of the material dimension in the chapter "With Skin and Hair" crucially concerns the subject, the "human being assigned to" or addressed by film. Resuming his earlier comparison with the "subject assigned to theater" ("the human being in long shot"), Kracauer reiterates that film by contrast addresses its viewer as a "corporeal-material being"; it seizes the "human being with skin and hair": "The material elements that present themselves in film directly stimulate the material layers of the human being: his nerves, his senses, his entire physiological substance" (M, 1:23). Pointing to the example of "archaic pornographic flicks," Kracauer comes close to describing the physical, tactile dimension of film spectatorship in sexual terms (though not in terms of gender); in striving for sensual, physiological stimulation, he notes, such "flicks" realize film's potential in general.32

Like photography, film can destabilize its viewer by staging involuntary encounters with material contingency and mortality. Discussing film's capacity to materialize phenomena that elude our consciousness,

Kracauer cites films that isolate objects and milieux from the human beings with which they are habitually and intimately entwined, and thus succeed in confronting us as Other (Jacques Feyder's Thérèse Raquin [1928], Jean Vigo's L'Atalante [1934]). As with watching old films, a "shudder" seizes us looking at them. In this furniture did we dwell, did we suffer? It is as if we were suddenly confronting the decayed parts of our lived life" (M, 1:34–35).

Beyond photography, however, the material structure of film—the discontinuity of individual frames and shots—predisposes it to enter into the "region of shock," "the dark depths of the material dimension, where push and pressure rule beyond the reach of meaning" (M, 2:2, 1:35). If the subject of bourgeois theater is reaffirmed by a unity of vision and continuity of consciousness, the cinema undermines such fictions by its direct attacks on the viewer's senses: "The 'ego' of the human being assigned to film is subject to permanent dissolution, is incessantly exploded by material phenomena" (M, 1:23). Hence the cinema, like psychoanalysis, raises the question—and suggests the possibility—of a form of subjectivity that is not predicated on the unity and self-identity of the bourgeois individual.

While human beings' longing "to commune with the depths of their physis, to suffer and administer shocks" has an ancient lineage, Kracauer relates the cinema to the historical proliferation of the shock experience with modern technology and the emergence of the urban masses, and the erosion of traditions that used to protect people against shock (M, 1:35, 37). (This is why he considers the city street such a privileged locus of cinematic specificity—not because it makes a picturesque icon of modern urban life, but because it figures as the historical arena of shock and chance.) If Kracauer shares with Benjamin the notion of shock (though not quite in the technical, Freudian sense elaborated in the latter's essay on Baudelaire), he also adopts his friend's argument about film's historical

33. This region of "psychophysical correspondences" (as Kracauer was to call them in the book) overlaps with Benjamin's notion of an "optical unconscious," less in the sense in which it appears in "A Short History of Photography" than the way he elaborates that notion in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935–36), Illuminations, pp. 236ff. The motif of nature (or, one hopes, the alienated world of things) returning the gaze, crucial to Benjamin's notion of "aura" and its decline, was also key to the film theory of Béla Balázs. See Koch, "Béla Balázs: The Physiognomy of Things," trans. Hansen, New German Critique, no. 40 (Winter 1987): 167–77. If Kracauer repeatedly criticized Balázs as neo-romantic, it was as much because of Balázs's premodern, unrefracted form of physiognomy as his naive communism.

34. Kracauer quotes an observation by Geneviève du Loup: "In the theater I always remain myself; in the cinema I am in all things and beings. Therefore I always feel lonely when I return to myself after a film" (M, 1:23). The quotation still appears, though slightly differently, in the chapter on the spectator in Theory of Film (p. 159), though without the last sentence. Kracauer himself describes this process of self-loss and blending with the images on the screen quite graphically in his early essay on boredom, "Langeweile" (1924), vol. 5, pt. 1 of Schriften, pp. 278–81.
function of providing a perceptual training ground for an industrially transformed physis—a function for which Benjamin uses the elusive term innervation.\(^{35}\) In its bid for the dynamic material world, Kracauer speculates, “film raises consciousness—and the sensorium?—to the level of technology,” at which point he inserts a note on the “non-contemporaneity” [Ungleichzeitigkeit] of consciousness.\(^{36}\) He even considers the possibility, though less assertively than Benjamin, that the cinematic staging of shocks could have a homoeopathic effect: “The representation of catastrophes may offer a technology to master them” (M, 1:28).\(^{37}\)

