**Siegfried Kracauer: Documentary Realism and Critique of ideological “homelessness”**

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Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966) was born into a Jewish family in Frankfurt.[[1]](#footnote-1) Following his parents’ wishes he studied architecture yet his true interests lay elsewhere even then as his early engagement of Georg Simmel and phenomenology indicates. Already as a student, Kracauer wrote substantial philosophical texts, yet these would be published only in 2004. Viewed as a maverick by most established academics throughout his life, Kracauer enjoyed broad acclaim in the 1920s as a journalist working for Germany’s foremost (liberal) daily, the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. In this prestigious capacity he got to know Benjamin, Bloch and Adorno and, disregarding his life-long friendship with Leo Löwenthal, it is principally as their comrade that he is still cited. His relationship to Adorno, whom he had mentored in his early years, though often conflicted, would remain particularly fond. Having encountered the turmoil of the disintegrating Weimar Republic in the early 1930s in Berlin, he and his wife Elisabeth left Germany immediately after the Reichstag fire. The *Frankfurter Zeitung* abandoned him soon after. It was during his years of extreme disillusionment and poverty in Paris that Kracauer, hoping for a position in the USA, developed the broad outline of the film theory that he would later publish to considerable acclaim. Only in 1941, at the eleventh hour, were Kracauer and his wife able to leave Europe via Marseille and Lisbon for New York. Though their financial situation remained precarious for another decade, Kracauer soon felt at home in the USA. He decided henceforth to publish only in English and devoted all his energy to enemy reconnaissance. Keeping himself afloat with precarious fellowships, he was initially affiliated with the MoMA Film Library. Later he regularly served as a consultant for empirical social science research projects and evaluated research proposals for various foundations. Kracauer found new interlocutors in the likes of Erwin Panofsky, Paul Lazarsfeld, and Hans Blumenerg and the “Poetics and Hermeneutics” circle.[[2]](#footnote-2)

His more substantive works include a discussion of the transcendental foundations of Sociology (1922); metaphysical reflections on the “trivial” genre of the detective novel (1922–1925); a sociological and literary study of the salaried employees in Weimar Germany under the spell of the early culture industry (1929–1930); two autobiographical novels, of which only the first, *Ginster* (1928), was published during his lifetime; a generally underrated “social biography” of the composer Jacques Offenbach and the Second Empire (1938) in which he paid precious little attention to Offenbach’s compositions; studies on the functioning of “totalitarian propaganda” in Germany and Italy (around 1940); accounts of the group-psychological make up of the Germans, drawing on Weimar cinema as a case study (1947) and people’s “satellite mentality” in countries in the Soviet sphere of influence (1956); a work of film theory focusing on the possibilities of representing “physical reality” from the “perspective of the camera” (1960); and an unfinished epistemology of history.

The biographical caesura of his emigration is imprinted on the evolution of his theory. Kracauer’s reception tends to distinguish between his earlier, more political works published in Germany and his later, more strongly empirical and aesthetic works that came out in the US.[[3]](#footnote-3) His politics, however, do not lend themselves to any straightforward characterization. One might say that he began as a cultural critic influenced by vitalism, subsequently became a Marxist and then a liberal humanist—and yet, none of these labels truly seem to fit. Not least, one can identify numerous continuities that cut across these outward distinctions. Overall, his texts from the later Weimar years, written between 1926 and 1933, are the ones that connect him most intimately with Critical Theory. Kracauer was, for many years, unquestioningly categorized as a proponent of Critical Theory.[[4]](#footnote-4) It is for this reason that he is still relatively well known.[[5]](#footnote-5) As early as the 1960s, it was his association with Adorno, Benjamin and Bloch that secured him a German readership. Especially in the eyes of the „younger critics“, Kracauer noted, the four of them formed „a group that stands out. I would have thought that we can only welcome this state of affairs”.[[6]](#footnote-6) Yet this all to neat association with Critical Theory has also detracted from a fuller understanding of his entirely idiosyncratic approach and its transformation over the years.

**„The Figure of the *Collector*“: Continuity and Discontinuity in Kracauer’s Work**

Throughout all his texts, Kracauer insisted on the need always to argue in a concrete phenomenological manner maintaining a strict focus on the object at hand. His “empathic method”[[7]](#footnote-7) fundamentally challenged the validity of systematic conceptual dispositions and instead focused on the heterogeneity of empirical experience and the world of objects (“According to his theory, Columbus had to land in India”).[[8]](#footnote-8) His critical contribution, then, lies in his micrological insistence on the logic of the slightest object or phenomenon. As an empathic observer he directed the gaze toward the usually overlooked pathologies, promises of happiness, and demands of everyday life and the “lifeworld [*Lebenswelt*]”,[[9]](#footnote-9) which for him formed the blind spot of the grand theories. “How is everyday life supposed to change if even those qualified to put the cat among the pigeons ignore it?”[[10]](#footnote-10)

It is a reflection of Kracauer’s *realism* and *pluralism* that he deployed a range of media and modes of expression in approaching the motley assortment of coexisting objects. Their philosophical sophistication notwithstanding, his acclaimed texts from the 1920s were recognizably journalistic in character, indeed, they decisively helped shape the genre of the political feuilleton.[[11]](#footnote-11) Kracauer’s writings also reflect the gaze of the trained architect. He frequently presented systematic problems in the form of geometrical allegories and “topographical” images; not to mention those texts, which dealt explicitly with street maps, streets, buildings, and interiors.[[12]](#footnote-12) Writing articles from the vantage point of a monocle or the apparently doomed umbrella, or offering an account of his all-too-human and crisis-ridden relationship with his typewriter,[[13]](#footnote-13) he transcended the conventional realms of journalism, literature and theory. With enormous plasticity he demonstrated what, on his reading, the period after the First World War had itself confirmed with enormous plasticity, namely, that the objects, which humans had created were turning into independent beings with a life of their own and interacting with one another and with the humans. In the meantime, Kracauer also wrote two autobiographical novels in which he developed the same critical diagnosis of his time and portrayed the abandonment and insecurity of the contingent subject in the “Age of the Masses”. The protagonists, Ginster and Georg, frequently seem to be only passive participants who merely respond to an environment that cajoles them into taking on certain roles.[[14]](#footnote-14) This speculative-literary social philosophy stands in marked contrast to Kracauer’s focus on empirical social research following his emigration. In his late film theory, the cinema screen eventually emerged as a far more reliable means of conveying the experience of physical-sensory reality.

What united these differing methodological and stylistic approaches was their phenomenological focus on the objects at hand. Against this backdrop, Kracauer was consistently concerned with the *indirect* juxtaposition of phenomena: “To focus directly upon ideas is at any rate a sure means never to grasp them … Ideas manifest themselves rather in by-ways, in unobtrusive facts”.[[15]](#footnote-15) Consequently, general problems too can be approached only circuitously by sounding out contingent phenomena and their *surface appearance*. Like the notion of the anteroom, the term surface appearance was among Kracauer’s central theoretical concepts. It points to the transitory nature and relativity of human knowledge and insight. Yet Kracauer went further and argued that the most profound and substantial problems actually reveal themselves in the surface appearance *of the object at hand*. Consequently, to give one example, Kracauer rejected the notion that National Socialism was a masked bourgeois-capitalist counterrevolution. If fascism masked anything it was the goals and interests of the concrete gang of rulers. Yet this should not detract from the need to take its ideology seriously on its own terms. Instead of tearing off the “mask” “as though one obviously knows already who has deigned to hide behind it”,[[16]](#footnote-16) one needed to dissect the mask itself. “Only the character of the mask may, at best, reveal the nature of the monster wearing it, provided, that it is actually possible to tear off its mask”.[[17]](#footnote-17)

