

**CRITICAL DESTRUCTIONS: KRACAUER AND  
BENJAMIN'S WEIMAR WRITINGS ON  
ARCHITECTURE, FILM, AND THE CULTURAL  
PUBLIC SPHERE**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study looks at Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer's insight that film was a revolutionary break with traditional culture, arguing it is better understood by framing it within their political relationship to the emergence of Weimar's new urban publics. Building on Miriam Hansen and Susan Buck-Morss, this essay differs from much scholarship on Benjamin and Kracauer's work on film and publics by identifying urban architecture as an illuminating counterpart to new experiences and configurations accompanying the rise of cinema culture. Architecture was a site for transformations of the Weimar public sphere, and connects their work on film to hope for a popular modernism that could experience the city as more than a repository for capitalist labour and consumption. Using close readings of primary texts and secondary sources, this thesis clarifies the context of their authorship to invite a more precise understanding of its relevance for present concerns in media studies.

### **Keywords:**

Benjamin, Walter; Kracauer, Siegfried; Architecture; Cinema; Cultural Public Sphere; Weimar Germany; Cultural Criticism; Media Studies

### **Subject Terms:**

Benjamin, Walter, 1892 - 1940 – Philosophy; Kracauer, Siegfried, 1889 – 1966; Modernism (Aesthetics) – Germany; Popular Culture -- History -- 20<sup>th</sup> century; Motion Pictures -- Social aspects; Mass media -- Philosophy.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Recognizing Weimar's Public Sphere

Walter Benjamin's very last completed work is a series of meditations that consider how to make stories of the past work in the fight for the present. Faced with a present in which things had gone very wrong (he himself died fleeing from persecution shortly after this work was written), he continued to believe that when we find an image of the past that draws our recognition, the kernel of truth that lies in its story needs to be teased out and very precisely applied to the present as a tool for social liberation. He characterized history, not as a linear series of events, but as an enormous stockpile from which, at any moment, a particular image of the past might emerge that bears an uncanny resemblance to our present moment. When it does, he asks us to pay close attention. Of this he writes: "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.... For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably."<sup>1</sup>

Benjamin and his contemporary and colleague, Siegfried Kracauer lived in and wrote about a historical moment when social configurations were undergoing massive changes. Key political upheavals meant that the still-young industrial masses who found

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Walter Benjamin Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 255.



themselves in Germany's major cities in ever greater numbers were starting to take a larger role in the public sphere and its cultural forms. The revolution in arts and culture that occurred during Germany's Weimar period of the 1920's and 30's is a remarkable example of a growing urban population that started to see itself reflected back in an exuberant explosion of popular culture. With the products of mass production and distribution establishing themselves ever more firmly in daily activities of consumption, display, and spectacle, the public sphere during this period began to take on characteristics that are not at all dissimilar to what we see and experience today. This surviving cultural legacy, observed in the light of our own explosion of popular culture in which self-generated media reflects publics back to themselves in new ways, may speak to why the work of cultural critics, Benjamin and Kracauer, continues to attract the attention of culture and media scholars trying to theorize the present moment.

In her foreword to Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's book *Public Sphere and Experience*, Miriam Hansen addresses the problem of evaluating the continued relevance of a book that was written with specific reference to the social and political struggles of a different era. She suggests that we can start by looking at the historicity of an author to find correlations with present concerns. In her own reading of Negt and Kluge's book from the 1970's, their concern that the development of new publics were being suppressed, and their attempt to find a way to show how this was taking place, provides her with a relevant, ongoing link to today's struggles. For Negt and Kluge, "the concept of a proletarian public sphere could be constructed, discursively, from its systematic negation, that is from hegemonic efforts to suppress, fragment, delegitimize, or assimilate any public formation that suggests an alternative, autonomous organization of

experience.”<sup>2</sup> While a call for an open, democratic public sphere can certainly resonate in many ages, the key here is to test and see whether the *terms* of the debate from one era can survive the translation to another.

During Germany’s Weimar period, Benjamin and Kracauer, with their newspaper essays and articles, also worked to perform precisely this kind of discursive negation that exposed hegemonic incursions into new growths emerging in the public sphere. As a result of revolutionary changes in popular media, the traditional boundaries around cultural practices suddenly seemed provocatively malleable. In our own time, the internet and similar forms of user-interfaced mass media have likewise paired with our present global political-economic configurations to produce a feeling of a yet undetermined openness in the public sphere. Once again, new media is forcing us to reconsider the framework of intellectual activity, and the spatio-political boundaries of the public sphere.<sup>3</sup> To this end, I offer a discussion of Kracauer and Benjamin’s writings on the Weimar public sphere. Though it is not an examination of our own changing boundaries, this thesis is an attempt to seize an image of the past that speaks to me of the possibilities and dangers inherent in our own media’s still fluid nature.

Benjamin and Kracauer recognized the popularization of film as an event that was creating a revolutionary break from traditional bourgeois cultural forms. As a new cultural institution, it was not beholden to the structures and practices of other art forms, and it had a unique “destructive” power to transform all manner of cultural and natural phenomena into objects of popular culture. Their hope that film could become a catalyst

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<sup>2</sup> Miriam Hansen, “Foreword” in *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxxii.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

for productive forms of popular modernism was tempered, however, by witnessing the ways in which cinema culture was taken hold of by powerful corporations and shaped into something that mimicked already established styles (not unlike the issue of internet “throttling” where providers are trying to create an internet landscape modelled after network television). Benjamin and Kracauer’s writing constitute a form of discursive negation of these over-determinations in an exciting new medium. The fluidity in the Weimar public sphere, while it was concentrated in the advent of large-scale cinema culture, was definitely not limited to this medium. For the purposes of this study, architecture emerges as a parallel field of development and activity where modern publics were being physically organized and psychologically influenced by the cultural elite. Kracauer, and to a somewhat lesser extent, Benjamin made use of architecture as a field against and within which they were able to trace cinema’s developments and potentials.

## **Political Constellations of the Weimar Republic**

*Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? ... For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body. –Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller”*

The exciting developments in architecture and cinema culture that emerged during the Weimar period are inalienably connected to the unique political and historical conditions in which Germany’s citizens found themselves between the First and Second

World Wars. Returning home from the devastating and disillusioning experience of the First World War, many of the German working classes found themselves living once again in cramped, unsanitary conditions without many prospects for income or improving personal resources. The conditions at the end of the war were such that many people saw the entire event as a pointless slaughter that had taken place at the behest of an unfit Kaiser. Inspired by the successful Bolshevik revolution that had helped to end the war in Russia, a popular uprising amongst German soldiers and workers launched a partially successful revolt that decisively ended the war at home and sealed the fate of the Kaiser and his constitutional monarchy. Although this revolution provided an outlet for the revolutionary energies and class-consciousness of many German people, its impact on the more deeply rooted social conditions was marginal by comparison to the Bolshevik revolution. In Germany, although the Kaiser had lost his governing role, the pre-existing moderate arm of the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD), middle-class parties, and union leaders (under the threat of obsolescence in the event of a successful worker takeover) made strategic political moves to quell the uprising as quickly as possible without having to adopt any of the revolutionaries' more radical demands. The result left a large and disparate population in an unsettled political state that with simmered desires for communism, fascism, social democracy, and monarchical nostalgia side by side; the only certainty amongst all of them was a desire for change.<sup>4</sup>

For many of Germany's elites, including the artist and intellectual class, this simmering German "mass" appeared to be a volatile, uncertain entity poised at the edge of yet-unknown configurations and directions. As happened in other times and places of

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<sup>4</sup> For a thorough discussion of political and economic conditions in Germany following World War I, see "The Weimar Republic" in Frank B. Tipton's *A History of Modern Germany Since 1815*.

rapid industrialization and political upheaval, the German people around 1919 became that slippery object of scrutiny, revulsion, and desire, known as “the masses.”

For a prominent segment of the culture bearing class, the physical and psychological proximity to the war had shaken up older worldviews and galvanized them toward a revolutionary politics.<sup>5</sup> With this new political energy, many artists and intellectuals became driven to find ways to productively plug their work into the revolutionary spirit of the times and its call for change. This desire forced them to ask themselves who the masses were, and how to engage with them. It was no secret to much of the intelligentsia that the existing bourgeois cultural public sphere was outmoded and becoming increasingly irrelevant in the context of post-war modernization, but the question of what should take its place was a difficult one. As Germany struggled to find its economic and political footing and identity, future directions for the cultural sphere were hotly debated by the literati of all different political persuasions.

A strong stream of socialist intellectuals and artists sought to re-define the institutions and practices of the cultural public sphere with a more practical, applied artistic practice in the hopes of better engaging a growing consumer public and its legions of metropolitan dwellers. Partly due to their post-war division from Western Europe, German avant-garde literati found inspiration for their work in the proletarianization of culture taking place in Bolshevik Russia and for political reasons were able to move easily back and forth between there and Germany. This influence nurtured a movement that sought to work for and address the masses with functional art and an investment in popular venues and design. Political disillusionment and radicalization, and the

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<sup>5</sup> John Willett, *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety 1917-1933* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 13.

proximity to the Bolsheviks' cultural revolution converged to leave an indelible mark on the (predominantly metropolitan) cultural public sphere of Weimar Germany. During this period, "the arts of the avant-garde began to have what cultural pessimists... normally accuse them of lacking: an audience, a function, a unity, a vital core."<sup>6</sup> Under the influence of democratic social concepts and a new politicized artistic internationalism, the German avant-garde embarked on an exciting and unsettling journey into the realm of popular culture.

Popular culture in Weimar experienced an explosion of venues, styles, participants and consumers, allowing the themes and ideas of the day to saturate the cultural landscape with unprecedented speed and scope. The feelings of defeat and inadequacy that burdened early post-war society were parlayed into an obsession with social regeneration and rebirth whose manifestations appeared on every level of cultural life. The Expressionist movement became a vehicle for some of these volatile energies, adopting a metaphysical "New Man" as one of its symbols for a desired large-scale cultural renewal. This successful artistic trend also made forays into popular media, taking firm root in the thriving film production industry. A huge player in the Weimar economy, the film industry produced 300-400 films per year that were delivered up to the appetites of a steadily growing cinema-going public. In the period between 1919-1929,<sup>7</sup> movie theatres increased in number from 3,700 to 5,000 to accommodate these audiences, the largest among them being able to hold over 2,000 viewers.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> "Cinema from Expressionism to Social Realism" *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, eds. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 617.