Given the emphasis on the shock experience, it is not surprising that slapstick comedy [Groteske]—along with, but more prominently than, the documentary—becomes the paradigmatic genre of film in its “basic layer.” From his earliest reviews, slapstick comedy (for example, that of Mack Sennett, Harold Lloyd, the early Chaplin) ranked high in Kracauer’s attempt to theorize film as a discourse of experience in a fallen, disintegrating, and fragmented world. Like no other genre, slapstick comedy brought into play the historical imbrication of the animate and inanimate worlds, with its physical clashes of human beings turned into things and objects assuming a life of their own. In the Marseille notebooks, Kracauer resumes his early endorsement of slapstick comedy (despite occasional complaints about it in the late twenties and thirties) as a genre that systematically confronts intentionality with “material life at its crudest” (“the shock troops of unconquered nature”), a genre whose sole purpose, he asserts, is “to perform games in the material dimension” (M, 1:39–40). While it is sociologically relevant that slapstick comedy flourished in the United States (as a response to the most advanced forms of capitalist rationalization),\(^{38}\) it assumes a more general significance in the

35. Derived from psychoanalytic discourse, the term innervation was used by Benjamin for conceptualizing historical transformation as a process of converting images into somatic and collective reality. In that sense, he speaks of “the revolution as an innervation of the technical organs of the collective” ([Gesammelte Schriften], 5:777). See Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,” p. 17, and Hansen, “Of Mice and Ducks,” p. 38.

36. The concept of Ungleichzeitigkeit was developed by Ernst Bloch in *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice (1935; Berkeley, 1991), pt. 1, where it is used toward an analysis of the origins of fascism.

37. For Benjamin this possibility was indicated by the infectious laughter unleashed by “figures of the collective dream such as the globe-orbiting Mickey Mouse.” If technology has created mass psychoses, it also offers a kind of “psychic inoculation” by means of films that advance an articulation of sadistic fantasies and masochistic delusions and thus “can prevent their natural and dangerous ripening in the masses.” The collective laughter signifies a premature and therapeutic eruption of such mass psychoses” (Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit” [2d version], [Gesammelte Schriften], 7:377). See also Hansen, “Of Mice and Ducks,” pp. 31ff.

38. Kracauer reflects on the passage of the genre from France to the United States (M, 1:40). In a review of 1926 he writes: “One has to hand this to the Americans: with slapstick films they have created a form that offers a counterweight to their reality: if in that reality
cinema’s role in the historical restructuring of subjectivity. With its shocklike, “discontinuous” sequence of gags, which Kracauer compares to the “sputtering of a machine gun,” slapstick comedy undercuts the closure of theatrical narrative and the attendant assumption of a coherent, identical subject (M, 2:2–3). More specifically, the material games slapstick comedy performs take place “on the brink of the abyss”; it engages, in a ludic form, the threat of annihilation.39 “The leitmotif of slapstick comedy is the play with danger, with catastrophe, and its prevention in the nick of time” (M, 1:37). In Theory of Film, slapstick comedy has become altogether marginalized, and the genre’s gamble with catastrophe is transmuted into a mere “toying with physical existence” (T, p. 88).

As Kracauer clearly knows, the slapstick genre ended by and large with the silent era. It nonetheless assumes a paradigmatic function in the Marseille notebooks for several reasons. For one thing, it prompts reflections on the relation between muteness and verbal language in film, on the material dimensions of noise and speech versus the hegemony of dialogue, and on the language character of filmic “figures” and “syntax” (M, 2:44–47, 3:1–2).40 For another, slapstick comedy undermines the principle of “theatrical” narrative, the closed dramaturgy of the fiction film. If the latter “endows all material phenomena with significance, creating among them a hierarchy of meanings,” the former, with its “endless action” of shocks, movements, and gags (M, 2:1ff.) allows material phenomena to retain their own, centrifugal gravity. The opposition of material endlessness and fictional closure is a genuine antinomy for Kracauer, not simply an alternative. As long as narrative films preserve the tension between the two, “the action below the action,” as long as they, like the mythical giant Antaeus, keep touching earth, the material dimension, films can tell stories and still remain close to the “basic layer” (M, 1:42).