One of the results of Kracauer’s vigilance in this regard was his immediate insistence, in 1933, on the integral role of antisemitism and the “force of the annihilatory intent” [[18]](#footnote-18) it reflected—when many on the left still considered it a propagandistic red herring. Yet Kracauer’s approach pertained not only to major ideologies such as National Socialism. For him, the symptoms allowing for a valid diagnosis articulated themselves, as a matter of principle, in “inconspicuous surface appearances”. It was “precisely because of their nescience” that they offered “direct access to the basic content of physical reality”.[[19]](#footnote-19) The streamlining character of the capitalist mode of production, for instance, was, to his mind, revealed paradigmatically by the Tiller Girls. This dance troupe presented not individual human beings but “indivisible clusters of girls” as “ornaments”.[[20]](#footnote-20) Similarly, the displacement of umbrellas by light waterproof raincoats with hoods bore testimony to the dwindling of the bourgeois generosity of spirit.[[21]](#footnote-21)

In his unfinished and posthumously published study on the writing of history, Kracauer himself took stock of the continuity of his work, which he saw precisely in the recording of discontinuities. The book, he wrote, was

another attempt of mine to bring out the significance of areas whose claim to be acknowledged in their own right has not yet been recognized. … So at long last all my main efforts, so incoherent on the surface, fall into line – they all have served, and continue to serve, a single purpose: the rehabilitation of objectives and modes of being which still lack a name and hence are overlooked or misjudged.[[22]](#footnote-22)

He owed this focus on symptomatic details and novel phenomena to his first teacher, Georg Simmel. In the course of the 1920s, Kracauer developed this mode of essayistic narration, against the backdrop of his exchange with Bloch, Benjamin, and Adorno, into an entirely new and stringent method of socio-philosophical critique.[[23]](#footnote-23) In 1930, Benjamin characterized his friend Kracauer as “a rag collector … recovering rags of speech and linguistic snippets with his stick. Mumbling cantankerously and a little boozily, he tosses them into his cart, not without, on occasion, derisively letting one of these faded calico rags ... flutter in the morning breeze. A rag collector out at the crack of dawn on the day of revolution.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

Yet the revolutionary political perspective, which Kracauer still shared with Benjamin in 1930 gradually receded after 1933 and no longer featured in his later work (although he did continue to acknowledge Marx’s qualities as an historian). In the late monographs on film and historiography he is “merely” concerned with adequate ways of approaching concrete individual phenomena in their diversity, yet without any revolutionary backdrop. As he noted in 1966 in a letter to Rolf Tiedemann, he still valued Benjamin’s messianic plea “that nothing should ever be lost”.[[25]](#footnote-25) In *History*, he drew on this demand to ground his insistence on the viability of forms of historiography that stay close to the sources, yet he presented it not as a political but as a “theological argument”: „[T]he ‚complete assemblage of the smallest facts’ is required for the reason that nothing should go lost. It is as if the fact-oriented accounts breathed pity with the dead. This vindicates the figure of the *collector*.“[[26]](#footnote-26) How far removed this sorrowful collector was from the Marxist Kracauer of the 1920s is illustrated by a letter to Bloch. Back in 1926 when he first conceived of the plan to write a philosophy of history, Kracauer had complemented the notion “that nothing should ever be forgotten” with the claim that “nothing that is unforgotten will remain untransformed”.[[27]](#footnote-27) This “motif of transformation”,[[28]](#footnote-28) located in the utopian abyss between theology and revolution, was not lost without trace, though. His experience as a refugee and encounter of American democracy formed the counterpoint to its disappearance from Kracauer’s horizon.

**Dialectics and the particular: Kracauer at odds with Critical Theory**

Philosophers have frequently found Kracauer’s realism, pluralism and documentary approach too imprecise.[[29]](#footnote-29) In his reckoning with his mentor, Adorno noted that Kracauer felt no „desire for the rigorous mediation within the object itself, no urge to evince the essential at the heart of individuation processes”.[[30]](#footnote-30) Yet paradoxically, Adorno added, this was precisely the source of Kracauer’s strength: “The greater the blindness and abandon with which he devoted himself to the subject matter ... the more fecund was the result.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Since Kracauer did in fact bring out the „essential“—by which Adorno meant the social relations refracted in the slightest detail—in his texts well into the 1930s, this was a tendentious claim on Adorno’s part. The surface phenomena, which he sought out with abandon were characterized precisely by the fact, that they revealed the state of society at large.

There can be no doubt that Kracauer’s Weimar era texts directly prefigured Adorno’s mode of philosophizing, be it in terms of the critique of language,[[32]](#footnote-32) the predilection for the essayistic form[[33]](#footnote-33) and—as an (anti-)methodology—the “construction” of systematic problems in the form of a “mosaic”[[34]](#footnote-34) of characteristic individual features in which the logic of the whole shines through. Both methodologically and in terms of its content, Adorno’s own postdoctoral thesis (*Habilitation*), *Kierkegaard*, which he dedicated to his mentor Kracauer, still reflected this micrological montage technique and the “motif of transformation”. Yet what for Kracauer was a way out of conceptual philosophy Adorno directed back into philosophy, albeit one intensely critical of concepts. This move resulted not least from his engagement of Hegel, which Horkheimer initiated in the context of their dialectics project. For Adorno it was the further differentiation of his dialectics that led him away from the bifurcated dialectical and social perspective of the 1920s, for Kracauer it was his continued questioning of dialectics on behalf of the dispersed and overlooked individual phenomena. The counterpart to Adorno’s critique of Kracauer’s neglect of “mediation”, then, was Kracauer’s critique of Adorno’s universalization of dialectics. The latter, on Kracauer’s reading, was no longer connected to the individual sensate objects yet they alone could provide the point of departure for critical judgements. „His rejection of any ontological stipulation in favor of an infinite dialectics which penetrates all concrete things and entities seems inseparable from a certain arbitrariness, an absence of content and direction.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Ultimately, then, Kracauer reproached the sort of universally mediating dialectics he attributed to Adorno for creating precisely the night in which, as Hegel had warned, all cows are black.

In order to avoid becoming trapped by the tautological immanence of dialectical logic and stand a chance of explaining why sensory experience exceeds abstract generalizing judgements, respect for the boundary set by real objects was indispensable. Adorno’s critique of the identity principle came up against the same boundary yet he responded to it negatively. Rather than resorting to ontology he developed the relational category of the “non-identical”.[[36]](#footnote-36) Adorno acknowledged the problematic nature of an all-encompassing form of dialectics yet recognized in it a real problem of capital (as a social relation), a problem that genuinely pervades „all concrete things and entities“ or produces them in the first place. In his historiographical monograph, Kracauer, by contrast, in order to establish a connection to the object and the viability of the writing of history, resorted to material and thus to “positive” solutions. It is in this dispute between Kracauer and Adorno over the unbounded nature of dialectics, the significance of the damaged individual phenomenon, and the claims of immediate experience that Kracauer’s role in the context of Critical Theory ultimately lies. Do the individual phenomena reveal the non-material and yet pernicious nature [(*Un*-)*Wesen*] of society that reproduces itself within them or does the crucial task lie in defending that which is irredeemably atomized against the reductionist social ascription of meaning? In fact, if one understands society as a non-material, non-sensuous yet pernicious being that disregards objects and individuals, Kracauer’s and Adorno’s perspectives converge.[[37]](#footnote-37) Both seek to defend the conditioned objects against this being. Their disagreement concerned the extent to which it pervades them. For all that Kracauer subjected the Horkheimer circle to polemical criticism, especially in the 1930s, and they, in turn, viewed him with derision, their approaches continued to intersect in terms of their micrological focus. The enthusiasm Kracauer showed in 1964 for Karl Heinz Haag’s essay “Das Unwiederholbare” [“The non-repeatable”] is a case in point.[[38]](#footnote-38) Nor did Kracauer ever lose sight in his late works of the fact that he was dealing with “constructions” of reality. Both the camera and the work of the historian obviously represent mediated forms of access to physical and historical reality. What truly set his German and American writings apart was the more pronounced social criticism in his earlier descriptions of reality.