<sup>8</sup> Willett, 142.

On the heels of the Expressionist movement and its deep influence on German filmmaking, came the style of New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*). In the harsh light of post-war life, the aspirational visions of Expressionist artists could hardly stand up to the socio-economic realities, and their metaphysical utopias were gradually translated into a more sober experimentation, approaching the development of a “new” culture with rational design and practical production. The New Objectivity’s sober reformulations were wildly successful, and swept through all areas of Weimar cultural life from journalism to fashion, making a particularly significant impact in architectural circles. Coinciding as it did with Weimar’s socio-historical conditions, this trend became one of modern architecture’s most fertile testing grounds, giving birth to the Bauhaus and modernist social housing projects whose legacies are alive and well today.

Due to their indisputable roles in physically shaping and cognitively influencing vast numbers of the German population, both architecture and cinema were public media *par excellence*. Their popularity, ubiquity, and influence, tied them intimately to the volatile publics of the Weimar period and made them instructive sites for observing significant social developments. Both Benjamin and Kracauer wrote passionate commentary on the changes that were taking place in these areas of the cultural public sphere during this time, as they were deeply invested in critiquing and analyzing the struggles over the meanings of modernity that were being given shape all around them. While witnessing these changes, they tried to develop an explosive point of contact between this new cultural public sphere, the political demands of their time, and their own relationship to these changes as members of a politicized German intelligentsia. Working on this crucial constellation, each critic in his own way took stock of the

relationships between the volatile factions of the German public (divided as it was along economic and political lines), and attempted to map out its figuration into the new cultural public sphere that was being fashioned for them by the cultural elite.

In this study, I use some of Benjamin and Kracauer's writing from the Weimar period to look at how they evaluated the New Objectivity movement as it manifested in architecture in particular. Analyzing their orientation toward the social constructions that were taking place in architecture gives me a unique framework for examining their developing theories of film and its pact with the modern public. Both critics are excited by the elements of film and architecture that threaten to be destructive toward bourgeois cultural hierarchy and simultaneously promise to be constitutive of new cultural formations that can reflect the productive ruptures of modernity. Though film's destructive character was undeniable, their excitement was weighed down by a fear that the film industry was sabotaging its potential for new developments by turning film into an empty aping of bourgeois aesthetics. They also worried that even the progressive trend of New Objectivity, with its enthusiasm for newness, might be eliminating the conditions for observing existing traditions without providing the proletarian and white-collar public with new institutions in which to nurture and practice their own culture. In light of these concerns, they tried to work out ways that film and photographic media could bring about these new formations, aiming their cultural criticism squarely at the elite literati in whose hands most new developments were taking shape. Benjamin took a gamble on film's potential to produce in its viewers a mimetic language of technological proficiency and an empathic response to history, while Kracauer similarly found potential power in the photographic media's democratic indexicality and its ability to shake up



cultural hierarchies by confronting viewers with an image of their own contingency and mortality.

## **Methods of Critique: Feuilletonism and Surface Culture**

Benjamin and Kracauer use overlapping yet distinct methodologies and objects of study to give voice to their hopes and fears surrounding the consequences of change in Weimar culture. Both were part of a new form of criticism that emerged in part due a conflict between the traditions of philosophical theory they inherited from their intellectual forefathers, and the radically changed world in which their own theoretical writings had to make sense. Their work is political as well as contemplative, and committed to a form of idiosyncratic historical materialism that eschews the search for universal forms, focusing instead upon everyday material objects as bearers of meaning in their own right. Hansen writes that Kracauer thought that the reigning academic mode of abstract philosophy suffered from a staleness that didn't allow it to struggle and engage with modernity and its changing modes of perception.

Theoretical thinking schooled in that tradition [German idealist philosophy], Kracauer felt, was increasingly incapable of grasping a changed and changing reality, a “reality filled with corporeal things and people.” Accordingly, Kracauer’s despair over the direction of the historical process turns into a despair over the lack of a *heuristic discourse*, over the fact that “the objectively-curious lacks a countenance.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Miriam Bratu Hansen, “America, Paris, The Alps: Kracauer (and Benjamin) on Cinema and Modernity,” in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press 1995), 369 emphasis added.

Kracauer worked to give the objectively-curious a face by writing essays for the Feuilleton in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and other popular publications. Though Benjamin and Kracauer were both exceptionally well educated in philosophical and literary traditions, neither critic ever held an academic post, and worked instead in the public sphere writing primarily for newspapers and journals. The newspaper became a forum where they could publicly address their criticism of the world of “things and people” to their peers and the educated bourgeois readership. Their criticism addressed the modern world by enacting a kind of decoding and diagnostic essayistics that read the surface phenomena of modernity and the trajectories of its cultural forms as complex historical signals.

The Feuilleton was the part of a newspaper or other similar publication that was traditionally sectioned off from the political section and devoted to literature, social criticism, or art criticism. Mixing literary and journalistic writing genres, feuilletonism tended to focus on current themes in culture, society, and morality, often using a self-reflexive style of narration that tied conclusions and insights directly to the individual author. This genre’s historical beginnings made it a logical forum for Benjamin and Kracauer’s style of criticism. Feuilletonism had emerged in the late 1800’s as a reaction to the prevailing style of literary criticism that was deeply formalistic and, presupposing an objective categorization of aesthetic forms, would judge artistic works based on how well they fit within specific categories.<sup>10</sup> The erosion of a highly regimented bourgeois culture in the face of rapid industrialization was reflected in the style of the Feuilleton author who wished to use her/his own subjective impressions to organize criticism rather

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<sup>10</sup> Russell A. Berman, “Literary Criticism from Empire to Dictatorship, 1870-1933” in *A History of German Literary Criticism, 1730-1980*, ed. Peter Uwe Hohendahl (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1988), 282.

than adhere to a categorical gospel. Conservative groups saw this kind of writing—which in Germany was often associated with urban Jewish intelligentsia—as dangerously liberal and unpatriotic because of its refusal to assert cultural norms. In the 1880’s the growing practice of Feuilleton writing led to a cultural backlash that fuelled the on-going anti-Semitic debate, while governing powers adopted protectionist measures against it by promoting a conservative naturalist literary criticism that evaluated German writing by defining it within specific regional “folk” literatures.<sup>11</sup>

By the 1920’s, there were many political voices within Feuilleton writing. Left-wing criticism was struggling to find a place for itself somewhere between the poles of a more traditional literary criticism characterized by the authority of the intellectual specialist, and a pseudo-proletarian criticism where a politicized intelligentsia imitated the radical proletariat often without genuine motivation to engage in politics.<sup>12</sup> In their own public writings, Kracauer and Benjamin try to avoid these ends of the spectrum by developing a theoretical framework that allows their work to be political while remaining anchored in histories of social forms and aesthetics. Kracauer is firmly committed to analyzing objects from the twentieth century, granting the most privileged status to the realm of “marginal, quotidian phenomena.” He believes that their very insignificance and taken-for-grantedness “allows them to serve as reliable indices or symptoms of specific historical conditions,”<sup>13</sup> providing unmediated access to the substance of the cultural world. Kracauer focuses upon daily phenomena in order to see beyond the “myth of progress” that attempts to cover over the alienation and fragmentation of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 331.

<sup>13</sup> Levin, “Introduction,” in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1995), 15.

modern life. His work as a cultural critic contains the desire, not to unmask the “truth” behind the myth *per se*, but to show how modern myths disguise themselves as rational truths. By stripping their rational camouflage, Kracauer’s writings contain the hope that the fractured, alienating conditions of modern life can be taken hold of by the public forced to encounter them. For him, the unsettling nature of living in these conditions confronts people with a jumble of a world that can be imaginatively re-configured en route to a socialist society.

The raw material that lends itself most readily to Kracauer’s physiognomic readings are the surface objects of popular culture. To his sociologically-oriented decodings, “the surface, though still situated within a terrain mapped by the idealist oppositions of essence/appearance and truth/empirical reality, becomes a cipher.”<sup>14</sup> Within his methodological orientation to surface culture, photography and film emerge as representational forms that hold an immediate affinity with surface and superficiality. Rather than evaluate individual films or photographs on the basis of their status as works of art, Kracauer sees the media themselves as holding diagnostic value—as rich iterations of a specific historical moment. He is captivated by their ability to show the alienated, contingent, and fragmentary status of surface aesthetics and material configurations, and he champions their ability to productively expose modern chaos and disintegration. By revealing the fragmented nature of modern life, he hopes they will help to destabilize tired rehearsals of the reigning order that have trapped the traditional bourgeois art forms. While praising its productive negation of the status quo, Kracauer is disturbed by a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 20.

tendency to use cinema, not for critical, progressive commentary, but rather to repeat regressive narratives in a bigger, more captivating form.

In an attempt to counter this tendency, Kracauer gives himself the role of “the responsible critic”, whose “mission is to unveil the social images and ideologies hidden in mainstream films and through this unveiling to undermine the influence of the films themselves wherever necessary.”<sup>15</sup> This mission includes the analysis of the socio-political aspects of film production, reception, and regulation, while striving toward the establishment of a critical public sphere in which these issues could be debated publicly.<sup>16</sup>

Benjamin also debated the effects and possible directions of modernity in a public forum. Partly due to the fact that he was unsuccessful at securing a post at the University of Frankfurt, he was forced to look outside of the academic world for gainful employment. He too wrote for the *Frankfurter Zeitung's* Feuilleton's educated bourgeois readership, though he did not address them as the privileged carriers of culture.

Benjamin saw the literary intelligentsia as a socio-historical class whose influence on the larger public needed to be accounted for, and he used his work to call on them to do so. Though he often reviewed literature and wrote on bourgeois artefacts, his critical materialist methodology was committed to making this work speak to the spirit and needs of his time. He writes in his 1929 fragment “Program for Literary Criticism,” that a work should never be analyzed as if it were free-floating and could have been produced at any moment in time under any conditions. He believes that literary or cultural works should be analyzed in explicit connection to their materialist origins, and in this way gain social

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<sup>15</sup> Kracauer, “The Task of the Film Critic” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 634.