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39. This connotation still resonates in the German term Groteske, which derives from the Italian word grotta (grotto, cave, or crypt) and was coined for the Baroque style of decorating such spaces, among other things, with skulls. The close cohabitation of horror and comedy, which is considered typical of the dramatic genre of the grotesque, is grounded in the genre’s claim to represent an objectively distorted, cruel, and disjointed reality (as opposed to the more totalizing, nonrealistic perspective of the absurd). See Arnold Heidsieck, Das Groteske und das Absurde im modernen Drama (Stuttgart, 1969).

Film challenges traditional notions of aesthetic totality (an organicist relation between the whole and the elements) not only because of its affinity with the endless material world outside but, more profoundly, because of the way in which it affects the viewing subject: “it communicates less as a whole with consciousness than in a fragmentary manner with the corporeal-material layers” (M, 2:6). However skeptical Kracauer may have become, in the closing days of the Weimar Republic, about the cult of “distraction” [Zerstreuung], in the Marseille notebooks he returns to that concept so as to justify an aesthetics of disintegration that goes way beyond the diversion of cosmopolitan audiences (M, 2:6).41 Predicated on reception, Kracauer’s antisymbolic, antihermeneutic program forgoes even the high-modernist option of organizing fragments and ruptures into a problematic totality. As he records Adorno’s reservation against using the term dialectical in the 1949 outline (rather, “the artistic totality in the film comes about by the organization of disintegration”), he goes on to misread Adorno by replacing the notion of the work’s totality (“the meaning of the whole”) with a minimalist aesthetics of reception: “Most important: not to speak of dialectical process in the film. Disintegration goes beyond dialectics. And the task is to marshall disintegration itself, so as to transform the irrelevant contingencies of life into stimuli of esthetic experience” (fig. 3).42

With his attempt to define cinematic materiality from the perspective of the subject, Kracauer anticipates a major concern of psychoanalytic semiotic film theory of the seventies. This trajectory, however, also throws into relief a significant distinction. Theorists such as Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz have described the cinema as an apparatus that

41. See his earlier valorization of the category as a practical critique of bourgeois culture in “Cult of Distraction: On Berlin’s Picture Palaces” (1926), trans. Levin, New German Critique, no. 40 (Winter 1987): 91–114. See also his defense of “diversion” against Paul Valéry in the first English draft (1954, pp. 117f.; a much-weakened version is in T, pp. 285ff.). Kracauer’s aesthetics of disintegration is an argument both about the centrifugal quality of filmic signs and about the disjuncture of memory and narrative temporality (“what one tends to remember of a film is less the overall plot than individual scenes” [M, 2:28; see also the German-English summary, p. 7]).

42. “Tentative Outline,” pp. 14, 14a. The complete comment, as recorded by Kracauer:

Teddie says the term “dialectical” is too weak because such a process between the whole and its elements occurs in any work of art. What happens in the film is, according to Teddie, this: the artistic totality in the film comes about by the organization of disintegration. As Teddie says: die Bruchstellen zwischen den Fragmenten stellen die Chiffreschrift dar die den Sinn des Ganzen ergibt [the ruptures between the fragments represent the cyphered script which yields the meaning of the whole]. That is, the organizing principle asserts itself in the “montage” of the disruptions. Most important: not to speak of dialectical process in the film. Disintegration goes beyond dialectic.

These marginalia appear in a section on “the whole and the elements” that begins with a critique of Eisenstein’s turn to organicism.
fails to take into account the problematic position of the whole in the cinematic medium. All those who, like him, characterize the film in terms of conventional typical of traditional aesthetics — as if the perfect film were a work of art in the traditional sense — overlook its connection with photography and its ensuing documentary tendency. The unbridled cord between film shot and snapshot cannot be cut. Therefore it is by no means natural for films to crystallize into finite wholes; rather, they tend to interfere with the formation of such wholes in a permanent effort to lay bare alienated phenomena. The principles of composition and disintegration clash with each other on the screen. And some fragments of material existence, perceptible only after removal of all compositional patterns, may well prove more incisive than the beautiful adequacy of these patterns themselves. It is true that, as Eisenstein has it, the elements of a film serve to build up the whole of the film; but it is equally true that the whole serves the exhibition of various phenomena which point beyond it to the infinity of life. Such as the surgeon's pince-nez, entangled in the ropes of the surgery, stands for the surgeon himself, it also appears in its own right — an object aglow with multiple meanings which only in part refer to its drowned owner.

To sum up, fiction films inevitably engage in a dialectical process between a potential whole and the elements of which it may consist. 