Kracauer’s stance regarding the relative significance of dialectics and the individual case found its paradigmatic expression in the works he wrote during the Second World War. In *From Caligari to Hitle*r (1947), like Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, he too developed a historiosophical scheme that culminated in National Socialism. Its frame of reference, however, was not the history of civilization. Instead he sought to portray the authoritarian disposition of the specifically German unconscious, an aspiration for which he has drawn considerable flak.[[39]](#footnote-39) Ultimately, then, he was a theoretician not of the dialectic of enlightenment but of the German *Sonderweg*. The pessimism of his focus on Germany stood in marked contrast to his much more positive assessment of Hollywood, indicating considerable optimism regarding the course of the enlightenment in the democratic West.

Already in his essay “Das Ornament der Masse” [“The Mass Ornament”] of 1927, long before his orientation shifted from the critique of capitalism to democratic concerns, he presented the capitalist rationalization reflected in the title of the essay as a form of “turbid” reason, implying that it could be distinguished from a positive, enlightened impulse, no matter how precarious. “[A]nd as history proceeds nature, subject to ever more disenchantment, may become increasingly permeable to reason”, he suggested.[[40]](#footnote-40) Kracauer, then, was calling for an increase in rationality that would effect the disintegration of the “turbid nature” of society. Almost twenty years later, Horkheimer and Adorno’s take on this demythologization process was much more sceptical and the domination of nature one of the main butts of their critique. From this perspective it would be misleading to suggest that Kracauer was a proponent of the Frankfurt School’s Critical Theory. Yet the controversies concerning dialectics and micrology and the mediation and immediacy of experience were of fundamental significance to the Frankfurt School and he was party to them, both directly and indirectly. From the vantage point of Critical Theory, Kracauer’s gaze—like Benjamin’s—stood for the “obligation to think dialectically and undialectically at the same time”.[[41]](#footnote-41)

While much can be gained from drawing out the controversy concerning dialectics and micrology this poignantly, the concrete historical process was altogether less heroic. The dispute between Kracauer and the protagonists of Critical Theory sprang primarily from personal disagreements during his exile in Paris. He was commissioned to write a study on propaganda, which Adorno rejected and then rewrote, effectively creating an entirely new text (though this was actually an indication of professional rather than personal disdain). The institute provided him neither with a living nor with an opportunity to flee Europe, and Kracauer eventually viewed it with bitter disappointment. Although “this institute is the only one … that … might have seemed an obvious choice all this time”, he wrote to Richard Krautheimer in 1936, it was also “the only institution in the whole world with which we neither can nor want to be involved”.[[42]](#footnote-42)

**Sensuous and social reality as Kracauer’s principal theme**

Kracauer’s sustained attention to individual sensuous data, to surface phenomena and objectification took on distinct guises during his respective ideological phases. In his first published monograph, *Soziologie als Wissenschaft* [Sociology as a Science], he illustrated his critique of scientific conceptual abstraction with the image of a cone that represented the ideal scientific order.[[43]](#footnote-43) The contingent empirical world formed its base and pure consciousness its tip. In between lay the various levels of conceptual abstraction in hierarchical order. Ideally, one should be able to move from any given individual phenomenon to the general laws and vice versa. At the very end of the book, Kracauer rejected this construction. Such a correspondence between thought and empirical reality had existed only in a lost “era of sense” in which thought and world, subject and object had not yet been separated.[[44]](#footnote-44) The harmony and order on which a “scientific”—which, in the spirit of the nineteenth century, meant: objectivistic—form of sociology was predicated would thus seem unavailable. All one could do was describe the fluid physical and social reality while maintaining a critical awareness of how things “really” ought to be.

Together with Adorno, Kracauer intensified his focus on the contingent world of appearances by engaging Kierkegaard’s apology of the “individual”. In his posthumously published monograph, *Der Detektiv-Roman* [The Detective Novel], the cone was replaced by an interpretation of Kierkegaard’s theory of stages as a theory of spheres. The ethical and religious spheres had become inaccessible and humanity, like the theoretician, had been banished to the shady aesthetic sphere. In the highest sphere, the religious sphere, the “names” were still accessible in the form of metaphysical entities. Down below this divine substance remained “inexorably in force” but here it was scattered, “all names are distorted to the point where they are unrecognizable”. Given its contemporary popularity, the genre of the detective novel permitted a precarious analysis of the distorted true content, the reality reflected in this sphere only in an unreal manner [“*stellt uneigentlich ein Eigentliches dar*”].[[45]](#footnote-45) The extent and character of the distortion corresponded to the rules of the “thoroughly rationalized society”.[[46]](#footnote-46) Here too, as he had done in the sociology monograph, Kracauer constructed a collapsed metaphysical-philosophical order with a hierarchy of planes, only to conclude that merely the sphere of the individual sensuous and social phenomena was still epistemically accessible.

As far as Marx was concerned, Kracauer argued in the mid-1920s that one needed to dig a tunnel beneath the “mountain massif Hegel” towards the naturalistic and sensualist materialism of the French Enlightenment.[[47]](#footnote-47) While he had admired Georg Lukács’s *Theorie des Romans* [The Theory of the Novel], Kracauer felt that *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* [History and Class Consciousness], in which Lukács had brought Hegel back into Marxism, remained unduly caught up in idealistic concepts.[[48]](#footnote-48) For Kracauer, the experience of physical, sensuous reality was a crucial corrective to the “abstract” character of the capitalist world of commodities. In his essay, „Die Photographie“ [„Photography“], of 1927 he explained his approach. He contrasted two photographs, one of a world-famous diva whom one could see in magazines and on billboards everywhere, the other of somebody’s grandmother, portrayed when she was the same age as the diva was now. The second photograph was now totally inaccessible to her grandchildren and, from their vantage point, could just as well show any other person in traditional costume. They had to take their parents’ word for it that the photograph really showed their grandmother as a young woman. It was the “memory image” of the grandmother, bequeathed to them by their parents or other contemporaries, that lent meaning to the photo. Yet inevitably, what the camera had caught was in various respects at odds with this “memory image”, much more (noticeably) so than was the case with photos whose meaning seemed instantly self-evident. In the discrepancy between the “mere surface cohesion” of the photograph and the “memory image” or its apparently self-evident meaning seemingly meaningless “remnants of nature”—in other words: physical reality—became visible, rendering this discrepancy the (potential) locus of emancipation. Reality only became visible in the photographs once the status of the diva and the memory-image of the grandmother were forgotten. The emancipatory potential of photography lay precisely in this ability to expose the “mere surface cohesion” because, in contrast to the ideological meanings produced by society, reason could reassemble the uncovered remnants of nature into a new order.[[49]](#footnote-49)

In his monograph on the salaried employees, *Die Angestellten*, Kracauer collated tableaux, as the book’s subtitle indicated, “from contemporary Germany”. Here physical reality featured predominantly as the locus of floundering sociation, as the surface appearance of the corporeal *lifeworld* of the Weimar-era cult of sport, the body, and youth. To his mind, this idealization of the corporeal represented a form of false concretism, a fetishization of “mere vitality”.[[50]](#footnote-50) Here too, the implication would seem to be that reason had to destroy this fetishization. The praise of the youthful body and debasement of age (not least on the job market) demonstrated “indirectly that under the current economic and social conditions humans are not living life”.[[51]](#footnote-51)

For Kracauer, the conformist “cult of diversion” that he saw at work in Berlin’s Weimar-era cinemas diverted attention away from social reality and colonized sensuous reality.[[52]](#footnote-52) In his relevant studies from the late 1930s onwards, he argued that National Socialist propaganda went one step further: „The Nazis utilized totalitarian propaganda as a tool to destroy the disturbing independence of reality.“[[53]](#footnote-53) The power of the fascist images emerges as the diametrical opposite of the emancipatory capacity for sensuous experience in which Kracauer placed his trust. In “totalitarian propaganda” decontextualized elements of reality were instrumentalized and reality was “put to work faking itself“.[[54]](#footnote-54) Real bodies of knowledge and traditions were transformed into malleable narratives that could be randomly deployed. Goebbels’s understanding of propaganda as a “creative art” had to be taken literally in the sense „that a world shaped by the art of propaganda becomes as modeling clay—amorphous material lacking any initiative of its own.“[[55]](#footnote-55) This form of propaganda was creative in the worst possible sense and lent a new meaning to existing orders that was capable of violently asserting itself against the previous reality.