<sup>16</sup> Levin, “Introduction,” 25.

relevance and immediacy.<sup>17</sup> In an effort to do this with his objects of analysis, Benjamin addressed works of art as vessels of a truth that develops gradually alongside changing social conditions, and saw his criticism as a continuation and nurturing of that truth's development. In this way, his role as a critic was neither that of a teacher of the masses, nor an arbiter of taste. For him, the critic's job was to probe and interrogate cultural works to illuminate their latent truth using the light cast from a particular material-historical moment.<sup>18</sup>

## **Bridges to a Popular Modernism**

There appears to be a small but determined movement in certain areas of cultural studies that is attempting a turn through contemporary postmodern theory toward a revitalized philosophical modernism. This movement is not just looking romantically backward to a time when every physical appearance was hiding a true decipherable essence, nor does it want to lose important ground broken in the last thirty years, rather, it aspires to connect what is living and vital in contemporary theory to a relationship with modernism that involves a re-imagination of its problematics and relevance for today's scholarship.

The modernist movement in arts and letters, and a scholarly preoccupation with a particular kind of modernity is often, and justifiably, accused of a hegemonic elitism that

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<sup>17</sup> Benjamin, "Program for Literary Criticism" in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Volume 2, part 1, 1927-1930*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1999), 294.

<sup>18</sup> Berman, 355.

does not allow room for the *multiplicity* of histories, politics, traditions, and practices, that, thanks to the socio-historical changes in our “globalized” world and the work of postmodern and postcolonial theory, are an inalienable part of our contemporary landscape. Clearly, an elitist modernism cannot do justice to the important contemporary project of opening up all spheres of discourse to include alternative and sub-altern voices. Modernism, however, need not be so strictly conceived.

In her essay “America, Paris, the Alps: Kracauer (and Benjamin) on Cinema and Modernity,” Hansen warns against sweeping attacks on “hegemonic modernism,” that reduce modernism to one select set of artists and cultural practices. She suggests that “[w]hether motivated by postmodern critique or the search for alternative traditions of modernity, this attack ... runs the risk of unwittingly reproducing the same epistemic totalitarianism that it seeks to displace.”<sup>19</sup> She reminds scholars that the fixation on a hegemonic modernism threatens the possibility of opening up a discussion of modernism as a more broadly conceived concept in order to both include and understand its inseparability from larger forces of politics, economy, social modernity, and modernization. Within this wider context of modernism, the presence of mass culture and everyday experience cannot be overlooked, nor can either be dismissed as nothing more than distracting ornaments used by the culture industry to dupe the unthinking public. It is essential that scholars today bring their contemporary openness to “everydayness” and a multiplicity of voices to bear on our analysis of modernism and its relationship to our world.

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<sup>19</sup> Hansen, “America, Paris, The Alps,” 364.

In the spirit of Hansen's call for a more subtle understanding of the imbrications of modernism, modernity, and the modernization of everyday life in the twentieth century, I am turning to Kracauer and Benjamin as important commentators on and contributors to the *popular* modernism that was emerging on the streets and in the cinemas of Weimar Germany.

An encounter with popular modernism is happily situated in urban Weimar Germany of the 1920's and early 30's. The explosion of cinema culture in the 1920's, with its proliferation of movie houses, "film palaces," national cinemas, and the growing monopolies of Hollywood and UFA, serves as a historical moment in which we can witness a significant maturation toward our current screen culture. It is particularly appealing to trace this maturation within Weimar Germany because of its connection to a larger movement that summoned an enthusiastic push toward aesthetic modernity. Here, the large-scale embrace of aesthetic modernity manifests itself strikingly in media such as architecture, fashion, cinema and the merchandizing of consumer goods: a "cult of surface" was widely celebrated throughout many strata of society.<sup>20</sup> In her comprehensive study of this phenomenon, *Weimar Surfaces*, Janet Ward writes that "Weimar is of particular value as an ongoing "bridging" scenario between modernism and postmodernism.... In key ways, Weimar design initiated our current state of saturation regarding the visual codes of consumerism."<sup>21</sup>

I would like to accept Ward's invitation to link eras and theoretical dispositions, and use my investigation of film and architecture criticism in Weimar Germany to bridge the work of these popular critics to contemporary debates on media's constitution of a

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<sup>20</sup> Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920's Germany*, (Berkeley: University of California Press 2001).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.



public sphere. Benjamin and Kracauer asked repeatedly: what is the role of the cultural public sphere, and on what terms should it be constructed? They were among a large of artists and intellectuals who, against incredible odds, continued to hold on to their utopian hopes for an ongoing modernist project that might eventually turn the means of production over to the masses that were being celebrated by surface culture. As we face a time of profound socio-economic change that is being shaped by growing access to public media that as yet, are still largely user-determined, these questions gain a renewed importance. We would do well to consider carefully the dynamic changes in interwar Europe and their relationship to an explosive new field of public media. I will try to contribute to this discussion by putting a new spin on well-known film theory by framing it within a consideration of how architecture was actively shaping a new urban public through the transformation of the visual and physical space of everyday life. Relating film to architecture instead of photography or other fine art practices lets me bring out its profound effects on the configuration of the public into audiences and their ability to visually take hold of themselves as these new, still molten urban masses. Through the writings of Benjamin and Kracauer, I look at film in Weimar Germany as something of a “destructive character.” Honing in on the subject of a short prose piece written by Benjamin, I use his “destructive character” as a trope for describing film and architecture’s explosive march through the existing cultural formations. The destructive character cleared the path for their utopian hope for the future of the public sphere by liquidating traditions that had lost their usefulness. Benjamin and Kracauer nested these hopes within film’s radical restructuring of traditional culture, seeing in its

destructiveness a potential to wipe out structures that had become empty rehearsals of an old hierarchical order.

In Chapter one, I open the discussion by giving a snapshot of the trends in modern architecture and design that were thriving in the Weimar period. In particular, I will focus on the New Objectivity and some of the ideological tenets that accompanied its development such as the concept of the “New Man.” Kracauer’s training as an architect gives him insight into these ideologies, and I will look at his evocative commentary on the strengths and dangers of this style of design. His primary concern is with its impact on its inhabitants’ experience of history and cultural memory, and I will use this concern as a platform for understanding his worry that the productive disjunctures of modernity were being prematurely smoothed over.

In the second chapter, I will look more specifically at Kracauer’s critique of an architectural penetration into cinema culture. He noticed that the use of modern architectural techniques within cinema façade, interior, and movie set design often stood in the way of film’s ability to productively reflect modernity’s fractured quality, tending instead toward a *Gesamtkunstwerk* effect that brought film in line with outdated bourgeois art forms. By examining his essay “Photography,” I will tease out his theory that photographic media has the potential to be a catalyst for new cultural forms that engage the people and concerns of their time by showing them their own profane disorder.

For the third chapter I will turn to Benjamin’s writings, beginning with a look at his critique that the left-wing intelligentsia and artistic avant-garde needed to be connected to political revolution in order to do more than just simulate a productive

destruction of outdated cultural forms. He calls for a more complete form of destruction than what is gestured at by the New Objectivity, and his essay “The Destructive Character” gives us a deeper sense of how destruction is connected to the hope for a socialist future. I will continue by making a brief excursus into the concepts of modern shock and experience as Benjamin used them, in order to better understand his hope that the filmic medium can act as a new form of public culture.

In the final chapter, I will forward the idea that film is a “destructive character” by using Benjamin’s famous “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” essay to talk about his theories of filmic mimesis and the optical unconscious. His hope that film could be an agent for socialist culture depends on its unique mode of reception that happens, as with architecture, in a state of distraction. Film, like architecture, can be culturally destructive, but it also is able to leave traces of experience on the well-armed consciousness of modern viewers by slipping in unnoticed. The question that remains unanswered in his theory of film is how people are meant to become conscious of these traces in order to use them as tools for political revolution? At the end of the chapter, I engage this ongoing debate by suggesting that his essay on the French Surrealist writers offers us the theoretical concepts of profane illumination and mimetic empathy as ways in which the masses of the cinema audiences might begin to feel themselves as more than just moving patterns on a screen.

I conclude this study by reflecting on how both Benjamin and Kracauer used their work as cultural critics as a way of intervening in developments within their own artistic/intellectual circles. In doing so, I believe that they were trying to point to the dangers and possibilities inherent in the volatile political moment that they lived in, and

draw the attention of their contemporaries to the role that they all played in what was to happen next. While theirs may not have been a popular modernism in the sense that it was itself consumed by the proletarian masses, their modernism took the popular with the utmost seriousness and concern, and worked to push it toward a productive, socialist forum for action and play.

## CHAPTER 1: READING THE SURFACES OF WEIMAR: NEW OBJECTIVITY AND CULTURAL MEMORY

*“Never trust big buildings”* –Vaclav Cilek

### Staying Open to the Surfaces

In his essay “Those Who Wait,” Kracauer considers the dilemma of faith in a time of crisis and cultural upheaval. On one end of the spectrum, he is critical of philosophers whom he perceives to be trying to restore wholeness to a shattered religious worldview by creating totalizing theories under which all of life’s chaos can be neatly subsumed.<sup>22</sup> On the other end, he rejects the perspective that all life is the haphazard product of random chance. It is straddling these poles—reaching in towards a life of depth and spirit, reaching out toward an embrace of the fractured, disjointed world—that we find Kracauer, and here can we begin to try to parse out his *modus operandi*.

Reflecting upon the history of German philosophy that came before him, Kracauer is critical of the overabundance of abstract theoretical thinking that he believes characterizes an attempt to grasp all of life and history within a totality. In the crisis of faith precipitated by increased industrialization, modern warfare, and social and political transformations, Kracauer is wary of a move toward all-inclusive theoretical systems in which philosophers seek to pin down the frayed edges of a disorienting modern experience. He believes that the only way to productively encounter the unknown future

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<sup>22</sup> Kracauer, “Those Who Wait” in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, 123.

possibilities that modern life presents is by adopting a “hesitant openness”<sup>23</sup> to things as they are.

Kracauer’s own approach to the city and its mass publics takes a close sociological look at what he sees as the emergence of a new dominant urban class—the white collar workers—and to better understand how Berlin (among other cities) is becoming their playground.<sup>24</sup> His attempt to determine precisely who the new urban masses are comprised of, and how they interact with their environment is characteristic of his hesitant openness. Without trying to subsume his present within a complete theoretical system, he mines it for cues and patterns that speak of carefully guarded beliefs and an orientation toward past and future. In “Those Who Wait,” Kracauer reminds his readers that a critical-yet-open interest in what is happening in the present moment is not to be confused with a lax waiting-to-see-what-happens (an attitude that many critics accused the bourgeoisie of adopting to very dangerous ends). As he writes in this essay, and reflects in his other work, Kracauer’s style of openness “consists of tense activity and engaged self-preparation,”<sup>25</sup> and it is certainly not meant to act as a mere sedative antidote to nostalgia for a religiously intact worldview. His concept of a hesitant openness can be seen as the foundation of a programmatic analysis of existing phenomena, and he used this to ground abstract philosophical theory within an embodied, lived world while trying to find a productive place from which to work within it.

