Cracking the cultural code

Methodological reflections on Kracauer's 'The Mass Ornament'

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Since the mid-1980s there has been a major revival of interest in the work of Siegfried Kracauer, focusing on the essays he wrote during the Weimar Republic for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*.[1] As a result of this renewed interest in Kracauer's early writings, a revisionist school of Kracauer criticism has emerged, particularly in the USA.[2] Where he had once been dismissed as a peddler of naively realist or simplistically psychological film criticism, Kracauer is now accorded a privileged position in the pantheon of post-structuralism and post-modernism, as the putative saviour of cultural studies from its own tendentious reflexivity.[3]

At the epicentre of this reconfiguration of Kracauer's work lies the essay 'The Mass Ornament', with its beguilingly lucid opening paragraph.[4] 'The Mass Ornament' is usually seen as playing a crucial role in the articulation of the new direction taken by Kracauer's writings from the mid-1920s onwards. Like Brecht and Benjamin, Kracauer shifts from a metaphysical to a materialist conception of modernity, and engages in a series of methodological reflections on the theoretical foundations of a materialist cultural analysis.[5] The opening sentences of 'The Mass Ornament' are often construed as a statement of Kracauer's new methodological credo: grounding his interest in phenomena otherwise ignored by sociologists and cultural critics, involving a genre of theoretical writing embodied in the essayistic miniature, and establishing a mode of cultural inquiry that appears to blend the insights of Marx, Freud and Weber in such a way as to inaugurate what Levin refers to as a 'materialist phenomenology of daily life'.[6]

It may well be that 'The Mass Ornament' signifies a key stage in the articulation of Kracauer's materialism, but it does so in a contradictory manner, in that it leaves unresolved the potential theoretical conflicts between the biological and the historical, and the metaphysical and the social. This discussion of 'The Mass Ornament' is therefore particularly concerned to establish the nature of Kracauer's materialism. Although commentators on Kracauer's Weimar essays concede the part played by Marxism in establishing Kracauer's materialist credentials, they also tend to draw attention to the ways in which Kracauer transcends the supposed limitations of Marxist cultural analysis. Levin, for example, observes that Kracauer 'does not simply reduce the mass ornament to a superstructural reflection of the prevailing mode of production, as would a traditional Marxist analysis of ideology'.[7] Moreover, Levin argues – again fairly typically – that Kracauer escapes the pitfalls of Marxist reductionism by adopting a mode of cultural inquiry which is premissed on the notion of deciphering or decoding. He even suggests that Kracauer's methodology is redolent of Freud's 'logic of the parapraxis'.[8] The Freudian dimension to Kracauer's approach seems to be confirmed by Kracauer's adherence to a symptomatic mode of reading modelled on dream analysis which seeks to access a historical unconscious,[9] and the stage might appear to be set for Kracauer to abandon his Marxist predilections entirely.

Yet even when Kracauer's writing seems to be at its most manifestly psychoanalytic, a more activist Marxism is also in evidence, as Kracauer engages in a critique of ideology by exposing the socio-political contradictions of contemporary capitalism in order to facilitate intervention in social reality.[10] It is far from clear that Kracauer's own practice of dream analysis or symptomatic reading has any firm basis in psychoanalytic theory, rather than the allegorizing modes of reading propounded by Simmel and Benjamin.[11] Not only that, it has also been argued that Kracauer's idi-

osyncratic analyses of cultural modernity owe at least as much theoretically to Weber as they do to Freud or Marx; Weber was, after all, the key proponent of the view that sociology should involve the systematic investigation of culture through the method of interpretative understanding.[12]

My consideration of these issues will proceed as follows. Concentrating on 'The Mass Ornament', as an exemplary instance of Kracauer's analysis of modernity, I shall seek to establish the precise configuration of Kracauer's method of cultural inquiry, in both theory and practice, by addressing a series of questions: What does the notorious opening paragraph of 'The Mass Ornament' actually mean in the context of Kracauer's supposed synthesis of Marx, Freud and Weber? Is Kracauer's approach to the 'interpretative understanding' of social and cultural phenomena Freudian, Weberian, or neither? If it is the case that Kracauer moves towards a Marxist position from the mid-1920s onwards, which particular variant of Marxist theory does he adopt? Is Kracauer's model of historical development dualistic or dialectical? Does Kracauer provide a coherent theoretical basis for the pursuit of cultural studies today, given the paradox of the combination of the emergent hegemony of that discipline with its own self-confessed methodological fragility? What, ultimately, are the specific terms of reference of Kracauer's ostensibly historical and materialist model of modernity?