Kracauer addressed the manipulation and deletion of reality in Nazi films with his own *Theory of Film*, which, as the subtitle indicated, promised *The Redemption of Physical Reality*. This redemption was facilitated by the perspective of the camera that records physical life in motion. The camera’s documentary capacity, he argued, reached beyond the human apparatus of perception and abstract thought. Successful films therefore provided people with “a chance of finding something we did not look for, something tremendously important in its own right—the world that is ours.”[[56]](#footnote-56) At its best, film can effect in the viewer, who is half in a dream-like state, half awakening to actual reality, an awareness of the logic and language inherent in the objects that surround him, of “the murmur of existence”.[[57]](#footnote-57)

On Kracauer’s account, the epistemology underlying the writing of history was like the redeeming eye of the camera. In *History*, it was the “micro” and “macro dimensions” in the “structure of the historical universe” that corresponded to the different layers of the cone of abstraction and the collapsed Kierkegaardian spheres.[[58]](#footnote-58) Kracauer primarily argued the case for microhistory. Only the inherent logic of the slightest objects could be recorded and represented responsibly. To be sure, to do so one also needed cautiously to extend one’s scope and venture into broader contexts. Yet in so doing the emphasis always needed to lie on allowing the idiosyncrasies and specific temporality of the sources and objects to emerge. Kracauer thus clarified the meaning of his focus on the “figure of the collector”: like the camera, the historian salvages the hopeless fragments of physical reality and in so doing gains a form of contemplative access to that reality and to the conditions of his own human existence.

Physical reality was no yet the ultimate point of reference, though. Films, Kracauer suggested, “penetrate ephemeral physical reality and burn through it”. Yet where that took them, “their destination”, he hastened to add, his study could not determine.[[59]](#footnote-59) Kracauer’s relativism, then, did not precipitate a critique of all epistemic claims that detract from the heterogeneous world of objects. Rather, it led him to bracket this world of objects as the “anteroom”.[[60]](#footnote-60) Hence the subtitle of *History*: *The Last Things Before the Last*. Kracauer wanted to refer to the “Last Things”, the objects of metaphysics and eschatology, only *ex negativo*. This negation nevertheless indicates a theological dimension in the deep structure of Kracauer’s thought that runs through all his writings from the Weimar era onwards. It was as constant and yet mutable as his concept of sensuous reality.

**“Transcendental Homelessness”: The shock of the First World War and the Religious Revival Movements of the Weimar Era**

In much of the secondary literature Kracauer’s religious early works (roughly up to 1926) are distinguished from his irreligious later work. In fact religion was initially of no great interest to Kracauer. It only became a substantive concern of his after the First World War. The form of liberal Judaism in his parental home had apparently instilled no pious sentiments in him. As he noted in one the few early diaries that have survived, in 1907 he demonstratively read a biography of Nietzsche on Yom Kippur (though he did not take to Nietzsche either).[[61]](#footnote-61)

The isolated modern subject and its attempts to reconcile with its environment formed a central focus in his early writings, which were not published during his lifetime. Here too he was already concerned with the problem of how to grapple with the “manifoldness” of reality. However, as yet he still saw a way from the Spirit to the world. “The relativist”, he wrote in 1916, “is a relativist only because he wants to be a dogmatist”.[[62]](#footnote-62) From the fact that there is no one all-encompassing truth the relativist concluded that there was no point in even trying to attain the manifold truths that actually could be determined on the basis of experience. The dogmatist, by contrast, failed to comprehend the manifoldness of reality and assumed that truth could be found only where basic human experience clustered around extant concepts. For Kracauer, the goal was a sense of rootedness in the world and of “community” [*Gemeinschaft*] attained by the subject by arranging its experiences in the radiant light of “concepts”. This forging of ideational links between the subject and the environment and community within which the isolated individual finds itself was Kracauer’s concern, *inter alia*, in “Über das Wesen der Persönlichkeit” [“On the Essence of Personality”], written in 1913/14. He characterized the human personality as a cosmos of concepts gravitating around one core concept.[[63]](#footnote-63) In the only text from this corpus of largely neglected early philosophical works published, in part, at the time, “Vom Erleben des Krieges” [“On Experiencing the War”], which came out in the *Preußische Jahrbücher* in 1915, Kracauer applied this scheme to patriotism [*Vaterlandsliebe*] and argued that the latter was only genuine and durable if it formed the core of the personality.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Yet in the event patriotism did not offer a successful path towards either the Spirit or the community. Instead the World War turned out to be a catastrophe. Consequently, *Ginster*, in stark contrast to this early text, became an anti-war novel. Against this backdrop and the sense of crisis it generated, Kracauer’s categories became more reflexive. One of the thematic implications of this development was his “departure from inwardness”.[[65]](#footnote-65) In the early writings, he had lamented the loneliness of the modern subject, sought a sense of belonging through the attachment to grand ideas and ideals, and experienced the manifoldness of external reality as dolorous. In his subsequent works he now identified “objectless inwardness” as a form of idealistic ideological deception: “The fact that the artistry with which the book elucidates mental states was praised”, he wrote in *Georg*, “led Georg to suspect that it obscured the external circumstances all the more intensely”.[[66]](#footnote-66)

Kracauer now focused on the question of why the extant forms of human sociation were so deficient. In engaging this issue he resorted to a new discipline and an old promise: sociology as the quest for the logic of sociation, on the one hand, and the quest for a religious community, on the other, that would transcend the mundanities of earthly existence. In the early 1920s, like Erich Fromm and Leo Löwenthal, Kracauer was drawn to the charismatic Frankfurt rabbi Nehemias Anton Nobel and subsequently, for a short while, to the *Freie Jüdische Lehrhaus* [Free Jewish Academy], established, also in Frankfurt, by Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber.[[67]](#footnote-67) In his features he reported critically on other neoreligious movements and prophetic figures such as Hermann Keyserling, Eugen Diederichs and Rudolf Steiner and their esoteric “circles”.[[68]](#footnote-68) Kracauer’s novel *Georg* also bears eloquent testimony to the Weimar smorgasbord of worldviews. Its protagonist jauntily moves through various religious and political sects before finally blurting out, in mid-conversation, the tenets of a social critique tinged with Marxism.

Ultimately, Kracauer viewed all religious attempts to lend meaning to human life with scepticism yet in the early 1920s he was convinced that only religion could provide a solution to the crisis of modernity. As he wrote in 1922, philosophy could only point to the chaotic and lawless present in self-critical terms and thus “help prepare, within narrow limits, the transformation, which can already be sensed faintly on occasion and will lead an expelled humanity back into the new-old realms suffused with divinity”.[[69]](#footnote-69) For life that still *had* meaning, this had not been a concern. Kracauer’s point of reference for this idea was a neoromantic notion Lukács had developed in *Die Theorie des Romans*. It concerned periods in which the deity had melded the world into a meaningful totality and in which subject and object, content and form were still coextensive. Lukács called these “blissful times” [*selige Zeiten*],[[70]](#footnote-70) Kracauer referred to them as “meaningful eras” [*sinnerfüllte* *Epochen*].[[71]](#footnote-71) Yet this holistic unity of a mythical golden antiquity had fractured. This notion implied a pessimistic theory of modernization as a process of anomic differentiation. For the implications of this development Lukács had coined the term “transcendental homelessness”.[[72]](#footnote-72) Kracauer’s utopian notions in these years were authoritarian and reactionary to match. He shared the desire for an objective and irrefutable footing and meaning anchored in attempts at religious restoration and revival with the modern prophets he criticized.[[73]](#footnote-73)