For Kracauer, “what is at stake ... is an attempt to shift the focus from the theoretical self to the self of the entire human being, and to move out of the atomized

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> This concept is analyzed in detail in his book *Die Angestellten* (White-Collar Workers), and emerges in many of his Weimar essays.

<sup>25</sup> Kracauer, “Those who Wait,” 139.

unreal world of shapeless powers and figures devoid of meaning and into the world of *reality* and the domains that it encompasses.”<sup>26</sup> This reality “is filled with incarnate things and people and that therefore demands to be seen concretely.”<sup>27</sup> By encountering life alongside the other people who comprise it—within the world in all its concreteness—Kracauer believes that one is likely to discover that life cannot be understood completely within the theoretical confines of traditional religious faith or philosophical totalities, nor as a product of chaotic coincidences. His hope is that this realization might lead an ‘open’ person to slowly build up their own critical frame of understanding, one that is guided by an active yielding to the people, events, and objects that confront them.

In his own work, Kracauer encounters and interrogates the city of Berlin in his journalism for the Feuilleton section of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. In an effort to remain “hesitantly open” to the transformations taking place in Weimar society as a result of the war, revolution, economic turmoil, increased industrialization, its concomitant consumer culture, and the rapid changes in the built environment, Kracauer analyzes surface culture as an antidote to the romantic philosophical tradition that seemed to have lost touch with reality. A supporter of a proletarian/socialist revolution, and as an unorthodox Marxist, Kracauer reads the “inconspicuous surface-level expressions”<sup>28</sup> in order to trace connections between them, building something of a map of his own historical epoch. This map tracks larger historical processes’ movement toward or away from his Kantian-Marxist values of increased human freedom and a more profound rationalization of culture, and is charted by way of surface culture, because “by virtue of their unconscious

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>28</sup> Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament” in *Weimar Essays*, 75.

nature, [surface-level expressions] provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things.” Kracauer’s “tense activity” consists of writing his encounters with surface culture for the (predominantly well-educated, bourgeois) public who read the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in the hopes that they can begin to likewise see hidden connections between surface culture and the underlying “state of things,” and so forge a deeper understanding of their political situation and the imperatives to action.

The “surface-level expressions” that capture Kracauer’s attention range widely, encompassing objects in media as varied as photography, literature, architecture, music, journalism, travel, and film. His writings embody a spirit that gained strength during the Weimar period, a spirit that rejected many of the distinctions made between high and low culture to embrace a wide variety of art and other media, which were no longer viewed as specialized expressions of genius, but appreciated as objects of labour. As John Willett writes in *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period*, “perhaps because so much was developing so fast, and the society itself was in some ways still a new one, there was little sense among such critics of any hierarchy in the media, with some art forms counting as high and others too profane to be intelligently discussed.”<sup>29</sup> Many different threads of surface culture became subjects of Kracauer’s essays, which he wove together to compose a complex, heterogeneous tapestry of the Weimar public sphere.

Kracauer came to his career in journalism after studying and working as an architect. He began to study architecture in 1909, working in architects’ studios until becoming an editor for the Berlin office of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1922. When he started to write literature and film criticism, his training in architecture gave him a unique

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<sup>29</sup> Willett, 104.



sensitivity to developments in Weimar's built environment and its relationship to larger cultural institutions. His writings contain a framework for taking note of the social nexus that lives between architects, their visions of the past, present, and future, the buildings they create, and the publics who occupy them. In addition to commenting directly on the city as an architectural space in several of his essays,<sup>30</sup> I believe that his knowledge of the architectural world influenced his reading of other cultural phenomena, particularly film—a theory that I will develop over the first half of this thesis. Kracauer's analyses of film are widely read and written about in cinema and cultural studies, but his understanding of architecture and the city and his approach to film are so deeply imbricated that it is difficult to fully understand one without the other, although they are rarely discussed together in the scholarship on Kracauer's work. The first two chapters will contribute to this scholarly discussion by taking a closer look at some of the key connections between film and the architectural cityscape as they reveal themselves in Kracauer's Weimar essays. While I do build an image of Kracauer's architectural sensitivity, this discussion is by no means an attempt to sketch out a comprehensive survey of his overarching theory of modernity, such as the one found in David Frisby's *Fragments of Modernity*. My intention instead, is to map out Kracauer's early film theory within the context of how he understands film's interaction with the city and the cultural public sphere. In this chapter, I will set up the discussion by sketching out some of the important architectural trends and ideologies that set the stage for Kracauer's ambivalent critique of modernist aesthetics and its impact on the memory and experiences of people who lived within its "dwelling cubes."

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<sup>30</sup> There is a collection of Kracauer's writings that are focused on the built spaces of the Berlin streets and buildings. *Strassen in Berlin und Anderswo* has not yet been translated into English.

The second chapter will use this platform to examine Kracauer's critique of the architectural aspects of Weimar's cinema culture that were steering it toward a bigger, better version of the classical bourgeois theatre. Janet Ward's book *Weimar Surfaces* is a comprehensive and engaging exercise in bringing together different aspects of Weimar surface culture such as cinema and architecture together; it has both inspired and informed this chapter's integration of these phenomena. Her analysis of Kracauer's writings on these two key topics however, does not fully grasp his reasons for being so critical of cinema culture's theatrical turn. Where she interprets his as a dismissive and condescending critique, I am offering a corrective of this position. My discussion of the architectural elements in cinema culture as witnessed by Kracauer shows that his criticism lay not in film's popular aesthetic and mass appeal (indeed, he celebrated these qualities). His criticism rested with the theatrical totality that was created through architectural design inside the cinemas and the movies themselves. He believed that this totality tried to keep the masses aspiring to an expired bourgeois aesthetic by ritualizing the theatre-going experience as a shrine to high culture.

In order to bring to life the "surface-level expressions" that shaped Kracauer's Weimar essays on architecture and film, it will be instructive to first develop something of a historical snapshot of some of the architectural trends that were subject to and influencing his criticism. Because this thesis is focussed on the popular modernism that emerged during the Weimar period, and linking architectural developments with the film theory that emerged in Benjamin and Kracauer's work, my cultural snapshot will be aimed at the New Objectivity movement as it manifest in public institutions such as architecture and cinema. Though it would be interesting to incorporate a discussion of a

broader range of artistic movements such as the avant-garde Dada, Futurism, and Surrealism, a larger overview of the cultural climate is beyond the scope of this project.<sup>31</sup>

## **Culture from the Ground Up**

The limited success of the German revolution, tempered as it was by the domestication of the socialist movement, the murder of key revolutionary leaders, and a strong militarist and nationalist force, was disillusioning for a large segment of left-minded intellectuals and artists (among others), who had hoped for a large-scale proletarian revolution similar to the one that took place in Russia. Channelling frustrated revolutionary energies toward the existing social climate, some of them created groups that attempted to move art beyond its ghettoization within galleries and formal exhibitions. These groups worked to “help to shape official policy throughout the visual arts, specifically with regard to town planning, art school reform, popularization of the museums, and provision of exhibition space.”<sup>32</sup> Part of a larger international movement that had manifestations all over Europe, groups in Germany worked to bring art and politics together as the foundation on which to build a desired future society.

The *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* (Working Council for Art), whose members included architectural heavyweights Bruno Taut and Walter Gropius, developed and proposed utopian projects and social reforms that gave architectural design pride of place as the source of a better future. In his 1918 “A Program for Architecture,” Taut insisted that,

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<sup>31</sup> For a thorough historical survey of artistic trends and politics in Weimar Germany, see John Willett’s *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety 1917-1933*.

<sup>32</sup> Willett, 44.

“the arts must be brought together under the wing of a great architecture,” and that this architecture was the business of the entire People:

The direct carrier of spiritual forces, *molder of the sensibilities of the general public*, which today are slumbering and tomorrow will awake, is architecture. Only a complete revolution in the spiritual realm will create this architecture. But this revolution, this architecture will not come of themselves. Both must be willed—today’s architects must prepare the way for tomorrow’s buildings. Their work on the future must receive public assistance to make it possible.<sup>33</sup>

Alongside their proposed social projects, the council organized exhibitions with the aim of educating “*the general public*” on architecture and its promise. In the early years of the council, these exhibitions were their most tangible projects, as the impact of the war had led to the cessation of virtually all building in Germany, and their plans for a “great architecture” were banished to the realm of the purely utopian.

In Weimar Germany, as for other places in Europe, the effects of the First World War were profound, leaving the economy in tatters and many without places to live. Even before the war, and continuing through to the early days of the Weimar Republic, living conditions in Germany were among some of the worst in Europe. The overcrowded, unsanitary conditions that existed in many apartment blocks across the country made housing a dire national dilemma. Adding to this crisis was a shortage of building materials that was felt with particular gravity during the inflationary period of 1919-1923, bringing an end to private housing construction.