In engaging with such questions one is inevitably drawn back to the initial conundrum posed by Kracauer's yoking together of the potentially incompatible theoretical positions of Marx, Freud and Weber, and in particular to the issue of the general structure of Kracauer's method of explanation in the context of his philosophy of history. In this respect, I should perhaps note that my own approach to such issues is based on the account of explanation and method propounded by Martin Hollis in *Models of Man*.[13] Hollis argues that all modes of sociological explanation are grounded in an interlinking series of theoretical assumptions that are not methodologically neutral. Any explanatory paradigm necessarily involves the following distinctive features: (i) a method of inquiry that entails specific criteria of explanation; (ii) a set of sociological concepts which circumscribe the sorts of explanations that will satisfy those methodological criteria; (iii) a set of ontological propositions specifying the nature of human beings and society; (iv) a theory of knowledge which justifies the method of inquiry; and (v) a set of general ontological or cosmological propositions implied or presupposed by that theory of knowledge. In view of the fact that seemingly neutral methodological precepts are grounded in specific epistemological and ontological assumptions – not least those articulating the relationship between self and society – it is hardly surprising that, as Mülder notes, Kracauer's own methodological practices should be so firmly rooted in his historical construction of the crisis of modernity.[14]

That notorious opening paragraph

Let us begin with the text in question, the opening paragraph of 'The Mass Ornament':

> The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch's judgements about itself. Since the latter are expressions of the tendencies of a particular era, they do not offer conclusive testimony about that era's overall constitution. By virtue of their unconscious nature, the former grant unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things. Conversely, knowledge of the latter depends on their interpretation. The fundamental substance of an epoch and its unheeded impulses illuminate each other reciprocally.

At first sight, these few short sentences could be construed as an indirect response to Marx's account of social structure and historical change in, for example, the 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Like Kracauer, Marx takes the view that when explaining social life, the investigator should be somewhat sceptical regarding an epoch's judgements about itself. As far as Marx is concerned, an epoch's self-understanding must itself be accounted for as a product of the contradictions of material life, so that valid explanations of social phenomena can cut through ideological obfuscation and identify the real causes of historical change located at the level of conditions of production. It is here, though, that Marx and Kracauer part company. Instead of arguing that the investigator must don the theoretical garb of the natural scientist and plumb the economic depths of society, Kracauer proposes that attention should be focused on inconspicuous surface phenomena.[15]

Kracauer's advocacy of the superficial here is no less striking than his rationale for doing so. He contends that surface phenomena make it possible to reach through to a more fundamental level of social life – they give direct, unmediated access to the basic content or substance of what exists. Moreover, they do so not by virtue of a dialectic of base and superstructure, but because they are unconscious. It follows that if the basic content of what exists is to be an object of knowledge, then these inconsequential

surface phenomena must be interpreted. Kracauer's appropriation of Freudian terminology suggests that we have moved from political economy to psychoanalysis. The epistemic primacy of the inconsequential and the superficial could no doubt be legitimized on the basis of the Freudian trope of displacement, just as the investigative focus on interpretation could be justified with reference to the hermeneutic dimensions of psychoanalysis. There is, though, a difficulty with this line of argument. In the Freudian model of interpretation, the latent meaning of a subject's manifest words and behaviour is disclosed after a tortuous hermeneutic rigmarole which aims to specify the unconscious wish that underlies manifest behaviour and would otherwise remain hidden. Kracauer, on the other hand, indicates that inconsequential surface phenomena are *themselves unconscious* (rather than being highly mediated manifestations of the unconscious), and he even proposes that they provide *direct* access to the basic content of what is.

In view of this significant divergence, it is far from clear how a Freudian model of interpretation could be mobilized to identify the mutually illuminating connections between the deep and surface layers of a historical epoch. It is also unclear whether the interpretative linkage between surface phenomena and the fundamentals of existence presupposes a causal relationship between these different layers of reality, as is the case in Marx and Freud. In fact, notwithstanding Kracauer's gestures in their direction, neither Marxian nor Freudian models of explanation appear to supply the theoretical presuppositions of Kracauer's 'methodological manifesto' at the outset of 'The Mass Ornament'. At this stage in the essay, it is difficult to ascertain what particular model of cultural inquiry Kracauer endorses.[16] At the same time, the opening section is not the only place in 'The Mass Ornament' where Kracauer reflects on such matters, as his subsequent engagement with Marxist theory shows.

Historical materialism: Marx or Weber?

Kracauer's implicit dialogue with Marxist theory in 'The Mass Ornament' centres on two theoretical controversies: the nature of the linkage between cultural phenomena and socio-economic structures (in aesthetic terms, the problem of mediation), and the precise specification of the forces generating historical change.[17] Whereas 'orthodox' Marxism is often accused of dealing with such issues in a simplistic and reductive fashion, Marx's own position even in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* is decidedly ambiguous. When Marx considers the status of cultural phenomena, he asserts initially that forms of consciousness *correspond to* the economic base, which comprises the entirety of a society's relations of production. He then argues that the mode of production – which includes both forces and relations of production – *conditions* the cultural realm, and concludes that social being *determines* consciousness. When Marx turns to the issue of historical change, he implies that the relationship between transformations in the economy and those in the superstructure is one of parallelism rather than causal necessity, as he observes that with the alteration of the economic foundation of society the superstructure is revolutionized either more slowly or more rapidly. Nevertheless, Marx also insists that changes in consciousness must ultimately be explained with reference to contradictions in material life – in other words, in terms of the contradiction between forces of production and relations of production which constitutes the fundamental dynamic of the historical process.