But how can the film mean both suppose and decompose a whole without falling into plain absurdity? About his artistic intentions: Like Plato's imaginary spectator, mentioned above, he must be so instructed with 

\footnote{Of course, paintings or literary works may also engage in such a dialectical process. But the film goes farthest in this direction. There are periods in which the detail wins out and periods in which the whole is emphasized at the expense of its elements. (See Wölflin: "Renaissance and Baroque"). For the time being general condi-}

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interpellates its viewer as subject by binding pleasure and meaning to a position of imaginary unity and mastery. Feminist critics such as Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane have analyzed this position as specifically male, predicated as it is on sadistic and fetishistic variants of voyeurism. 45

In both cases, spectatorship is posited as a process of identification that abstracts the viewer from his own body, links his accession to subjecthood to a proper distance from both spectacle and the material conditions of perception. 44

Kracauer, by contrast, seems interested in almost the opposite: the way in which the cinema involves the viewer’s physiological base, assaults the boundaries of an ostensibly coherent, autonomous self. This aligns him with a somewhat different trajectory, one to which I can allude here only in the barest bibliographic terms. In particular, more recent inquiries into the nature of cinematic pleasure have stressed the masochistic components of spectatorship and the ways in which they problematize socially dominant standards of masculinity. 45 Also, studies devoted to particular genres—pornography and horror in particular—have reinserted the viewer’s body into the debate on the cinema’s articulation of subjectivity,


44. The model of perception assumed in these theories of cinematic spectatorship is usually that of the camera obscura, grounded in principles of monocular vision and geometric perspective and the separation of viewing subject and spectacle—in Kracauer’s terminology, the long-shot perspective of the theater. However, as Crary has argued, the demise of that model was not brought about by the advent of modernist painting toward the end of the nineteenth century, but happened much earlier in the century with the emergence of research and techniques of observation that located vision “in the empirical immediacy of the observer’s body.” “It is a moment when the visible escapes from the timeless order of the camera obscura and becomes lodged in another apparatus, within the unstable physiology and temporality of the human body” (Crary, Techniques of the Observer, pp. 24, 70). If, as film theorists of the seventies such as Comolli and Heath have claimed, the camera obscura model was indeed resurrected with classical cinema, with the elaboration of continuity codes and a closed diegesis, it competed with—and tried to integrate—an already long-standing alternative conception of vision. On the ambivalent position of photography in this genealogy, see also ibid., pp. 133, 136.

sexuality, and gender. If film theory of the seventies proceeded from the norm of a monolithically conceived "classical cinema," defined by a tight economy of narrative and scopic registers, recent scholarship has focused on the margins of and fissures within the cinematic institution, questioning the hold of that economy. Among other things, this has spawned a renewed interest in the nonnarrative aspects of cinema, a concern that links Kracauer's film theory—via Bergson—with that of Gilles Deleuze.

Beyond film theory, Kracauer's notion of cinematic subjectivity could be read in conjunction with Sartre's chapter on "the look" in Being and Nothingness, his elaboration of the category of "the Other" as a decentering, destabilizing irruption into the visual field, as well as Lacan's radicalization of Sartre in his essay "Of the Gaze as Objet Petit a."

For Kracauer, the subject to which the cinema referred was not only a philosophical and psychosexual term, but had a highly specific historical profile. He accorded film a key role in the ongoing crisis because he believed that the cinema could stage, in an institutionally bounded form of play, encounters with contingency and temporality, objectification and loss, disintegration and annihilation. From the midtwenties on, Kracauer had analyzed the political struggle surrounding the media of consumer culture as a question of the fear, denial, and confrontation of death. As in the essay on photography, he increasingly read the proliferation of illustrated magazines, newsreels, "society films," the whole industry of "distraction," as symptoms of a society trying to evade its material foundations: "The flight of the images is the flight from revolution and


from death."

At the same time, since the photographic media also exposed the viewer to involuntary encounters with mortality (the turn of the photography essay) and to physical shocks, they offered a chance for a general and public reflection on death. During the heightening crisis of the Weimar Republic, such a reflection was called for not only by the persisting trauma of technological mass destruction in World War I and the mutilation of bodies and minds in Taylorized production and consumption; more pressingly, it was mandated in view of the powerful defenses deployed against these traumas, from the false resurrections of bourgeois individuality (for example, the Stefan George cult) to protofascist fantasies of the male body as armor.\(^50\) The question for Kracauer was how film could turn its *material disposition* toward a confrontation with death into a conscious *aesthetic and political practice*, whether and how it could enable new forms of experience and subjectivity after the death of the Subject.