During and immediately following the war, a powerful movement of Expressionist art emerged from angry and impassioned German artists who imagined a new and better future arising from the rubble of their present. The ideal of the New Man

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<sup>33</sup> Taut, “A Program for Architecture,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 432, emphasis added.

that took hold in German expressionist art, drama, and literature turned the devastation and uncertainty wrought by these new socio-economic circumstances into a cradle for a new era. The New Man was part of a creative trend that favoured bold, revolutionary characters looking for new beginnings and new means to achieve them. In his essay “The ‘New Man’ and the Architecture of the Twenties,” Wolfgang Peht writes that:

“Expressionist literature and especially drama is full of figures who destroy the laws of ancient society, while seeking to establish new ones.... This is what Rainer Maria Rilke called ‘*Wolle die Wandlung*,’ the longing for changes. The means of change were almost always more important than the ends.”<sup>34</sup> These ideas did not long remain cloistered within art, but came to permeate almost all realms of industry and culture. The idea of the New Man grew beyond its early Expressionist origins, and in 1920’s Germany, the New Man became but one iteration of a popular obsession with an entirely “New” society. In building and design there was talk of “New Living,” “New Architecture,” and “New Objectivity,” and in the larger cultural sphere there was “New Music,” the “New City,” the “New Household,” the “New Woman,” the “New Photography,” and even the “New Berlin.” Cultural and social rebirth was on the agenda, and the trope of the “New” caught on with wildfire scope and speed. Along the same lines, architects were seeking a total break in form from their predecessors, which they came to imagine in terms of a ‘stripping away’ of the ornamentation of previous eras. “Like the *l’hommes des lettres*, the architects were enthused by the idea of purification, cleansing, and rebirth.”<sup>35</sup> Where the Expressionists employed crystal as a symbol of the New Man’s purity and perfection,

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<sup>34</sup> Wolfgang Peht, “The ‘New Man’ and the Architecture of the Twenties” in *Social Utopias of the Twenties: Bauhaus, Kibbutz and the Dream of the New Man*, ed. Jeannine Fielder (Germany: Müller + Busmann Press 1995), 15-16.

<sup>35</sup> Peht, 16.

the large-scale use of glass in utopian design projects was able to communicate the designers' longing for clarity, precision, lightness, and the invitation of light into the inner spheres of life.

The exuberant, utopian energies that Expressionism channelled from wartime experience and revolutionary fervour, were quickly brought down to earth by the socio-economic realities of post-revolutionary Weimar. The disillusionment of artists and intellectuals in post-war politics undermined the earlier utopian, activist wing of Expressionism, and oriented its energy toward more practical art movements inspired by those taking place in Bolshevik Russia. In one of the era's iconic developments, Gropius took the applied art school in Weimar and renamed it the State Bauhaus. Under the guiding principle of subordinating all 'art' to 'building' (*der Bau*), he proclaimed that in order to remain relevant, art must go "back to the crafts" and be learned in the workshop.<sup>36</sup> The growing vision that the artist should play a social role similar to that of a mechanic tempered the more individual-centred Expressionism, steering it toward a more literal, austere, and impersonal style that became known as the "New Objectivity" (*die Neue Sachlichkeit*).

By 1923, although most architectural projects remained confined to paper, the practical, utilitarian shift in design and theory created a push for a more pro-active approach. In order to stimulate the building economy and address the need for social housing, the German government developed public-interest building associations that gave a tangible shape to the social idealism, political activism, and architectural innovation that had been brewing in the arts. Founded by the SPD and funded by unions,

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<sup>36</sup> Willett, 49.

banks, and trade groups, these associations began major building initiatives, allowing some architects, now employed for social works projects, to address the pressing need for affordable housing.<sup>37</sup> Limitations on achievable architectural goals under existing conditions created a rationalization of both design and construction, and principles of Taylorization and Fordism were eagerly adopted into the field.<sup>38</sup> The assembly line became an integral part of artists' and architects' work, putting an emphasis on modular design that could be quickly and easily assembled. The Bauhaus' mandate of developing "practical experimental work for the construction and equipment of houses: development of prototypes for industry and crafts," led it's members to set up their own production company whose mission was to sell and fabricate their own designs and concepts. This allowed them to move their work off of paper and into concrete.<sup>39</sup>

The New Objectivity and its parallel styles and monikers such as Bauhaus, Functionalist, and Modernist architecture, became the dominant trend in the "New Architecture." A radical departure from the heavy, sculptural façades of the Wilhelmine era, buildings conceived in the New Objectivity style celebrated their aesthetic restraint and lightness using unadorned geometric shapes composed of glass and steel. The nudity being celebrated in architectural developments echoed a trope that was gaining popularity in many different spheres of culture, and was poignantly captured by Benjamin's characterization of Paul Klee's famous 1920 painting "Angelus Novus." Benjamin writes of the angel that he "would prefer to free man by taking from him than making him happy by giving."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Kaes et. al. "Housing for the Masses" in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 454.

<sup>38</sup> Pehnt, 18.

<sup>39</sup> Willett, 118.

<sup>40</sup> Pehnt., 17.

The spirit of beneficent “taking away” was a clear motivation for many of the famous modern architects of the time. Artists such as Gropius and LeCorbusier are renowned not only for their sleek, minimal style, but also for spawning entire schools of thought on design’s ability to improve the lives and minds of its users and, by extension, the larger society that they live in. Gropius delights in the nudity of the New Building by observing that,

[t]he New Architecture throws open its walls like curtains to admit a plenitude of fresh air, daylight, and sunshine. Instead of anchoring buildings ponderously into the ground with massive foundations, it poises them lightly, yet firmly, upon the face of the earth; and bodies itself forth, not in stylistic imitation or ornamental frippery, but in those simply and sharply modelled designs in which every part merges naturally into the comprehensive volume of the whole.<sup>41</sup>

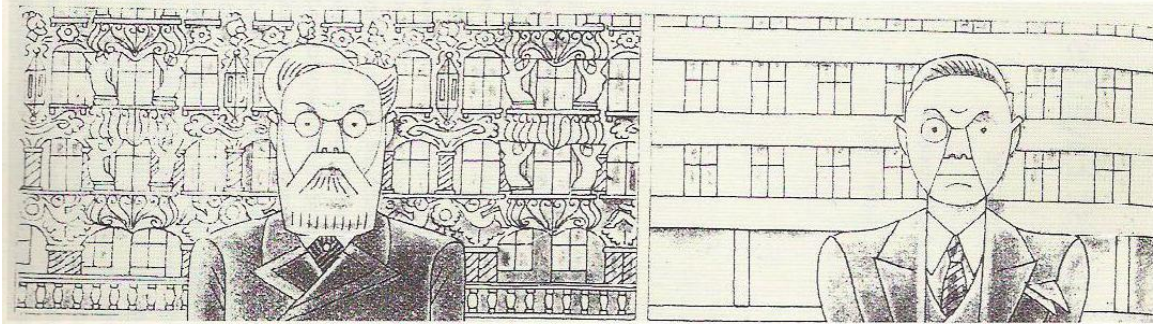
The belief that depressed post-war society could be improved by way of beneficial destruction and simplification gained enormous currency with architects. Adolf Loos represented one of the more extreme voices for this moral asceticism, famously declaring that any ornamentation at all is a form of criminality. The ornate building styles of the earlier periods (in particular that of the preceding Wilhelmine era) began to be viewed by proponents of the New Objectivity as structures of grotesque excess that offended the austere sensibilities of the New Man. As the constraints of economic and social necessity that had been imposed upon architects and builders were philosophically internalized, they took on such potency that the sleek, Spartan form of New Objectivity, much more than a mere adaptation to difficult circumstances, became a “symbol of Modernism itself.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ward, *Weimar Surfaces*, 66.

<sup>42</sup> Peht, 19.





**Figure 1: “Modernization: The house-owner Gieselmann before and after the renovation of his façade” (Modernisierung: Der Hausbesitzer Gieselmann vor und nach der Erneuerung seinen Fassade), by H. Abeking, (1929).**

## **The Clean Sweep of New Living**

The ideological embrace of clean surfaces did not end with the construction of new buildings. A refrain of “no more façade!” was directed at existing buildings that appeared to embody the “barbaric” ornamentation of previous eras. Extensive façade renewals became an important part of the New Objectification of Weimar Germany. The ornate sills, balustrades, archways, and decorations of many Wilhelmine exteriors were literally stripped from the surface of the buildings, and replaced with smooth, geometrical shapes.<sup>43</sup> As much as the aesthetic impulses of the New Objectivity were based in an attempt to grapple with new social and economic realities, the enthusiastic stripping down of Weimar surfaces to reveal its “authentic core” was not wholeheartedly embraced by all parties. Nor indeed, were the aesthetics and philosophy of New Objectivity without major opponents. As the symbolic centre of modern design in Germany, the Bauhaus bore a lot of criticism from parties who saw modernist architecture as

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<sup>43</sup> Ward, *Weimar Surfaces*, 45-7.

symptomatic of a degeneration of German culture. As Kaes et. al. note in “Designing the New World,”

despite increasing critical recognition enjoyed by the Bauhaus, conservative attacks against it were so common that Gropius once claimed he spent most of his time defending the school. Conservatives such as Paul Schultze-Naumburg faulted its designs for leading to cultural and racial decline and decried the replacement of the traditional German home by a mechanical “dwelling machine.”<sup>44</sup>

Conservative voices bemoaned the “loss” of art and culture that appeared to have disappeared in the new aesthetics and its manufacturing techniques. Many people were alarmed by the sacrifice of hundreds of years of specialized knowledge in the production of unique, handcrafted goods that had so quickly become obsolete. The Bauhaus school, among other organizations, was experimenting with large-scale production techniques to make modular homes and furnishings that could be easily produced and assembled by anyone, and these new production methods contributed to the extinction of a class of crafts people whose skills were completely out of touch with new production requirements.<sup>45</sup> Even staunchly socialist critics like Benjamin and Kracauer were wary that something important was becoming lost in the New Objectivity’s haste to “take away.”

The trend that wanted to clean off the surfaces of the struggling republic was not limited to purging the façades of buildings. An attempt to rationalize and minimize their insides followed suit, with a reform of the interior of Weimar’s spaces taking place under the banner of “hygienic improvement.” The promotion of hygienic interiors was able to make a more direct incursion into the lives of the working-class public than the more

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<sup>44</sup> Kaes et. al. “Designing the New World: Modern Architecture and the Bauhaus,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 431.

<sup>45</sup> Peht, 17.

aspirational aesthetic education that the façade renewals were meant to inspire, as it provided an intimate *entrée* into lives and homes. Re-surfacing interior spaces became part of an obsession with hygiene that coincided with a national popularization of concepts of Fordism, morality, and efficiency.<sup>46</sup> After the devastation of WWI, the humiliation of national defeat, and the ensuing political-economic instability, the regeneration of society from within the home unit became an appealing and widespread object of focus, with the idea of hygiene coinciding perfectly with the architectural trends that were taking place on the street.<sup>47</sup> As an observer of these changes, Kracauer is wary of the ideological connections between the Germans' defeat in the war, and the fevered push to *renew* inside and out. In her essay "America, Paris, The Alps" Miriam Hansen writes that Kracauer

indicts the architectural style of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, for its secret complicity with the business of distraction: 'Like the rejection of old age, it too originates in the horror of the confrontation with death.' The reflection on death which functionalism evades and which Kracauer insists upon as a public responsibility is not simply an existential *memento mori*, however, but is aimed at German society's refusal to confront the experience of mass death bound up with the lost war.<sup>48</sup>

The economic situation coupled with ever-increasing industrialization created a need for mass housing projects to shelter the republic's urban labouring class. Utopian visions, the spirit of socialist ideals of equality, and the economic realities of the inflationary period meant that many of the social housing projects done in the New Objectivity style became large agglomerations of identical "housing-boxes" or "honeycomb" units with rationalized interiors sectioning off different rooms for different

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<sup>46</sup> Ward, 80.