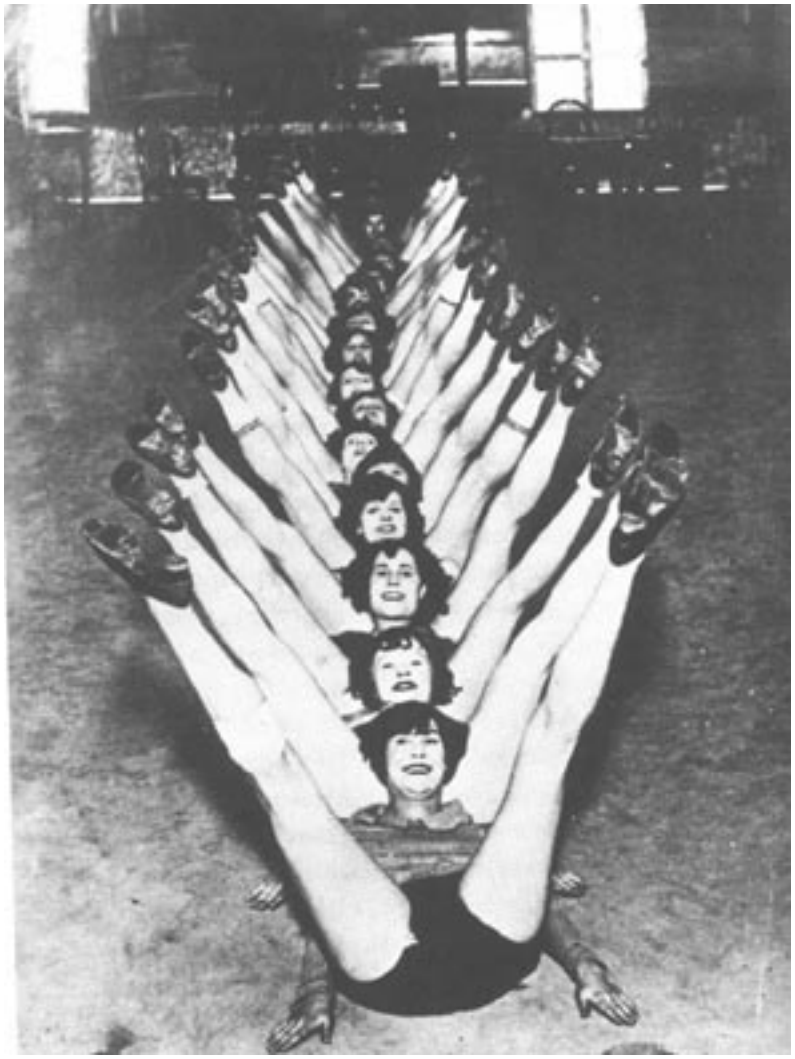
Kracauer's account of the relationship between culture and socio-economic factors reproduces and intensifies the ambiguities present in Marx. We are informed that the structure of the mass ornament *reflects* the structure of the entire contemporary situation.[18] What Kracauer appears to mean by this is that the same organizational principle informs the structures of specifically cultural and broadly societal phenomena. He then suggests that *like* the mass ornament, the capitalist production process is autotelic. Again, the implication seems to be that the same basic principle applies to both culture and the economy, though we should note that in Kracauer's formulation it is the economic that parallels the cultural, rather than vice-versa as in Marx. Explanation by analogy also informs Kracauer's account of the individual's position in relation to the production process and the participants' position in relation to the mass ornament: '*Like* the pattern in the stadium, the organization stands above the masses.' This structural point is reinforced when Kracauer asserts that the hands in the factory *correspond to* the legs of the Tiller girls, and here too it is as if economic organization is modelled on cultural principles. Then, almost immediately, Kracauer reverses tack, and states quite bluntly that the mass ornament is the aesthetic *reflex* of the economic system, appearing at first sight to revert to orthodox Marxism at its most reductionist. Crucially, however, Kracauer does not construe the economic system in Marxist terms at this point, for the mass ornament is the reflex not of the contradictions of material life, but

of the rationality that the prevailing economic system is striving for. So what the mass ornament really 'reflects' is the basic principle that also structures the capitalist production process. Here too, though, Kracauer's argument is fraught with difficulties. Initially, he had indicated that the mass ornament and the capitalist production process were analogous in that both were autotelic. Now he observes that both are imbued with the principle of rationality, despite the fact that when he had previously discussed the telos of the capitalist production process he had drawn our attention to its limitless striving for profitability, rather than Taylorism or rationalization.