Ultimately, Kracauer’s quest for a meaningful footing in the absolute clashed with the insight that the religious revivalist movements never delivered what they promised. He remained an agnostic who, despite wanting to, could not believe. Every spiritual proposition seemed to short-circuit the issues it claimed to address.[[74]](#footnote-74) In Ernst Bloch’s theosophical narrative of illumination, *Geist der Utopie* [*Spirit of Utopia*] of 1918, for example, he saw “God running amok”,[[75]](#footnote-75) and he soon concluded that new religious formations were “illusive and romantic” and that “the positive word” was therefore “not ours”. Instead one needed to be “a thorn” in the others’ sides, it was better “to drive them, with us, to desperation than to give them hope”.[[76]](#footnote-76) The only contribution one could make to redemption lay in the forthright denunciation of false promises of redemption. Kracauer thus initiated the *Bilderverbot* (prohibition of the image) that would later feature prominently in Critical Theory. The religious revivalist movements merely immobilized the vexing heterogeneity of the world, substituting a false harmony for the totality of meaning that had been lost, as Kracauer put it in 1926 in his critique of Buber and Rosenzweig’s “Germanization” [*Verdeutschung*], i.e., their German translation, of the Tanakh. Precisely because of their conceit that the translation should make the word of God audible in a new way, they resorted to neoromantic phraseology.[[77]](#footnote-77) He directed the same critique at the völkisch religious publisher Eugen Diederichs, who claimed that the germanicizing [*deutschtümelnden*] “word agglomerations” with which he advertised his “religious propaganda weeks” originated organically in the very essence of the German people [*Volk*].[[78]](#footnote-78)

In order to uncover the original meaning of the religions one needed to take a detour that entailed secular criticism. Kracauer’s critique of Buber and Rosenzweig hinged on a theoretical concept that he shared with Adorno and Benjamin, namely, that of the “migration” of theological “truth” into the “profane”. “Economics instead of explicit theology!” he demanded in “Zwei Arten der Mitteilung” [“Two Types of Communication”]. “First the outrage in the material realm, then the contemplation which, for heaven’s sake, must not detract from that realm”.[[79]](#footnote-79) Those categories in the religions and myths in which truth had inhered had to be demythologized and the content of theological categories had to change in tandem with social transformations until it could “hold its ground … in the face of the lowliest needs. … One would need to come across theology in the profane and point to the holes and fissures of the profane into which the truth has sunk”.[[80]](#footnote-80) Only on rare occasions did Kracauer clarify that the “indirect path” of profanization implied not only a critique but also a practical attempt to establish this-worldly truth. Thus, Kracauer argued that the “concept … of the classless society”, for instance, “represents not least a contemporary transformation of theological fixations”.[[81]](#footnote-81) Drawing on Kafka, Kracauer described the structure of capitalist society as a „burrow“ and a self-created prison of humanity. For the time being, only its critique was indirectly preparing the way for its destruction, which would amount to the uncovering of the obscured reality. The articulation of social criticism is thus equated with the Kafkaian “theological” perspective. “The true law is thrown into relief only by the untruth that surrounds it”.[[82]](#footnote-82)

If one takes the theological discourse between Benjamin, Kracauer, Adorno, and Bloch into account, the conventional account that has Kracauer swap his religious for a political stance in the mid-1920s thus turns out to be imprecise. Both phases were in fact political and religious in one. The conservative-authoritarian episode with its historico-metaphysical notion of the shattered absolute and the yearning for community was superseded by a vision of utopia that drew on both Marxism and messianism. As he wrote to an author whose book he reviewed in 1929: “But theology exists and, like you, I acknowledge the reality of the term eternal”.[[83]](#footnote-83)

**“Homeless Shelter”: The Masses of Salaried Employees and the Cult of Diversion**

Like the implicit theology, the concept of “homelessness” he had appropriated from Lukács’s *Theorie des Romans* also ran through Kracauer’s entire work. The way in which his utilization of this concept changed over time allows us to chart the development of his philosophy overall. In the early 1920s, he still used the concept as an expression of metaphysical pessimism to describe his own situation. By the end of the decade, the concept had gone from describing his vantage point to being the object of his investigation. Kracauer now pointed to the authoritarian potential that lay in the desire for a definitive footing and used the concept to portray the socially unaware and historically hopeless salaried employees in the Weimar Republic.[[84]](#footnote-84) As Kracauer added later, it was precisely the middle-class salaried employees in their state of homelessness who formed the first and principal target audience of “totalitarian propaganda”. Their quest for an absolutely secure shelter was a precursor of the conformist rebellion of the Nazis.[[85]](#footnote-85)

In the essays on the salaried employees he wrote in 1929 and 1930, Kracauer’s philosophy reached its initial apex both in terms of style and acuity. In the introduction to the book version he juxtaposed it both to merely descriptive reportage and to merely deductive “idealism” and emphasized the constructed mosaic-like structure of his account.[[86]](#footnote-86) In it, he had condensed, once again indirectly, ethnographic observation of the relevant milieus, advertisement and death notices, leisure opportunities, the self-promotion of certain associations and the content of personal conversations to arrive at a comprehensive cultural diagnosis. Kracauer portrayed a new class which, in the eyes of both the right and the left, should never have emerged and who no longer trusted in the utopian promises of either left-wing or bourgeois-liberal politics. The number of salaried employees had grown exponentially after the First World War and they formed a “new middle class”: the “white-collar [*Stehkragen*, lit. stand-up collar] proletarians” and petty bourgeoisie of the Weimar Republic. They were in fact proletarianized but superficially aspired to bourgeois cultural values whose realization was the task of the emerging culture industry. Kracauer illustrated this by pointing to Berlin’s nightlife. In the popular entertainment venue “Haus Vaterland” he saw a “homeless shelter”. “Nothing is more characteristic of this life, which can only be called life to a limited extent”, he wrote, “than the way in which it perceives of higher things. In them it sees not substance but glamour. It grasps them with the means not of concentration but of diversion”.[[87]](#footnote-87) The “geography of the homeless shelters” was shaped by dancehall music, enthusiasm for sport, cinemas and the allure of fairground booths, in short, by the “cult of diversion”.[[88]](#footnote-88)[[89]](#footnote-89) As the erosion of traditional modes of sociation gathered pace the salaried employees epitomized the transformation of human beings into appendages of capital. They became more and more streamlined and atomized at the same time. Where the repressive authority of tradition had died away images from films and magazines came to define culture.[[90]](#footnote-90) From its analysis of the pseudo-authenticity required at job interviews (“morally pink complexion”) to its focus on the integration of leisure activities as workplace amenities, *Die Angestellten* is definitely Kracauer’s most topical book.

For Kracauer, the observed concurrence of conformism and atomization was closely connected to the—at the time much discussed—sociological concept of the masses. The First World War and the rapidly rising number of salaried employees in the cities were experienced as the dawn of an age of the masses. Unwittingly, the atomized individuals—for whom the ideologically malleable salaried employees stood paradigmatically—lined themselves up as a “mass ornament”.[[91]](#footnote-91) The organic solidarity of the pre-capitalist eras had been shattered by the capitalist mode of production. What remained were subjects who were like dots clustered in pseudo-geometrical structures that matched the functions of economic rationality. The Tiller Girls or the assembly line workers laboring in perfect synchronicity were cases in point.

As Kracauer noted elsewhere, the largest mass was the proletariat. Its emancipation had to consist precisely in the shedding of its state as an amorphous agglomerate of “mass particles”.[[92]](#footnote-92) Fascist propaganda intentionally treated human beings as masses within which the individual was interchangeable and which, in its entirety, was easily manipulable.[[93]](#footnote-93) The transition from the capitalist „cult of diversion“ to reactionary propaganda, then, was a fluid one. The atomized individuals were diverted so they did not congregate, the masses so they did not rally. In the first part of *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* [*Heritage of Our times*], published in 1935, Ernst Bloch discussed Kracauer’s *Die Angestellten* and the “cult of diversion” in detail. “Cinema or race”, he concluded succinctly, were apparently two homologous modes of that cult.[[94]](#footnote-94)

Kracauer’s notion of the ornament formed by the masses was underpinned by a description of the ways in which socially produced economic forms became second nature, placing human beings at the mercy of its laws and the structures it stipulated. To be sure, compared to pre-modern organic forms of association the geometry of the mass ornament amounted to a rationalization. Yet given that people were unaware of its functioning and it was not instituted by reason, it still belonged to the realm of nature, indeed, from the perspective of reason it represented a “relapse into mythology so massive that a greater one seems inconceivable”.[[95]](#footnote-95) In „The Mass Ornament“, then, his strong concept of reason notwithstanding, Kracauer observed elements of the dialectic of enlightenment: phenomena and relations that have developed historically, specifically the economy, gain a momentum of their own that determines human existence no less comprehensively and mercilessly than did fate in the mythical mindset.