<sup>47</sup> See Jeannine Fielder "Between a Nest and a Cube: About Architecture and the Concept of Life in the 1920's" in *Social Utopias of the Twenties: Bauhaus, Kibbutz and the Dream of the New Man*, ed. Jeannine Fielder (Germany: Müller + Busmann Press 1995), 31 and Janet Ward *Weimar Surfaces*, 81.

<sup>48</sup> Hansen, "America, Paris, The Alps," 384.

living purposes. Seen as hygienically superior, the new style of apartment fragmented more traditional living spaces where cooking, eating, care giving, and bathing might have taken place within the same room, and gave them each their own walls.<sup>49</sup> Gropius himself wrote that “a house is a technical-industrial organism, whose unity is composed organically from a number of separate functions.... Building means shaping the different process of living. Most individuals have the same living requirements.”<sup>50</sup> And in that spirit, the New Apartments were built for the New Man: efficient, minimal, rational.

The reality of these new housing complexes were slightly more complicated, however, as it was rarely New Men who were moving in to them. On occasion, perfectly minimal white, glass, and concrete apartments housed equally minimal avant-garde artists, such as the sleek, cubist apartment that was designed by Gropius and Marcel Breuer for theatre director, Erwin Piscator.<sup>51</sup> Berlin architect, Edgar Wedepohl points out the too-cosy connection (or perhaps more austere than cosy) between the ideals of the avant-garde literati and the form being given to the New living spaces:

If the dwelling type is supposed to correspond to the type of the person inhabiting it, then one can only imagine the inhabitant of Le Corbusier’s houses as a certain kind of intellectual. It is the eccentric, unconcerned by sentiment, free to roam as he likes, and homeless, who can easily shed himself of all historical ballast, perhaps preferring to live in such a nomad’s tent of concrete and glass.<sup>52</sup>

More often than not, the new occupants of the New Dwellings were working class families with all of their newly obsolete bourgeois-style furnishings. Often, the furniture that people brought with them didn’t physically fit or make sense with the new, hygienic positioning of different rooms for different activities, and satirical cartoons from that time

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<sup>49</sup> Fielder, 32.

<sup>50</sup> Willett, 121.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>52</sup> Edgar Wedepohl, “The Weissenhof Settlement” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 467.

often parodied the comical improvisations that resulted from the clash between intention and reality.<sup>53</sup> The obvious disparity between their old lives and their new homes created a clear imperative to purge their petit bourgeois clutter and embrace a clean (and empty) slate.

The gulf that lay between the people moving into the New Apartments and the New Man for whom they were built was not unexpected. Indeed it was hoped that these rationalized cubes would act as a catalyst for transforming the ill-housed publics into a clean, rational mass. In a short article titled “A Visit to a New Apartment,” Otto Steinicke pays a visit to a proletarian family who, after 5 years on a waiting list, have moved into an apartment in a gigantic new housing block. As he surveys the hygienic, airy rooms, he observes that “[o]nly the old, poor-quality furniture does not go with the room. It was brought from the old apartment: a chaise lounge, an extension table, six chairs, and a buffet. The petit-bourgeois *unculture*, the so-called knick-knacks, are no longer visible.”<sup>54</sup> Steinicke’s satisfied and condescending tone throughout the article is characteristic of the prevailing New Objective sentiment that was relieved to see the “tasteless” clutter and oppressive decay of working-class conditions cleared out and rationalized.

The new living cubes were meant to both represent and foster a liberated and invigorated dwelling, and women in particular, as the principal managers of household functions, “became the objects, or carriers, of a new-found pragmatism in the home.”<sup>55</sup> The running of the ideal New Home like an efficient machine was described in many popular publications as being intimately bound to a systematic approach to housekeeping

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<sup>53</sup> Pehnt, 20.

<sup>54</sup> Otto Steinicke, “A Visit to a New Apartment” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 472 emphasis added

<sup>55</sup> Ward, 76.

and child rearing<sup>56</sup> facilitated by bringing new machines into the home itself. Electrification of the dwelling cube by way of lights, electric heaters, and appliances quickly became a thoroughly marketed concept that merged seamlessly with the ideologies of the New Dwelling. Due to economic constraints however, very few homes were actually able to achieve the promoted state of electrification, creating a psychological burden of insufficiency that was shouldered by the women who were expected to nurture these new ideals.<sup>57</sup> The New Objectivity “was not the cold affair that it might seem, but could inspire missionary devotion and even passion, with the result that the ordinary member of the public was under considerable moral pressure to move with the times.”<sup>58</sup> Publications such as *New Living—New Building* made injunctions to the public to get rid of their old furniture and furnishings to make room for modern designs. Although the expectation of interior modernization may not have been able to come to immediate fruition, it certainly managed to feed a large-scale appetite to bring home the electrification and modernization that was taking place on the city’s streets.

As much as the rhetoric of New Architecture seemed to be about stripping surfaces bare, Ward reminds us that there was a simultaneous interest in a new style of redecoration that fit perfectly with its newly-cleaned aesthetic. The culture of electric advertising quickly occupied pride of place on Weimar’s cleared façades.

*Lichtarchitektur* (light architecture), the practice of featuring lit-up displays, moving light

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<sup>56</sup> For an insightful glimpse at these ideals see Bruno Taut’s essay “The New Dwelling: The Woman as Creator,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 461, where he writes: “[new dwellings will provide] the woman with a way to improve her performance. She will adopt a new organization for her work and ... arrange to perform individual chores... according to a plan. Sufficient time for going on walks and sleeping will be calculated into it, as the new home economics teaches, which amounts to the application of the Taylor System to the household.”

<sup>57</sup> Ward, 78.

<sup>58</sup> Willett, 133.

shows, and electrified advertising of all kinds was embraced as an important and desirable aspect of Germany's new architectural topography.<sup>59</sup>

In [mid 1920's] Germany, for the first time, buildings were conceived of (or their former façades were removed and redesigned) in relation not just to their material monumentality by day but to their illusionary monumentality by night. The new smooth surfaces and horizontal streamlining of urban buildings' façades set the stage for the use of exterior advertising text, not as something fanciful but something organized and efficient.<sup>60</sup>

The light architecture on the façades of buildings effectively reinforced the New Objectivity's ideological marriage between form and function by being a surface built and designed expressly for the purpose of advertising. Ernst May, Frankfurt's head architect officially decreed that the application of electric advertising on buildings, streets, and public squares, needed to be incorporated into the design stage.<sup>61</sup> These exciting, illuminated structures had taken the heavy ornamental decorations of earlier building design, and transformed them into dynamic, evanescent "light advertisements" that projected the buildings' new energy and identity out into the formerly dark street. State art advisor Erwin Redslob promoted "light advertising" (*Lichtreklame*) as the "great ornamental motif of our time.... The house, the *light-swallower* that sucks in the sunlight into the interior, *becomes a light dispenser*."<sup>62</sup> Ornamentation no longer faded at sundown, but lit up to create a new, fantastical setting. For the first time, separate buildings seen from a distance became unified by their lights into a single, glowing city,

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<sup>59</sup> Ward, 114.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

an “ ‘organically membered communal entity,’ ... bringing ‘order and character’ to the otherwise opaque street.”<sup>63</sup>

The perceived unity generated by the lit-up buildings delivered a considerable aesthetic argument in the totalizing vision of modernist Germany. The ability to visually unify otherwise disparate surfaces lent a power and momentum to the New Objectivity’s desire to purge and rebuild the city in a truly modern image. Taking away the trappings of Wilhelmine aesthetics left a clean slate of sorts on which to visually manifest the gospel of 20<sup>th</sup> century production, consumerism, and entertainment. The dazzling light world of the 1920’s city street-by-night took the shape of an enormous fairground of visual stimulation that left very little unincorporated into its display, and created a “whole” cityscape that united everything in an unconditional membership that banished its older elements from the dazzling image. The aesthetic argument proved convincing, and “[t]his new tradition of exact, rational architecture now spread with remarkable speed right across Weimar Germany, starting with the big cities.... Germany became the new movement’s effective centre and was for many years the one country where it made a real impact not only on the townscape but on the everyday life of ordinary people.”<sup>64</sup>

In his work for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Kracauer had a studied interest in the changing built topography of the Weimar Republic, and commented on a number of its developments. In a review of the Weissenhof Housing Project, an exhibit of different modern housing projects by a number of designers that showcased in Stuttgart in 1927, he is impressed by the clean functionality of some of the individual prototypes and larger projects. Organized by the German Werkbund to help publicize innovations in domestic

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<sup>63</sup> Max Osborn as cited in Ward, *Weimar Surfaces*, 115.

<sup>64</sup> Willett, 124.



architecture, the event was spearheaded by modernist powerhouses Mies van der Rohe and his collaborator LeCorbusier.<sup>65</sup> Writing about the exhibition, Kracauer notes some of the houses' ability to embody "hygiene; no fuss. A skeleton, thin and agile like a person in sportshirt and pants."<sup>66</sup>

Although he admired the buildings' skeletal beauty, Kracauer was sceptical of the visionary confidence that often accompanied the larger movement that produced them. One of the difficulties with its overarching aesthetic and ideological objective was that by striving for visual purity, there was a tendency to conflate this *new*, unadorned façade with an objective or "true" essence of form, rather than recognize its own contextual aesthetic. Indeed, in a statement written by the "International Faction of Constructivists," it is stressed that "the progressive artist [is] one who denies and opposes the dominant place of subjectivity in art, founding his works not on any basis of poetic arbitrariness but on the principle of new creation, using systematic organization of means to achieve *universally intelligible expression*."<sup>67</sup> Kracauer notes that "the characteristic of New Objectivity is precisely that it is a façade that hides nothing, that it does not wrest itself from depth but simulates it."<sup>68</sup> The façade that appears to be "hiding nothing," and as such, appears as an *embodiment* of depth, fails to locate itself within an aesthetic and cultural context. The belief that a "universally intelligible expression" can be achieved by sticking to "the facts," or hiding nothing strikes Kracauer as a mere simulation of essence.