On the one hand, Kracauer underscores the parallelism between cultural and economic realities, on the basis of a shared underlying rationale. On the other hand, he gestures towards the primacy of economic factors in a manner reminiscent not only of Marx's Preface but also of his *Theses on Feuerbach*. Kracauer suggests that the mode of abstract thought associated with contemporary cap-italism can only be transcended if the economic system is fundamentally transformed. This reassertion of Marxian precepts leads us to the second key aspect of Kracauer's conceptualization of base and superstructure: the nature and identity of the forces that generate historical change.

Kracauer's explanation of the development and hegemony of abstract thought conforms to a Marxian model, and his observation that the structure of mythological thinking changes in different epochs could also be easily accommodated by historical materialism. At the same time, there are other passages in 'The Mass Ornament' which imply a theoretical commitment to Weber rather than Marx. We have already noted an equivocation in Kracauer's specification of the capitalist production process – untrammelled profitability versus radical rationalization – and a similar ambiguity informs his general approach to historical explanation. In his discussion of the capitalist production process, Kracauer observes that calculability destroys entities such as community and personality, entailing a reduction of human beings to mass particles on a global scale. But it is unclear whether calculability is a cause or an effect of capitalism's drive for profit. Similarly, Kracauer refers later to the type of thought characteristic of the contemporary economic system, which enables the latter to dominate and exploit nature, but he conceives this thought in Weberian fashion in a general process of disenchantment of which capitalism represents merely one phase.

Kracauer describes the historical process as a process of demythologization, but whereas in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse* Marx explains demythologization with reference to industrial capitalism's domination of nature, Kracauer construes demythologization primarily in ideological terms by referring us to the demystificatory critiques of religion and politics in the French Enlightenment. Moreover, Kracauer goes on to suggest that the bourgeois revolutions of the previous 150 years – including the French Revolution – had taken place thanks to the principle of rationality, which had enabled them to settle accounts with the natural forces of church, monarchy and feudalism. In the enigmatic final sentences of 'The Mass Ornament',



Kracauer suggests that the historical process can only advance if thought restricts nature and constitutes humanity through Reason – for then society will change. It is almost as if Kracauer's own thinking has mapped out a similar trajectory, as he shifts from Marxian materialism, via Weberian rationalism, to an Enlightened idealism that ultimately leaves us none the wiser as to how, precisely, his utopia is to be made real.

At a more fundamental level, Kracauer's approach to history and modernity is characterized by a series of binary oppositions, such that the structure of his analyses is intrinsically dualistic. In fact, Kracauer's account of historical development works with two distinct but related models, one vitalistic and the other rationalistic, each of which is organized along dualistic lines.

In his initial specification of the cultural significance of the mass ornament, Kracauer establishes a series of oppositions: community or people (*Volk*) versus mass, organic life versus abstraction, magic versus mathematical systematization, meaningful ritual versus autotelic rationalization, charisma versus geometry. At this stage, Kracauer's argumentation is reminiscent of the vitalistic aesthetics of Viktor Shklovsky's early work,[19] and the tenor of his discussion mediates that profound disaffection with modernity characteristic of his own earlier essays.[20] Elsewhere in 'The Mass Ornament', however, Kracauer evinces a much more positive attitude to the expansion of rationality. In this framework, the historical process is viewed as a struggle between Reason and Nature, where Nature is glossed as those natural powers that controlled heaven and earth in myth. The advance of Reason thus involves a fundamental conflict with mythological thought, a major exemplar of that conflict being the French Enlightenment of the late eighteenth century.

The dualistic dimension to Kracauer's comprehension of modernity is also reflected in the way he specifies the ambiguity of contemporary abstraction and the mass ornament. In both cases, Kracauer analyses this ambiguity by counterposing two reciprocal viewpoints. Viewed from the perspective of Mythology, the abstractions of natural science constitute a gain in rationality; whereas from the perspective of Reason, that same rationality degenerates into an empty formalism. What this dual perspective on abstraction signifies is that the process of demythologization has not yet been brought to a conclusion, which for Kracauer can only be attained through the victory of Reason.

Given that Kracauer resorts to multiple and embedded dualisms in order to characterize the historical process, it seems appropriate to ask whether his model of history is in any sense dialectical. We saw earlier that Kracauer did not seem to be committed to a standard Marxian dialectic grounded in the conflict between forces and relations of production, and his hostility to Hegelian thought is well known.[21] Nevertheless, Kracauer's model of cultural development can be usefully compared to the dialectical schema proposed by the Czech structuralist Jan Mukarovsky.[22] The central category in Mukarovsky's account of cultural change is the dialectical antinomy: the contradictory dynamic of opposing factors (such as the presence or absence of the aesthetic function, or the relative priority of the communicative and the aesthetic function) sustains the continual evolution of culture. Similarly, in Kracauer's account of modernity the motor of historical change is the antinomy of Reason and Nature. The difficulty with Mukarovsky's deployment of the dialectical antinomy is that he does not explain how this dialectic can be made historically real with reference to the actual beliefs and practices of social agents – it is as if the dialectical antinomy has an autonomous power of its own – and a similar charge could be laid at Kracauer's door, in that the dialectic implicit in his own model of cultural development operates at a similarly highly abstract and generalized level. In his 1928 review essay on Walter Benjamin, Kracauer had criticized Benjamin on the grounds that he had failed to develop the 'real dialectic' between elements of things and their figures, between the meaning or significance of a shape and the shape itself.[23] Yet there, too, Kracauer does not specify what this real dialectic might be, so that we are ultimately at a loss as to how the process of cultural decoding is supposed to function, and as to the nature of its theoretical presuppositions.[24]

Trivial pursuits or critique of ideology?