In keeping with the theological concept of the migration of truth into the profane, which could not simply be leapfrogged but needed to be subjected to critique, Kracauer warned against a premature quest for an alternative praxis in the existing order or in the context of escapist forms of community. This would amount to “disrespect for our historical locus”. The only way led “right through the mass ornament, not backwards from it”.[[96]](#footnote-96) Against the bourgeois critique of the thoroughly capitalized mass culture Kracauer consequently insisted that “*aesthetic* enjoyment of the ornamental mass movements is *legitimate*”.[[97]](#footnote-97) At least this form of mass entertainment was in touch with the current state of reality, which was more than could be said for the elitist enjoyment of high culture.

This also helps explain Kracauer’s focus on film as a modern, mechanized art form. The screen was the paradigmatic surface on which the logic of society—from the Tiller Girls to totalitarian mass rallies—could quite literally be watched. Traces of this ideology-critical understanding of the cinema are still found in his later film theory, for instance, when he wrote: “The film screen is Athena’s polished shield.”[[98]](#footnote-98) With this shield Perseus was able to approach Medusa without turning into stone because he did not have to look at her directly and watched only her reflection in the shield. For Kracauer, this allegory implied that even the unimaginable horror of National Socialism could be confronted with the gaze of cinematic realism while the human apparatus of perception and conceptualization had ideologically shut itself off.

**Ahasver, Charlie Chaplin, and Jacques Offenbach or the epistemic subject in Kracauer’s Theory**

Whether Adorno was right in assuming that Kracauer had derived his “gaze”, which viewed even the familiar as “an object of amazement”, from the sublimation of a “childhood trauma of dubitable belonging” is a moot point.[[99]](#footnote-99) Certainly, it was not only his contemporaries and subsequent scholars who described him as a loner and a maverick. As his early self-identification as “transcendentally homeless” indicates, he also saw himself in these terms. Later he would describe his existence as “exterritorial”. This sense of alienation was owed not least to the antisemitic animosity he encountered at school.

This outsider perspective has repeatedly been interpreted as a form specifically of Jewish subjectivity. It should be borne in mind, though, that the characterization of “the Jew” as an alien and outsider resonates profoundly with integral antisemitic tropes. Kracauer grappled with this problem in an intensely reflective manner.[[100]](#footnote-100) His references to the anti-Judaic Christian myth of the “eternal Jew” Ahasver are a case in point. An early unpublished note bore the title, “Die ewigen Juden” [“The eternal Jews”]. Kracauer described the Jews as isolated and displaced, as “vagrant souls”. They ought to find their “realm” among their fellow human beings yet are not granted access to them.[[101]](#footnote-101) Ahasver repeatedly turned up again at crucial junctures. In the theses on antisemitism Kracauer published anonymously in 1933, he cited the eternal Jew as the exemplary cosmopolitan who transcends humanity’s natural separation into races and classes. He characterized this “explosion of an existence beholden entirely to nature” and reorganisation of nature with the means of reason (which he also described in “Die Photographie” and “Das Ornament der Masse”) as a “Jewish trait directed towards redemption”.[[102]](#footnote-102) In *From Caligari to Hitler*, Kracauer interpreted Paul Wegener’s second *Golem* film (1920) as one of the few attempts in the history of Weimar film to leverage reason and liberate the oppressed. In the film, Ahasver is among those whom the legendary Rabbi Löw invokes in defence of Prague Jewry. For Kracauer, both the eternal Jew and the Golem symbolized reason.[[103]](#footnote-103) In *History*, finally, Ahasver represented the dialectic of time and historical “‘*Ungleichzeitigkeit*’ (nonsimultaneousness)”.[[104]](#footnote-104) Condemned for all eternity and wandering through all the ages, he embodies the paradoxical unity of continuity and discontinuity in history.[[105]](#footnote-105) Ahasver is just one of the allegorical figures that illustrate systematic problems in Kracauer’s late work but can also be interpreted in autobiographical terms. The way in which the figure of Ahasver changes over time perfectly encapsulates the development of Kracauer’s theoretical and political point of view, from his early lament about rootlessness of modernity via the “explosion” of social relations beholden to nature to the involuntary witness of the involute course of history that leads to no redemption.

Within the context of Kracauer’s changeable theory, the sympathetic outsider was the epistemic subject, which, in turn, was inseparable from the empirical subject. As opposed to the deluded people who had aligned themselves with the mass ornament, the gaze of the outsider focused on the essential surface appearances and recognized their patterns. The principal protagonists of his two novels, Georg and Ginster, also embody this vantage point. There is one caveat, though. Elsewhere Kracauer also portrays the objects of his investigation as clear sighted outsiders of this kind. In 1919, Kracauer credited his first teacher, Georg Simmel, with the gaze of the rootless stranger who, for that very reason, can observe state of the world with the requisite distance.[[106]](#footnote-106) In 1926, he ascribed this estranging gaze to “the Jew Kafka” whose writings brought “dread into the world” from which “the countenance of truth is withdrawing”.[[107]](#footnote-107) This is exactly the position of Adorno’s later “inverse theology”, which can reveal no divine secrets but only the utter negativity of the existing order.[[108]](#footnote-108)

For Kracauer, nobody represented this figure of the outsider more incisively than (the non-Jew) Charlie Chaplin. Kracauer’s take was in some ways similar to Hannah Arendt’s claim on Chaplin for her hidden tradition of the Jew as pariah.[[109]](#footnote-109) To Kracauer’s mind, Chaplin demonstrated that the experience of the hostile environment could be processed aesthetically and reflected upon in an emancipatory manner. As the (ostensible) preacher in *The Pilgrim*, Kracauer wrote in 1929, Chaplin discredited the sectarianism by outwardly imitating it. “Finally, he walks off, one foot in the USA, the other in Mexico. Religion is no more his home than any fatherland. Nor do his fellow humans offer him a genuine home. … One has to fear and outwit them like the things. … for him, organic and inorganic nature are one and the same thing. … He simply does not know his way around life; he has no religion and no fatherland.[[110]](#footnote-110) And yet, for all that he does still have a home, one that seems palpable to anyone who sees him”.[[111]](#footnote-111) Kracauer’s construction of Chaplin reflected his assumption of a form of human impotence that was experienced involuntarily by Jews and that everybody could grasp on the screen.[[112]](#footnote-112) In film he finds the epistemological reliability he had sought in vain elsewhere. The world over, or at least wherever the film was shown, a trace of rootless rootedness could be experienced through Chaplin’s performance in a tangible manner on screen.