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<sup>65</sup> Ward, 60.

<sup>66</sup> Kracauer's *Frankfurter Zeitung* review of the Weissenhof Project as cited in Ward, 62.

<sup>67</sup> Willett, 77 emphasis added.

<sup>68</sup> Kracauer as cited in Ward, 71.

It is possible to interpret Kracauer's primary worry as one about the New Objectivity's tendency to visually represent itself as something that lives outside of history. If the New Objective aesthetic is perceived as being a natural derivative of pure form and functionality, it subsequently loses its place as an architectural era embedded in a line of preceding eras and followed by those that will succeed it. With "pure" form and function operating conceptually as Platonic universals that exist beyond history, the assumption that the New Objectivity's style was the arrival of a "true" architecture may have caused Kracauer significant distress. For a historical materialist, any style that proclaims the arrival of a true future without a proletarian revolution must surely have been seen as a dangerous deception, one analogous to the artificial putting-together of the fractured world into totalizing pseudo-theological philosophies that have no room for the real world. As we will explore later in more detail, for Kracauer, the exciting possibilities enabled by modern life's fractures lay in the visual world's inherent mutability. Thus the naturalization of an architectural style threatened the visual disruptions of modernity and its ability to stimulate memory, play, and the imagination of future forms in the minds of the diverse publics that inhabited it.

Manifestations of the New Objectivity's conceit of objectivity could be witnessed in its attitudes towards existing buildings and structures. Many architects and planners revived a Hausmann era<sup>69</sup> approach to modern cityscapes, advocating total demolition of older buildings and quarters and proposing to replace them with integrated design projects, mapped out down to the shape of the concrete slabs on the sidewalks, the

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<sup>69</sup> Baron Georges-Eugene Hausmann was an urban planner commissioned by Napoleon III between 1852 and 1870 to reconstruct the topography of Paris' city streets. He was notorious for slicing through the dense, medieval districts with huge, straight boulevards that rationalized the city with a network of wide avenues.

handles on the cabinets, and the placing and style of the light fixtures. It is from the open, lit up avenues of this complete modern revision of the city that Kracauer cautions his readers as to the hidden consequences of these

street[s] without memory.... From many houses they have torn down the ornament that used to form a kind of bridge to yesteryear. Now the robbed façades stand there without a footing in time and are the impression of an ahistorical transformation taking place behind them.<sup>70</sup>

Ward writes that “[a]s a result of this emptying-out of metropolitan memory, Kracauer writes of a nightmarish ‘fear’ that assaults him as he walks in the streets of Berlin-West, a panic caused by screams that he hears. ... The ‘streets themselves’ ... are ‘screaming out their emptiness.’”<sup>71</sup> Not only have the older buildings lost their ability to speak to Kracauer of a different time, but the new buildings deny their own historicity by believing that their form is universal.

This silent scream speaks of Kracauer’s fear that the city’s surfaces are losing their dialogical power by becoming petrified in a horrifying, eternal nowness, and that the cleaned-out insides of the new apartments likewise perform a break with the past. With the loss of knick-knacks and old furniture, the working-class masses were being asked to give up their failed petit bourgeois aspirations and embrace a clean, clear future. The Bauhaus and other proponents of New Objectivity’s insistence on universal intelligibility was certainly guided by a socialist orientation towards “the masses.” This orientation, however, was not one that wanted to recognize their cultural complexity and political heterogeneity. What ultimately became lost in translation were not only knick-knacks and ornamentation, but the fact that these objects carried with them histories, memories,

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<sup>70</sup> Kracauer as cited in Ward, 71.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

and traditions that, as yet, had nothing to replace them. Their work was based on an ethic that seemed to want to sweep away the masses with their complicated, old-furnished, multivalent forms and, through design and education, usher in a rational, clean, orderly mass that could be organized using universal rules and shapes. While Kracauer supported progress toward a modern, socialist future, he was wary of the consequences of purging the past artificially by way of an enforced aesthetics, recognizing that a public left out on the barren plains of the proverbial clean slate might seek shelter in other, more dangerous places.

In Frisby's account of Benjamin, Kracauer, and Simmel's overlapping and intertwined analyses of modern experience, he notes a passage in Kracauer's essay "Street People in Paris," that underlines Kracauer's suspicion of the new developments in the Weimar public sphere. Kracauer's distrust of urban rationalization in Germany is revealed through its contrast to his depiction of a far more stable street life as he sees it occurring in Paris. Kracauer describes the working class of Paris, saying that:

Whilst higher society disappears in the four walls of cars and homes, they grow everywhere out of the houses.... Their humus is the pavement, the public sphere is their home. Though they may be composed of workers, tradespeople, conductors, they are not absorbed in statistics. This people has created the city landscape in which it can persist, an indestructible web of cells that is hardly harmed by the architectural perspective of the king and the enlightened haute bourgeoisie.<sup>72</sup>

Kracauer believes that the density and complexity of the urban metropolis will not be easily herded into the efficient through-lines of New Objectivity's planning without accumulating significant remainders that will later need to be accounted for. In keeping with his respect for the unexpected and productive ruptures visible in modern city life, he

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<sup>72</sup> Frisby, David. *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer, and Benjamin*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press 1986), 138.

proposes that though: “bourgeois society seeks out security beyond the immediate moment and moves in a system of lines that are just as straight as the avenues ... the image in which the common people represent themselves is an *improvised mosaic*. It leaves many cavities free.”<sup>73</sup> In another essay, he takes this even further by saying that the very “value of cities is determined according to the number of places in which improvisation is permitted.”<sup>74</sup>

Kracauer’s reaction to the emptiness engendered by the self-professed objectivity and top-down rationalization of architecture extended to other media forms as well. Willett observes that the style of New Objectivity became an important signifier for all manner of artists, reporters, and intellectuals who wanted to present themselves as “impersonal screens,” and “neutral observers,”<sup>75</sup> and let the facts of the time speak for themselves. Due to its preoccupation with objective method rather than content, this new style was able to embrace all the art forms as equal media: architecture, cinema, theatre, graphics, all co-existed as tools for social/revolutionary practice.<sup>76</sup> Kracauer’s own approach to journalism simultaneously speaks to and resists this trend. He too uses “the facts” as a point of entry for writing analyses of his time, allowing all surface expressions to speak to him with equal potency. Where his work struggles against major currents of this trend reveals itself in his determination to constantly remind his reader that “the facts” as they appear on the surface are not the end, but merely the beginning of a story about their connection to larger politico-historical ideologies and circumstances.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Willett, 107.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

In the following chapter I will look at how film as a photographic medium suggests ideas of what might take over as a productive popular form of culture in the place of the bourgeois cultural clutter that is so eagerly being taken away. While film offers potential as a new, fragmented, indexical medium, Kracauer worries that it is being tamed. By incorporating film into an older form of bourgeois performance culture with elements of architectural design, its possible social impacts are being over-determined before they can turn into something genuinely new. The architectural elements in film shape its social reception by launching a three-pronged attack on its overall aesthetic; by stylizing the façade, the insides of the theatre, and the set design, architecture weaves film's fractured status into unified *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Despite this trend, Kracauer holds out for the promise contained in film's indexical nature and its ability to confront the public with a provocative image of itself. He hopes that this might effect a perceptual anarchy that would do justice to the exciting disorder of the Weimar street.

## CHAPTER 2: DETRITUS BREAKS FREE FROM CINEMA'S ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

### Bringing Modern Perception to the Street: Weimar Movie Palace Design

Although he expresses significant distress at the state of distraction and loss of memory engendered by the rise in popularity of surface life, Kracauer believes that “[t]his emphasis on the external has the advantage of being *sincere*. It is not externality that poses as a threat to truth. Truth is threatened only by the naïve affirmation of cultural values that have become unreal....”<sup>77</sup> He sees that surface culture is an authentic development that produces its own possibilities for a productive relationship to modernity. In particular, he sees that film as a form of art and entertainment holds exciting promise for a number of reasons. In the first instance, the phenomenal popularity of film in Weimar Germany was creating new organizations of the public as they convened as audiences participating in a shared experience. Although this quality on its own did not guarantee film’s function as a catalyst for progressive change, its ability to indexically represent the shocking, fractured, modern world (and the people that inhabit it) for what it was and communicate it to these audiences, held the promise of a fertile marriage. In particular, it is the aspects of film that are able to reflect the significant characteristics of modern life: its two-dimensional illusion; its composition out of millions of fragmented images; and its use of montage and other techniques to

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<sup>77</sup> Kracauer, “Cult of Distraction,” in *The Mass Ornament*, 326.

disrupt our naturalized images of the world, that give Kracauer hope that film holds the potential to become a true art of the street and the masses in all their heterogeneity.

Kracauer appreciates that film, rather than being merely a degenerate art form (for which it was often lambasted by art critics), is to be reckoned with as a natural and legitimate manifestation of its time. He sympathizes that:

Berlin audiences act truthfully when they increasingly shun these art events [literature, drama, and music that claim the status of high art] (which, for good reason, remain caught in mere pretence), preferring instead the surface glamour of the stars, films, revues, and spectacular shows. Here, in pure externality, the audience encounters itself; its own reality is revealed in the fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions.<sup>78</sup>

In the surface culture of films and revues, Kracauer sees an opening: a space in which the public of Weimar Germany is no longer trapped by the outdated cultural forms and morals of the bourgeoisie. In film, a suggestion of the future forms that might fill the clean slate of the New Objectivity, peeks out. Events that celebrate the spectacular and chaotic life of the modern city street provide a space for, and justification of the emergence of a new culture that is attempting to start with its own image, rather than reproducing ones that no longer make sense.

It is in the emergence of a new culture that begins by grasping the forms and realities of the large populations of blue- and white-collar workers that make up Weimar's cities that Kracauer invests his hope and his work. As a member of a politicized cultural elite, his writings on film encourage his readers and colleagues to re-imagine their roles in the shaping of this new culture. As Hansen writes of him:

“Kracauer rejects any attempt to resurrect precapitalist forms of community as a way out:

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.