The enormous importance Kracauer attaches to the investigation of the superficial and the ephemeral in 'The Mass Ornament' can be gauged from the structure of the essay's opening page: a quotation from Hölderlin is followed by a philosophical meditation on historical inquiry – only for Kracauer's first exemplary instance to be the Tiller girls. Kracauer explicitly rejects the dismissive attitude of the educated elite and intelligentsia to mass cultural phenomena, insisting that aesthetic pleasure in mass ornaments is entirely legitimate. At the same time, Kracauer's justification for his stance is not based on some modish egalitarian populism. He employs a criterion of aesthetic value according to which an aesthetic representation

is more real the less it dispenses with extra-aesthetic realities, and he contends that contemporary mass ornaments achieve a higher level of reality than do artistic productions that imitatively cultivate obsolete feelings in past forms.

In so arguing, Kracauer implies that the *sociological truth* of an aesthetic object is a criterion of its *artistic value*, and he thereby tacitly intervenes in the long-standing debate on the political Left about the appropriate attitude to adopt to the cultural heritage, particularly in its classical or idealist guise. He attacks contemporary intellectuals who prefer to edify themselves through artistic occasions untouched by the mundane reality present in mass ornaments, and thus dismisses obeisance to the cultural heritage with its concomitant valorization of 'high' culture. A similar position is in evidence a year earlier in 'Cult of Distraction',[25] where Kracauer had observed that the cultural heritage is historically specific, and embedded – like contemporary mass culture – in particular socio-economic realities. He concluded that the attempt to reassert obsolete standards of cultural value, including 'personality', 'inwardness' and 'tragedy', whose social basis has disappeared, diverts attention away from society's external shortcomings and the trials and tribulations of the contemporary world.

Kracauer's theses on distraction bring into view the overall purpose of his cultural inquiry: ideological critique from the vantage point of Reason. He unmasks the mass ornament as a mythological cult concealing itself in abstract garb, an illusion perpetrated in part thanks to the dissociation of capitalist *ratio* from Reason, and capitalist *ratio*'s consequent tendency to enter the void of abstraction. The ideologically critical and activist dimension of 'The Mass Ornament' is underlined when Kracauer attacks the contemporary fad of body culture, arguing that the energies invested in producing and consuming mass ornaments divert the participants in them away from changing the prevailing order, rather like the circuses of ancient Rome.

The upshot of Kracauer's various considerations of the mass ornament would seem to be that it cannot be evaluated or interpreted in a single, uniform or undifferentiated manner; it should therefore be the object neither of non-judgemental, populist veneration, nor of highbrow, elitist scorn. Although Kracauer emphasizes the compromised ideological function of the mass ornament and related cultural phenomena, he also insists on its epistemological and aesthetic value. Moreover, Kracauer's various approaches to the analysis of the mass ornament and their implicit or explicit theoretical grounding would seem to support the notion that exactly the same criteria and procedures should apply in the investigation of mass, 'low' or 'popular' culture as have traditionally been adopted in the process of understanding elite or 'high' culture. It is, ultimately, this methodological rationale that provides a basis for attending to the inconsequential surfaces of social life, rather than any intrinsic value these might possess.

The latter point is well illustrated in Kracauer's juxtaposition of Chinese landscape paintings and the mass ornament. He argues that in both cases nature is desubstantialized, so that the principle of formal structure is no longer organic: the centripetal tendency of organic form gives way to the centrifugal dynamic of abstract artefacts. The principles of composition that operate in abstract aesthetic media represent Reason more purely than those that seek to preserve humanity as an organic unity. At the same time, though, Kracauer indicates Reason's destructive and explosive force when it comes into confrontation with natural structures. Kracauer's account of the shift to abstraction in the aesthetic sphere is thus embedded in his overarching dialectic of Reason, *ratio* and Nature; it also forcefully historicizes modes of artistic representation, instead of advocating the universal or transcendent value of either organicist or abstractionist aesthetics.