In his second-most controversial book, after *From Caligari to Hitler*, his monograph, *Jacques Offenbach und das Paris seiner Zeit* [Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of His Time], written while in exile in Paris, Kracauer took a similar approach. Kracauer’s major concerns throughout his work converged in this “social biography” [*Sozialbiographie*]. It too was the product as much of construction as of reconstruction. It comprised historiosophy, assemblages of single frames, sociology, and indirect-allegorical contemporary analysis. Given that the book focused on a Jewish immigrant in Paris and Kracauer portrayed Napoleon III as a tyrannical dictator, one can even discern an autobiographical dimension to the project.[[113]](#footnote-113) Written when he was in great financial difficulties, it was pitched at a broad readership. This, and the fact that Offenbach’s music barely featured in his account, precipitated profoundly polemical responses from Adorno and Benjamin.[[114]](#footnote-114)

Like Kafka, Chaplin and Ginster, Kracauer’s Offenbach achieves a satirical estrangement of the society that surrounds him and whose contours he throws all the more sharply into relief for it. “He is a mockingbird”.[[115]](#footnote-115) As such he does not destroy or profane the lofty and sacred, but he does discredit that which unjustly dons the mantle of sanctity. From the perspective of the mockingbird one saw an inversion “of the customary image of the world. Many things that seem to be at the bottom are in fact on top; many things generally considered great turn out to be small”.[[116]](#footnote-116) Later on in the book, Kracauer describes Offenbach’s qualities in terms of the confluence of two Jewish background: emancipation in the spirit of the tolerance Offenbach’s father represented, on the one hand, and an inclination Kracauer ascribed to Jewish bandsmen and occasional and wandering musicians [*Spielleute*], on the other, namely that they played and engaged in tomfoolery with the same dedication at worldly festivities they also displayed when performing their duties in the synagogue”.[[117]](#footnote-117) Kracauer also invoked the problematic Jewish motif of peregrination [*Wanderschaft*][[118]](#footnote-118) and a form of homesickness with metaphysical connotations for which the boulevards of Paris—as a “home for the homeless”[[119]](#footnote-119) akin to the “homeless shelter”—offered poor compensation. Kracauer attributet Offenbach’s operettas to a society that had become operetta-like under the dictatorship of Napoleon III. They offered “intoxicating illusions” to the citizens who, having been expelled from politics, were now confined to the private sphere.[[120]](#footnote-120)

Here too all the characteristic tenets certainly of Kracauer’s early theory—emancipation, sensuousness, homelessness and ideological diversion that serves authoritarian domination—were assembled. Kracauer’s mockingbirds—the protagonists of his novels, Chaplin, Kafka, Simmel, Offenbach, and Ahasver—have (at least) three functions: one that is epistemological, one that is existential and one that is directed towards the critique of society. Their status gives rise to the critique of society and as excluded figures they are credited with a gaze particularly well suited to the critique of society. At the same time, their quest for a “home for the homeless” reflects Kracauer’s grappling with his own existence.

Today, Kracauer is discussed predominantly as a pioneer of Film and Media Studies. A second line of reception takes the perspective of intellectual history and reads him as critical social philosopher akin to Benjamin or Critical Theory. In both cases, he is considered a classic. Yet this generally leads to his no longer being engaged as a thinker who has a genuine contribution to make to current debates. He continues to be discussed in university seminars and doctoral dissertations, and a first biography was published to mark the fiftieth anniversary of his death. Whether he can be used to initiate broader debates seems a moot point, though. On the one hand, his fundamental critique of theoretical endeavours on behalf of the individual objects has lost nothing of its topicality. The ignorance of academic and ideology-critical analyses regarding inconspicuous everyday phenomena remains a constant challenge. Taking up Kracauer’s legacy means learning to engage in exacting observation rather than simply allowing explanatory patterns and concepts to click into place. On the other hand, the work of this “collector” radiates a sense of cultural antiquarianism. One encounters typewriters, tatty umbrellas, and silent movies, forgotten microhistorical events and missed opportunities. Where Kracauer offered thick phenomenological descriptions rather than engaging in theoretical deductions that also applied to other material, Kracauer’s texts appear irrecoverably historical. The question, then, is not whether they can be short-circuited with the current state of the art in the relevant disciplines but how the present that the reader brings to the texts and their objects appears in the light of this contrast.