In the published version of *Theory of Film*, this historicophilosophical, political perspective all but disappeared. The problematic of the subject has been segregated, on the one hand, into the chapter on "the spectator" and, on the other, into the general philosophical reflections of the epilogue. Without skin and hair, the material dimension has concealed into an alienated object, a "physical reality" whose shared root with physis and physiology has been supplanted with vague references to modern physics (see *T*, p. 52).\(^51\) To the extent that the experience of shock, disintegration, and self-abandonment has survived into the chapter on the spectator, it is domesticated, rationalized in terms of compensatory functions; the violent irruptions of an alien nature are relegated to the "twilight region of psychophysical correspondences" (*T*, p. 225). Above all, the analysis of the cinematic experience is no longer linked to the crisis and restructuring of the subject, let alone the social discourse on death.

What distinguishes Kracauer's *Theory of Film* from both his early essays and the Marseille notebooks is not only the dimension of history in the text but also the changed historical situation. The Proustian grand-


51. In the "Tentative Outline" Kracauer explains that the term *material world* indicates "that this world is not basically structured by ideas, value judgments, desires, etc.," but is a "world analogous to that of science" and, in a typed-in note, adds that "it may prove advisable to replace the term 'material' by the term 'physical.'" Considering the materialist connotations of the former term (see n. 20 above), it may not be too farfetched to read this ominous impersonal construction ("it may prove advisable") in light of the fact that Kracauer was writing at the height of McCarthyism.
mother of the film book and that of the photography essay may or may not be the same; but, as Schliipmann points out, the alternative between the two kinds of photograph—the ideological positivity of the diva and the radical negativity of the grandmother—no longer exists. The “go-for-broke game” of the historical process has been lost on an unprecedented scale: the catastrophe has occurred, but the Messiah did not come. With the triumph of fascism, nature did actually “sit down at the table that consciousness had abandoned.” As early as 1940, Kracauer’s thoughts on film revolve around the question of how to continue living after having survived, after the unimaginable has become reality—the question of a happy ending under erasure. In that context, I will briefly return to the significance of slapstick comedy.

In the Marseille notebooks, slapstick assumes a privileged place not only on account of its affinity with the unintentional dynamics of an alienated material world but also because it opens up the “tiny gate” for overcoming the catastrophe, for imagining life after the apocalypse. The prevention of the catastrophe in the nick of time is not the result of the intervention of divine fate as it is in melodrama. On the contrary, danger is averted by virtue of chance, by the same principle that sets into motion the orgies of demolition and disintegration that assault the boundaries of the subject in the first place—the “accidental” rather than the “providential.” The category of “chance,” which affiliates Kracauer with both the surrealists and, proleptically, with aleatory artists such as John Cage, is anything but a melodramatic Deus ex Machina. It is radically anti- or post-metaphysical, diametrically opposed to notions of destiny or fate [Schicksal] that Kracauer associates with the work of Fritz Lang. Like shock, chance for Kracauer is a historical category, the signature of modernity; it arises with “the entry of the masses into history,” with the emergence of a public sphere that is unpredictable and volatile, with public spaces such as the urban street and movie theaters (M, 2:28–30).

The last-minute rescue in slapstick comedy represents a happy ending under erasure, as Kracauer remarks about the ending of Chaplin’s films, an injunction that says “we must go on living.” Because of their utopian character, these endings remain necessarily provisional: “a promise that, like a mirage [Fata Morgana], flashes up in the desert of existence” (M, 2:33). The resilience of the silent clowns reverberates with the utopian promises of the fairy tale; it is also a variant on the biblical legend of David and Goliath, which for Kracauer is a running political motif dramatizing the counterfactual victory of the weak and powerless against brute force.