Similar assumptions inform Kracauer's explanation of the move to aesthetic autonomy embodied in the autotelic structures of the mass ornament. Just as the abstract system of lines constituted by the physical motion of the Tiller girls has been de-eroticized, so too the pseudo-military shapes associated with star images produced in stadia neither mean nor intend anything beyond themselves. These visual formations are no longer grounded in an ethical or political substance, but located in an empty silence: 'The end result is the ornament, whose taciturnity is secured by emptying out the substantial constructs.' Once again, Kracauer's consideration of what might otherwise appear to be an entirely frivolous manifestation of mass culture draws its coherence from a theoretical template that enables him to address questions of aesthetic representation whether they occur in the Weimar Republic's answer to synchronic swimming or in classical Chinese art. Furthermore, his analyses in 'The Mass Ornament' of the complexities inherent in the aesthetic object throw into question Adorno's critique of his methodology: to paraphrase Adorno, 'The need for strict mediation in the entity itself, after demonstrating the presence of the essential in the midst of the innermost cell of particularity, was *indeed* his.'[26]

Alienation, abstraction and apocalypse

One of the more puzzling propositions advanced in 'The Mass Ornament' is Kracauer's claim that progressing towards the realm of Reason entails going through the middle of the mass ornament, thereby acknowledging and accepting the latter's reality instead of trying to evade it. Kracauer's argument turns on the positive aspect of the process of disenchantment embodied in the rise of capitalist *ratio*, which has undermined the legitimacy and validity of world-views rooted in mythological notions of the essential oneness and organic unity of humanity and Nature.[27] At the same time, Kracauer contends that capitalist *ratio* is at best a truncated variant of authentic Reason. A major factor in Kracauer's critique of capitalist *ratio* is that it fails to incorporate humanity. No account is taken of humanity in the regulation of the capitalist production process, nor in the construction of capitalist forms of economic and social organization. Crucially, the fundaments of the capitalist system ignore what Kracauer refers to 'the human ground', and at this point Kracauer's argument could be read as yet another piece of Romantic anti-capitalism, or even as a variant of radical Expressionist critiques of modernity.[28] Kracauer immediately dispels this misapprehension, however, by indicating that it is *not* a question of leaving the notion of the human personality uncontested, nor of grounding a more benevolent social order in our naturally given needs so as to remedy the human violations of capitalist rationalism.[29] The problem with capitalism, Kracauer contends, is that it rationalizes not too much but too little. What Kracauer means by this startling assertion is that capitalist *ratio* resists the trajectory of perfection towards Reason that speaks out of the fundaments of humanity. This resistance is encapsulated in the fact that capitalist *ratio* remains at the level of abstraction; but whereas Kracauer emphasizes that abstraction must ultimately be transcended, he also insists that abstraction must not be abandoned in favour of a regression to those mythological patterns of thought that capitalist *ratio* had rightly attacked.

It must be said that Kracauer's critique of capitalism is somewhat perplexing. The meaning of an authentic humanity grounded in Reason is obscure, and is only partly clarified in his further comments on the limitations of abstraction, which suggest that abstract generalizations are inadequate from the point of view of Reason because they ignore the empirical and are essentially content-free. His argument seems to be based on the Kantian need for a synthesis of categorial frameworks and the evidence of the senses – 'thoughts without content are empty, percepts without concepts are blind', or, in the case of the mass ornament, mute.[30] Yet an epistemological critique of the shortcomings of capitalist *ratio* can hardly provide a sufficient basis for Kracauer's attack on capitalism as a system of economic production and social organization. Kracauer himself observes that the activities which enter into the production process have been emptied of substance, that the activities of individual workers are meaningless because they carry out partial functions without having any sense of the whole to which they are contributing. At no stage, however, is this insight placed in the context of, for example, a Marxian exploration of the division of labour. Similarly, Kracauer's account of the human ground as transfigured by Reason seems to entail a denial that we are natural beings at all. At the end of the day, the vitalistic critique of abstraction and capitalist *ratio* that marked Kracauer's discussion at the beginning of 'The Mass Ornament' has been supplanted by a bloodless and disembodied rationalism whose panegyric to Reason is so radically utopian as to render vacuous Kracauer's purported sociological and political critique.

There is, however, a final dimension to 'The Mass Ornament' which undermines the essay's avowedly utopian dynamic. Although at one level capitalist *ratio* is a necessary stage in the actualization of Reason, at another its constrictions and blockages seem to presage a veritably modernist apocalypse.[31] The more powerful and impregnable abstraction becomes, the more human beings may be subjected once again to the power of natural forces. One consequence of the unrestrained expansion of capitalism is that 'dark Nature' rebels against abstract *ratio* in an increasingly threatening manner, a threat underlined when Kracauer suggests that *ratio*'s flight from Reason into abstraction makes it possible for uncontrolled Nature to expand violently under cover of rational modes of expression. But if Kracauer is right, and capitalist *ratio* is more and more drastically dissociated from Reason, it can only be a matter of time before humanity is overwhelmed by the catastrophic eruption or irruption of those dark forces he warns against. Perhaps that is why the 'real dialectic' said to be lacking in Benjamin can never speak its name in 'The Ornament of the Masses'.