1. For good general surveys, see Gertrud Koch, *Kracauer zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 1996); Graeme Gilloch, *Siegfried Kracauer* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015); Gerd Gemünden, Johannes von Moltke (eds.), *Culture in the Anteroom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2012); Jörn Ahrens et al. (eds.), *„Doch ist das Wirkliche auch vergessen, so ist es darum noch nicht getilgt“* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Jörg Später, *Siegfried Kracauer* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On both phases, see Inka Mülder, *Siegfried Kracauer* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1985); Johannes von Moltke, *The Curious Humanist* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Jörn Ahrens et al., “‘Doch ist das Wirkliche auch vergessen, so ist es darum noch nicht getilgt’,” in *“Doch ist das Wirkliche auch vergessen”*, 3–13, here 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Theodor W. Adorno, Siegfried Kracauer, *Briefwechsel 1923–1966* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2008), 658–659. On relations between the four men, see Später, *Siegfried Kracauer*, chapters 15, 21 and 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Später, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 605. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Siegfried Kracauer, “Ginster,” in *Werke* vol. 7 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004), 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Später, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 532–533. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Siegfried Kracauer, “Die Angestellten,” in *Werke* vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006), 211–310, here 304. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Helmut Stalder, *Siegfried Kracauer* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Henrik Reeh, *Ornaments of the Metropolis* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Siegfried Kracauer, “Das Monokel,” “Falscher Untergang der Regenschirme,“ “Das Scheibmaschinchen,” in *Werke* vol. 5.2 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011), 495–497, 364–365, 585–589. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Sven Kramer, “Vergesellschaftung durch Sprache,” in *„Doch ist das Wirkliche auch vergessen“*, 59–80. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Siegfried Kracauer, “Notes on the planned History of the German Film,” in Volker Breidecker (ed.), *Siegfried Kracauer — Erwin Panofsky: Briefwechsel, 1941–1966* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1996), 15–18, here 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Siegfried Kracauer, “Totalitäre Propaganda,” in *Werke* vol. 2.2 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012), 17–173, here 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Siegfried Kracauer, “Conclusions,” in *Werke* vol. 5.4 (Berlin: Suhrkamp 2011), 467–473, here 470. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Siegfried Kracauer, “Das Ornament der Masse,” in *Werke* vol. 5.2, 612–624, here 612. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Kracauer, “Falscher Untergang der Regenschirme,” 364. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Siegfried Kracauer, *History* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1995), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See David Frisby, *Fragmente der Moderne* (Rheda-Wiedenbrück: Daedalus, 1989); Mülder, *Grenzgänger*, 103–115. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Walter Benjamin, “Ein Außenseiter macht sich bemerkbar,” in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 3 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991) 219–225, here 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Quote in Später, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 551. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Kracauer, *History*, 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ernst Bloch, *Briefe1903–1975* vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985), 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See, for example, Axel Honneth, *Vivisektionen eines Zeitalters* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014), 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Theodor W. Adorno, “Der wunderliche Realist,” [1964] in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 11 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2003), 388–408, here 394. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 397. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See Max Beck, Nicholas Coomann, “Adorno, Kracauer und die Ursprünge der Jargonkritik,” in *Sprachkritik als Ideologiekritik* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2015), 7–27. See also Kramer, „Vergesellschaftung durch Sprache“. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Mülder, *Grenzgänger*, 103–115. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Kracauer, “Die Angestellten,” 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Kracauer, *History*, 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See the contributions by Nico Bobka and Dirk Braunstein. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See also Karl Marx, „Ökonomisch-Philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844,“ in *Marx Engels Werke* vol. 40 (Berlin: Dietz, 2012), 465–588, here 578–579. The usage of the term *Unwesen* here plays on the double meaning of the term. In common parlance it denotes unruly, mischievous and pernicious behaviour. At the same time it forms the counterpoint to *Wesen* (meaning being, nature or essence), i.e., it denotes non-essence or the non-materiality of a being. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Karl-Heinz Haag, “Das Unwiederholbare,” [1963] in *Kritische Philosophie* (Munich: etk, 2012), 97–107. See also Später, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 552. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* [1947](Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Kracauer, „Das Ornament der Masse“, 617. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Theodor W. Adorno, “Minima Moralia,” in *Werke*  vol. 4 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Quoted in Momme Brodersen, *Siegfried Kracauer* (Rowohlt: Reinbek, 2001), 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Siegfried Kracauer, “Soziologie als Wissenschaft,” in Werke 1, 9–101, here 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid., 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Siegfried Kracauer, “Der Detektiv-Roman,” in *Werke* 1, 103–209, here 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Bloch, *Briefe* vol. 1, 282. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid., 283. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Siegfried Kracauer, “Die Photographie,” in *Werke* 5.2, 682–698. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Kracauer, “Die Angestellten,” 211–254. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Siegfried Kracauer, “Kult der Zerstreuung,” in *Werke* vol. 6.1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004), 208–213. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Siegfried Kracauer, “Propaganda and the Nazi War Film,” in *From Caligari To Hitler*, 273–307, here 295. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid., 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 296. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid., 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Kracauer, *History*, 105–106 and *passim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Kracauer, *History*, 191–217. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Siegfried Kracauer, “Aus dem Tagebuch des Studenten (1907),” in *Marbacher Magazin* 47/1988, 9–13, here 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Siegfried Kracauer, “Von der Erkenntnismöglichkeit seelischen Lebens,” in *Werke* vol. 9.1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004), 121–168, here 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Siegfried Kracauer, “Über das Wesen der Persönlichkeit,” in *Werke* vol. 9.1, 7–120, here 41 and *passim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Siegfried Kracauer, “Vom Erleben des Krieges,” in *Werke* vol. 5.1, 11–24. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. See Dirk Oschmann, *Auszug aus der Innerlichkeit* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Kracauer, “Georg,” in *Werke* vol. 7, 257–516, here 488. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Compared to his engagement of other religious revival movements, Kracauer’s relationship to Buber and Rosenzweig has been studied extensively. See Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Intellektuellendämmerung* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1982); Raimund Sesterhenn (ed.), *Das Freie Jüdische Lehrhaus* (Munich: Schnell & Steiner, 1987); Rachel Heuberger: *Rabbiner Nehemias Anton Nobel* (Frankfurt: Societäts-Verlag, 2005); Martina Lesch, Walter Lesch, “Verbindungen zu einer anderen Frankfurter Schule,” in Michael Kessler, Thomas Y. Levin (eds.), *Siegfried Kracauer* (Tübingen: Stauffenberg, 1990), 171–194; Matthew Handelman, “The Forgotten Conversation,” in Scientia Poetica, vol. 15 (2011), 234–251. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. See Manfred Bauschulte, *Religionsbahnhöfe in der Weimarer Republik* (Marburg: diagonal, 2007), 27–51, 111–145; Jared Poley, “Siegfried Kracauer, Spirit, and the Soul of Weimar Germany,” in Monica Black, Eric Kurlander (eds.), Revisiting the „Nazi Occult“ (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2015), 86–102. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Kracauer, “Soziologie als Wissenschaft,” 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Georg Lukács, *Die Theorie des Romans* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2009), 21. On the context see Gerhard Scheit, “Der Gelehrte im Zeitalter der ‘vollendeten Sündhaftigkeit’. Georg Lukács *Theorie des Romans* und der romantische Antikapitalismus,“ in Nicolas Berg, Dieter Burdorf (eds.), *Textgelehrte. Literaturwissenschaft und literarisches Wissen im Umkreis der Kritischen Theorie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 2014), 39–64. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Kracauer, “Soziologie als Wissenschaft,” 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Lukács, *Theorie*, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Dieses explizite Dauerthema Kracauers nach 1920 lässt sich am besten an seiner Einschätzung des Stichwortgebers studieren, vgl. Kracauer, „Georg von Lukács‘ Romantheorie,“ in *Werke* vol. 5.1, 282-288. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Zum Nicht-Glauben-Können in Abgrenzung zur prinzipiellen Skepsis (Nicht-Glauben-wollen) und zu den religiösen „Kurzschluß“-Menschen vgl. Kracauer, „Die Wartenden,“ in *Werke* vol. 5.1, 383-394. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Kracauer an Leo Löwenthal in Dies., *„In steter Freundschaft…“*. *Briefwechsel* (Münster: Zu Klampen, 2003), 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Ebd., 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Kracauer, „Die Bibel auf deutsch,“ in *Werke* vol. 5.2, 374-386. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Vgl. Kracauer, „Volkheit! Goethe! Mythos!“ in *Werke* vol. 5.2, 371-372. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Kracauer, „Zwei Arten der Mitteilung,“ in *Werke* 5.3, 180-187, hier 180-181. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Kracauer an Bloch, 27.5.1926 in Bloch, *Briefe* vol. 1, 274. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Kracauer, „Theologie gegen Nationalismus,“ in *Werke* vol. 5.4, 344-349, hier 347-348. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Kracauer, „Franz Kafka,“ in *Werke* vol. 5.3, 65-67, hier 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Kracauer, „Zwei Arten der Mitteilung,“ 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Vgl. Kracauer, „Die Angestellten,“ 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Vgl. Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 107, 132, 288, ders., “Bemerkungen zur geplanten Geschichte des deutschen Films,” in Werke vol. 2.1, 494. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Kracauer, „Die Angestellten,“ 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Kracauer, „Die Angestellten,“ 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Ebd., 293. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Vgl. Kracauer, „Kult der Zerstreuung.“ [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Vgl. Henri Band, *Mittelschichten und Massenkultur. Siegfried Kracauers publizistische Auseinandersetzung mit der populären Kultur und der Kultur der Mittelschichten in der Weimarer Republik* (Berlin: Lukas, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Vgl. Kracauer, „Das Ornament der Masse“ in *Werke* vol. 5.2, 612-624. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Kracauer, „Totalitäre Propaganda,“ 91-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Ibid., passim. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Cf. Ernst Bloch, „Erbschaft dieser Zeit,“ in ders.,*Gesamtausgabe* vol. 4 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985), 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Kracauer, „Das Ornament der Masse,“ 621. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Ibid., 623. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Ibid., 615. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 305. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Adorno, „Der wunderliche Realist,“ 399. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Cf. zur Diskussion Matthew Handelman, “The Dialectics of Otherness: Siegfried Kracauer’s Figurations of the Jew, Judaism and Jewishness,” in *Yearbook for European Jewish Literature Studies* vol. 2, 1 (2015), 90-111. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Cf.ibid., 96-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Kracauer, „Conclusions,“ 471-472. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 112-113. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Als Referenz für diesen Begriff dient – für das Spätwerk – bemerkenswerterweise Karl Marx, vgl. Kracauer, *History*, 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Kracauer, *History*, 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Cf. Kracauer, „Georg Simmel. Ein Beitrag zur Deutung des geistigen Lebens in unserer Zeit,“ in *Werke* vol. 9.2, 270-271. Simmels „Exkurs über den Fremden“, der gleichfalls als bleibender Wandernder und vertrauter Fremder porträtiert wird und damit Programmatik und Problematik des Kracauerschen Ahasver-Subjekts zeigt, vgl. Simmel, *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* (Berlin: Duncker&Humblodt, 1908), 509-512. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Kracauer, „Das Schloß,“ in *Werke* vol. 5.2, 491-494, hier 494. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Vgl. dazu den Beitrag von Julia Jopp und mir zur „Theologie“ in diesem Lexikon. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Hannah Arendt, “The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition,” in *Jewish Social Studies* 6, 2 (1944), 99–122, here 110–113. For a similar approach, see also Leo Löwenthal, “Judentum und deutscher Geist,” in *Schriften* vol. 4 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), 9–56. Löwenthal did not discuss Chaplin, though. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Kracauer referred to Chaplin as “ein religions- und vaterlandsloser Geselle”, which is a play on the pejorative term “vaterlandslose Gesellen” historically used to denounce the Social Democrats, especially in Imperial Germany. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Kracauer, „Chaplin als Prediger,“ in *Werke* vol. 6.2, 312-314, hier 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Vgl. Kracauer, „Chaplins Triumph,“ in *Werke* vol. 6.2, 492-495492. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Vgl. Harald Reil, *Siegfried Kracauers Jacques Offenbach. Biographie, Geschichte, Zeitgeschichte* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Vgl. Später, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 330-333. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Siegfried Kracauer: *Jaqcues Offenbach und das Paris seiner Zeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994), 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Ebd. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Ebd., 50-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Ebd., 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Ebd., 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Vgl. ebd., 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)