By the fifties, it was no longer possible to hope that the catastrophe

53. The title of this projected chapter, “Gestalt und Zufall” [shape and chance], echoes the title of Kracauer’s programmatic essay “Gestalt und Zerfall” [shape and disintegration] (1925), vol. 5, pt. 1 of Schriften, pp. 324–38.
could still be averted. The utopian motif of the last-minute rescue is generalized into a more modest project of redemption, of film’s task to pick up the pieces in the petrified landscape of “physical reality.” What has all but disappeared from this project of redemption in the book is the catastrophe that created that landscape, and with it the problematics of death. The emblem of the death’s-head beneath the face had presided over the project as an epigraph (German-English summary) and a never-realized concluding chapter; in the final form it has vanished without explanation. Beginning with the first chapter breakdown (19 November 1940), the final chapter of the book was to be called, variably, “Kermesse funèbre,” “Danse macabre” or “The death’s-head.” The 1949 outline specifies that this chapter was to center “around an analysis of death day, a short assembled from Eisenstein’s Mexican material,” and asserts that it “will not only summarize the whole of the book but formulate certain ultimate conclusions.” According to a note, Kracauer was still discussing this chapter with Jay Leyda as late as 6 January 1955—heading: “‘Death Day’ and (contemporary Am. Film)—but in the contents page of 15 January it is replaced with the “Epilogue: The Redemption of Physical Existence.”

The historical break of the Holocaust irrevocably changed the conditions under which film could still be constructed as a publicly available medium for experiencing and reflecting on the problematics of death. Kracauer had invested hope in the cinema because it seemed to promise the possibility of acknowledging death in a collective and intersubjective form. If the death of the subject, as stated in various ways by the twenties modernists, still referred to a nineteenth-century conception of the individual, the Holocaust presented the problematics of what Edith Wyschogrod calls “man-made mass death” on a historically unprecedented scale—the possibility of the annihilation of a collective subject, an entire genus.54

Theory of Film still assumes a postapocalyptic, allegorical landscape, to be sure, but from that landscape even the traces of the demolished subject have disappeared (which is the focus of Claude Lanzmann’s film Shoah). Film’s affinity with historical materiality—its capability of confronting the subject with the Other, the possibility of death, the immanence of the human physis, has been neutralized into physical reality, the flow of life. The collective subject that had been the object of systematic extermination cannot be conceptualized any more except in the most universalistic,

54. See Edith Wyschogrod, Spirit in Ashes: Hegel, Heidegger, and Man-Made Mass Death (New Haven, Conn., 1985), esp. chap. 4, “Hegel and the Aporias of Existence.” Roland Barthes, in Camera Lucida, raises the philosophical issue of the sublation of the individual, particular death in the continuity of the universal (the race or species) from which he is excluded by virtue of not having procreated. He does not address the more radical disruption of this dialectics or transcendence posed by the historical event of mass death. Barthes’s reflections on death, written around the photograph of his mother, remain within a nineteenth-century conception of death as an individual, private event (p. 72).
and ultimately apologetic, terms as the common life of mankind on earth.\textsuperscript{55} Racial and ethnic difference, the terms that ordain oppression, discrimination, and genocide, are reduced to “exotic charms and cultural differences” \textit{(T, p. 205)}. Film’s historical turn to materiality evaporates into the timeless universals of human life.

But this is not the only way to read \textit{Theory of Film}. Even in 1960 there are traces of the earlier project and, beyond that, of the lost, defeated perspective of the Weimar essays.\textsuperscript{56} There is still the chapter on the photographic approach, with its emphasis on alienation and melancholia, and there is the chapter on the film actor, an “object among objects” as opposed to a “well-defined individual”; there are still remarkable passages on shock and chance. And there are numerous examples and images that disrupt the detached temper of the text (for instance: “Any huge close-up reveals new and unsuspected formations of matter; skin textures are reminiscent of aerial photographs, eyes turn into lakes or volcanic craters” \textit{(T, p. 48)}). And then there is the curious epilogue, which Adorno found so embarrassing, and which tells us, among other things, that “we are free to experience \textit{[the material world with its psychophysical correspondences] because we are fragmentized} \textit{(T, p. 300)}. To be sure, these moments are not dominant or sustained, but they are there, and not just between the lines. If Kracauer himself repressed much of the political and historical dimension of his film theory in the process of revision, the traces that remained were altogether erased in the book’s American reception. Recovering those traces in \textit{Theory of Film} means not only restoring a historical dimension to the text but also rereading it in ways that make it part of our own history.

\textsuperscript{55} See the reference to Edward Steichen’s “Family of Man” exhibit at the end of the book, or the praise for Paul Rotha and Basil Wright’s \textit{World without End} \textit{(T, pp. 309–11)}.

\textsuperscript{56} See Schläpmann, “The Subject of Survival,” pp. 113ff.