Notes

1. See, in particular, David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1985, pp. 109–86; and Inka Mülder, *Siegfried Kracauer – Grenzgänger zwischen Theorie und Literatur: Seine frühen Schriften 1913–1933*, Metzler, Stuttgart, 1985. The spate of publications since 1990 was initiated by

the centenary of Kracauer's birth in 1989. On Kracauer's recent reception, see Thomas Y. Levin, 'Introduction', in Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. Thomas Y. Levin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1995, pp. 1–30.

2. See, for example, Levin, 'Introduction', and the special issue of *New German Critique*, no. 54, Fall 1991.
3. On Kracauer's anticipation of and recuperation by contemporary cultural theory, see Patrice Petro, 'Kracauer's Epistemological Shift', *New German Critique*, 54, Fall 1991, pp. 127–38; Levin, 'Introduction', pp. 28–9; and Inka Mülder-Bach, 'Introduction' to Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, Verso, London, 1998, pp. 1–22. The methodological disputes in British cultural studies are critically presented in Martin Barker and Anne Beezer, eds, *Reading into Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London, 1992. On the issue of ethnographic reflexivity in relation to the 'new paradigm' in cultural studies, see Barker and Beezer's 'Introduction: What's in a Text?', *Reading into Cultural Studies*, pp. 6–20.
4. Kracauer, 'The Mass Ornament', in *The Mass Ornament*, pp. 75–86. One of the best-known examples of a 'mass ornament' is the highly choreographed visual displays in the films of Busby Berkeley, such as *Gold Diggers* of 1933.
5. See for example Levin, 'Introduction', pp. 11–12; and Miriam Hansen, 'Decentric Perspectives: Kracauer's Early Writings on Film and Mass Culture', *New German Critique*, 54, Fall 1991, pp. 47–76.
6. Levin, 'Introduction', p. 28.
7. Ibid., p. 18. On Kracauer's rejection of 'vulgar' Marxism, see also Mülder, *Siegfried Kracauer*, p. 60, and Martin Jay, *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986, pp. 158, 161.
8. Levin, 'Introduction', p. 15. On the themes of deciphering and decoding see ibid., pp. 5–6; Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, pp. 109, 110, 186; Mülder, *Siegfried Kracauer*, pp. 87–8, 93; and Miriam Hansen, 'Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing: Adorno, Derrida, Kracauer', *New German Critique*, 56, Spring/Summer 1992, pp. 43–73.
9. See Levin, 'Introduction', pp. 10, 24; and Hansen, 'Decentric Perspectives', pp. 64–5.
10. See Levin, 'Introduction', pp. 23–4; Mülder, *Siegfried Kracauer*, p. 87; Johanna Rosenberg, 'Nachwort', in Siegfried Kracauer, *Der verbotene Blick: Beobachtungen – Analysen – Kritiken*, ed. Johanna Rosenberg, Reclam, Leipzig, 1992, p. 362.
11. On Kracauer's relationship to Georg Simmel, see Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, pp. 117–18, 148; Mülder, *Siegfried Kracauer*, p. 86; and Kracauer's own essays, 'Georg Simmel', in *The Mass Ornament*, pp. 225–57, and 'Georg Simmel: *Zur Philosophie der Kunst*', in Siegfried Kracauer, *Schriften*, 5.1, ed. Inka Mülder-Bach, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1990, pp. 233–36. For Kracauer's views on Benjamin's theory of interpretation, see Kracauer, 'On the Writings of Walter Benjamin', in *The Mass Ornament*, pp. 259–64.
12. On Kracauer's relationship to Weber, see Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, pp. 115–16, 133, 184; and Mülder, *Siegfried Kracauer*, pp. 31–5, 60, 64–5. Somewhat surprisingly, Kracauer seldom discusses Weber's work in any detail. One notable exception is his cursory account of Weber's views on the philosophy of social science in 'The Crisis of Science', in *The Mass Ornament*, pp. 213–23.
13. See Martin Hollis, *Models of Man: Philosophical Thoughts on Social Action*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977, p. 158.
14. See Mülder, *Siegfried Kracauer*, pp. 58–9; and Inka Mülder-Bach, 'Der Umschlag der Negativität. Zur Verschränkung von Phänomenologie, Geschichtsphilosophie und Filmästhetik in Siegfried Kracauers Metaphorik der "Oberfläche"', *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, vol. 61, no. 2, 1987, pp. 359–73.
15. Note also Mülder-Bach's point that Kracauer wishes to question 'the "depth" which bourgeois culture identified with genuineness, authenticity and truth' ('Introduction', p. 10).
16. Despite the Freudian resonances of its opening, the remainder of 'The Mass Ornament' makes only one significant reference to dreams, when Kracauer asserts that Reason's empire is anticipated in dream (rather than 'intimated') in authentic fairy tales (p. 80). Not only is this conception of dream pre-Freudian; Kracauer's perspective on fairy tales is also, arguably, anti-Freudian, in that he sees fairy tales as a repository of Justice and Truth as opposed to encapsulating the longings of the id. Kracauer's concatenation of dreams, hieroglyphs, sociological interpretation and cultural inquiry seems to work at a metaphorical level rather than belonging to psychoanalytic theory. An excellent instance may be found in a much-cited passage from his essay 'Über Arbeitsnachweise. Konstruktion eines Raumes' (*Schriften*, 5.2, pp. 185–92), written around 1930: 'Any typical space is brought into being by typical societal relationships that are expressed in it without being disturbed by the complications of consciousness. Everything denied by consciousness, everything which is otherwise deliberately overlooked, is implicated in its construction. Spatial images are the dreams of society. Wherever the hieroglyph of some spatial image has been deciphered, the ground of social reality is exposed' (p. 186). What seems to be happening here is that Kracauer starts out with a Marxian model of social reality, but, because he does not subscribe to a Marxian hermeneutic based on either the 1859 Preface or the theory of commodity fetishism, resorts to an undertheorized discourse of dream hieroglyphics in order to establish a significant linkage between the ground of social reality and spatial organization at the phenomenal level.
17. At the time when Kracauer was acquainting himself with Marx's writings from the 1840s, he was fully aware of the most important theoretical critiques of orthodox Marxism from the early 1920s, namely Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* and Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*. See Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, pp. 122–6; Mülder, *Siegfried Kracauer*, pp. 134–5; and Jay, *Permanent Exiles*, pp. 162–3, 221–2.
18. 'The Mass Ornament', p. 18.
19. See Viktor Shklovsky, 'The Resurrection of the Word', in *Russian Formalism*, ed. Stephen Bann and John Bowlt, Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh, 1973, pp. 41–7. Kracauer was, of course, fully conversant with the vitalistic cultural theory of Georg Simmel, and with modernist and Expressionist aesthetics. See his early essay 'Schicksalswende der Kunst', *Schriften*, 5.1, pp. 72–8.
20. See, for example, Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, pp. 111–33.
21. On Kracauer's antipathy to Hegelian thinking, see Adorno, 'The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer',

in Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature, Volume Two*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, Columbia University Press, New York, 1992, pp. 58–78. Kracauer was also critical of the Hegelian aspect of Lukács's interpretation of Marx, as noted by Jay, *Permanent Exiles*, pp. 162–3, 194.

22. See Jan Mukarovsky, *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1970 (first published in Czech in 1936); and Steve Giles, 'Sociological Aesthetics as a Challenge to Literary Theory', *New Comparison*, 19, Spring 1995, pp. 89–106.
23. Kracauer, 'On the Writings of Walter Benjamin', p. 264.
24. A similar vagueness characterizes Kracauer's use of semiotics in 'The Mass Ornament'. He refers to abstraction as the sign of the locus of capitalist thought; suggests that the abstract signs of rationalized modernity differ fundamentally from the symbolic representations of religious cults; and observes that the mass ornament is a sign of the ruling economic system. At no stage in 'The Mass Ornament', however, does Kracauer reflect theoretically on his own semiological presuppositions, so that the relationship between signifier/signified or sign/referent is never properly clarified. Is the relationship based on resemblance? Is it causal, metaphorical or magical? Or, to use the terminology of C.S. Peirce, does Kracauer construe signs as icons, indices, or symbols?
25. Kracauer, 'Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces', in *The Mass Ornament*, pp. 323–8.
26. See Adorno, 'The Curious Realist'. Adorno's actual words are 'was *hardly* his'.
27. One difficulty with Levin's translation of 'The Mass Ornament' is that he translates the word 'Mensch' as 'man' ('The Mass Ornament', p. 81), whereas for Kracauer – as for Marx – the term 'Mensch' designates humanity, or even 'being human'.
28. On Expressionist – and vitalistic – critiques of modernity, see Gunter Martens, *Vitalismus und Expressionismus: Ein Beitrag zur Genese und Deutung expressionistischer Stilstrukturen und Motive*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1971.
29. Kracauer's continued antipathy into the 1960s to Marxist humanism and the concept of de-alienation is noted by Jay, *Permanent Exiles*, pp. 194, 196–7.
30. If my interpretation of Kracauer is correct, then Adorno's critique of Kracauer's epistemological shortcomings is surely misplaced. Kracauer's extensive knowledge of Kant has been attested to by several commentators, not least Adorno himself.
31. See Richard Sheppard, 'The Problematics of European Modernism', in Steve Giles, ed., *Theorising Modernism: Essays in Critical Theory*, Routledge, London, 1993, pp. 1–51; the modernist theme that the excrescences of reason/modernity will transmute themselves into their monstrous antithesis is discussed on pp. 8–11, 26–33. Hansen also notes the apocalyptic aspect of Kracauer's early writings, but locates it in the context of Jewish messianism rather than European modernism ('Decentric Perspectives', p. 53).