‘The process leads right through the middle of the mass ornament, not back from it.’<sup>79</sup>

In this respect, he embraces the “surfacedness” of Weimar entertainment, hoping that it will flourish in progressive ways. He is extremely wary that this potential flourishing will be all too easily stamped out by approaches to surface culture that attempt to mask its productive, disjointed, and superficial qualities by regressively shaping them into stories and forms that reinforce an old moral order. Kracauer warns that the characteristics that make surface culture reflect the chaotic life of the street must not be integrated into a seamless whole of a “total art work” (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) from an outdated aesthetic sensibility. “Indeed, the very fact that the shows aiming at distraction are composed of the same mixture of externalities as the world of the urban masses; ... the fact that these shows convey precisely and openly to thousands of eyes and ears the *disorder* of society—this is precisely what would enable them to evoke and maintain the tension that must precede the inevitable and radical change.”<sup>80</sup>

The radical change that Kracauer works toward would come from a large-scale public encounter with the disorder of the masses, and he hopes that this might result in a creative, mimetic opportunity to seize the means to remake culture in their own image. It is the very instability and “disorder” of the film and cognate entertainment that makes him imagine the possibility that viewers could “attack” or “change” it,<sup>81</sup> seizing the chance to make it their own and relevant. Rather than seeing this take place, however, Kracauer is frustrated to note cinema’s tendency to neutralize its own chaos by weaving it “into an ‘artistic’ unity.”<sup>82</sup> In his 1926 essay “The Cult of Distraction,” he criticizes the

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<sup>79</sup> Hansen, “America, Paris, the Alps,” 375.

<sup>80</sup> Kracauer, “Cult of Distraction,” 327.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

emerging architectural trend of constructing enormous, elaborate “movie palaces” (*Kinopalast*), that situate film culture within a context that aspires backwards to the traditional bourgeois theatre.<sup>83</sup> By placing the film screen at the back of a huge, regal theatre and couching screenings amongst revues with live actors, dancers, and professional orchestras, he discerns an attempt to smooth over the fractured quality of cinema by embedding it within hegemonic bourgeois art forms, resulting in an elaborate and overwhelming *Gesamtkunstwerk*. He identifies the architectural effects of both the movie “palaces” that house the shows, and those of the set designers for the films themselves as primary culprits in this regressive action, complaining that the “architectural setting tends to emphasize a dignity that used to inhabit the institutions of high culture. It favors the lofty and the *sacred* as if designed to accommodate works of eternal significance....”<sup>84</sup>

In a dramatic extension of the “Light Advertising” (*Lichtreklame*) that became the new ornamentation on the denuded surfaces of Weimar buildings, the movie palace advertisements turned theatres into colossal, living objects of fantasy. As Ward writes in her comprehensive study of movie theatre culture of the era: “[t]he general urge was to make a display window of the theatre’s façade, or a department store out of the body of the building: in short, to commodify and fetishize the film product at its site of reception.”<sup>85</sup> For the first-run cinemas, electrically enhanced façades that moved and lit up worked to bring the three dimensional illusion of the films’ image out onto the street in life-size or beyond life-size scale.<sup>86</sup> For example, there was Rudi Feld’s (the art

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ward, 165.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 167.

director for Ufa) installation that went up on the “front of the Ufa-Palast for the premier of Lang’s *Woman in the Moon* ... [which] displayed a sculpted rocket being launched from a three-dimensional skyscraper city that jutted out from the wall of the theatre.... Approximately one thousand twinkling electric stars (light bulbs) illuminated the dark blue backdrop.”<sup>87</sup> The major movie theatres in urban centres competed with each other to produce ever bigger and better attractions for drawing audiences inside to see the films.

The architectural ambience within the theatres was designed with no less attention, and sought to enhance and sustain the “post-sacramental, technologically enhanced ‘sublime’ of their façades.”<sup>88</sup> Some of the largest film palaces were able to house orchestras of up to seventy musicians, blew eau de cologne through the air conditioning, held restaurants, bars, and the Tauentzien-Palast in Berlin even boasted Europe’s largest organ.<sup>89</sup> The outside of these buildings generally favoured the New Objectivity trend in architecture, tending towards completely bare surfaces that could bear the extensive light façades that advertised the films playing within. They often embodied a sense of modern movement with huge, sweeping curves and transportation-themed design that recalled the motion and shape of trains, planes, and ocean liners.<sup>90</sup> The interior of these spaces sought to further extend the illusion, with domes and lighting effects stretching the film fantasy around the film spectator in physical space. Ward writes that “[t]he New Objective movie auditorium was ... a pseudo-church, but that which was to be worshipped was ... on a par with the outdoor reality of the busy,

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 174.

technologized city street.”<sup>91</sup> It seems from Ward’s characterization of New Objective movie theatres that the type of street that was being worshipped, however, was not the chaotic, unpredictable clash of forces that was being experienced by the average pedestrian, but rather its meticulous architectural re-creation, reflecting the street as the designers wished it to be. Rather than celebrate the reality of the city street as Ward suggests, the controlled and re-created environment of the theatre effectively blocked out the disordered world of the Weimar street, replacing it with something clean and unified, and it was this blockage that caught Kracauer’s critical attention.

Ward reminds us that it was by no means only Kracauer who honed in on the architectonic qualities of Weimar cinema. She writes that:

[t]he great age of German silent film, coinciding as it did with the emergence of New Objectivity out of the inverted spirit of expressionism, was experienced as an architectural event. In this conscious architecturalization of film, 1920’s German film industry excelled more than any other national cinema of any era, and nowhere was the façadism of modern surface culture so excessively constituted in entertainment form.<sup>92</sup>

German film of the 1920’s was largely a product of the Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft (Ufa) and its close ties with Hollywood. Begun in WWI as part of German propaganda efforts, Ufa became the effective center of the Weimar Republic’s cultural development, producing an enormously successful institution of film production, display, and consumption. In 1924, 500 million cinema tickets were sold throughout Germany—a figure that puts every single citizen in the theatre seventeen times in that year alone,<sup>93</sup> and this scale of exposure made the film industry one of the largest in the

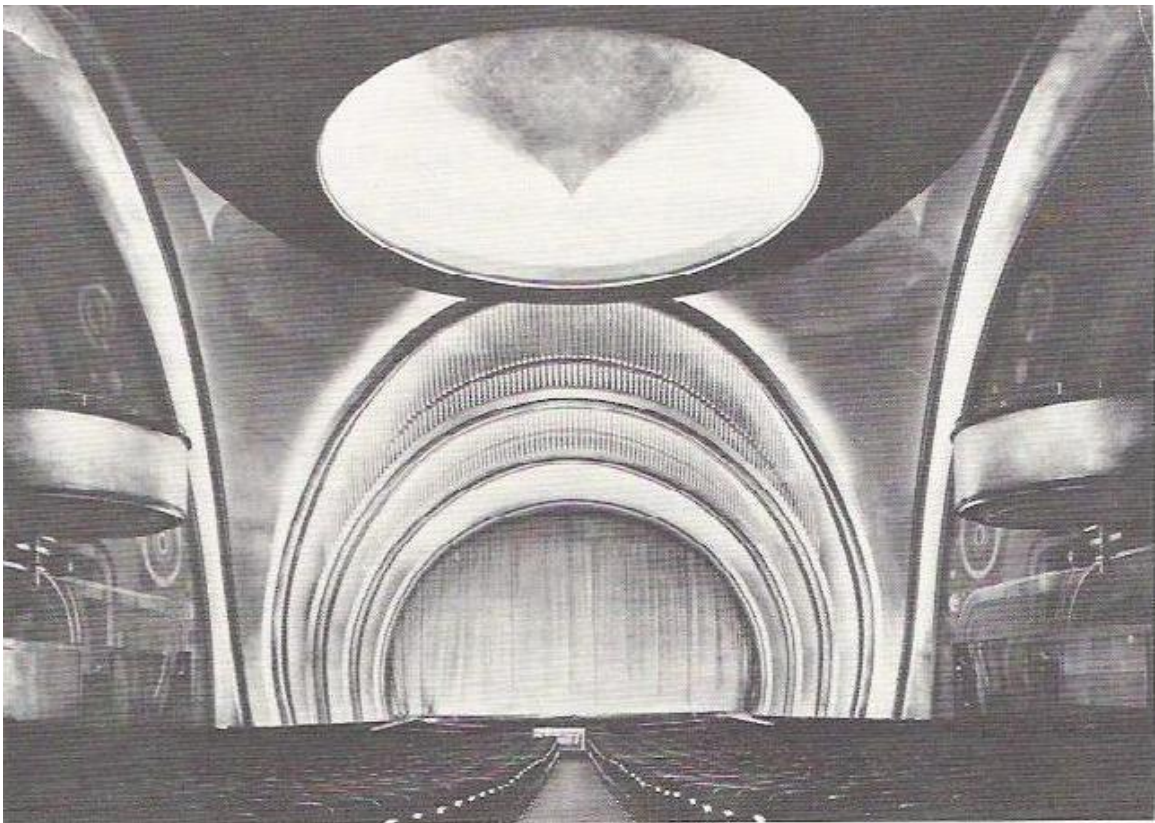
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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>92</sup> Ward, *Weimar Surfaces*, 142.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 150.

country.<sup>94</sup> Taking on the largest player in this industry, Kracauer writes the article: “Calico-World: The Ufa City at Neubabelsberg,” which was published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1926, one month prior to “Cult of Distraction.” In “Calico-World,” he takes stock of the enormous 80-acre “film-city” constructed by Ufa just outside of Berlin, and it was within this city they produced the third prong of film’s architecturalization: the interior worlds of the films’ sets and their designers.



**Figure 2: Titania Palace Cinema, Berlin, (1929).**

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

## Setting the Stage to Keep the World Out

The robust film industry's need for set design and the construction of movie palaces provided exciting employment opportunities for architects and designers in an otherwise underemployed field. Ward writes that "Weimar cinema took up the tools of expressionist yearnings for a mythological rebirth for Germany in the wake of the defeat of World War I.... The rebuilding of Germany via film took place quite literally."<sup>95</sup> The fact that Germany was being rebuilt on and around film was deeply unsettling for former architect Kracauer. His strong socialist leanings made it difficult for him to justify the huge expenditure of resources and creative energy on the insubstantial monumentalism that he saw in much film architecture, and he believed that like the architectural effects on the *outside* and *interiors* of the films' locations of reception, the architectural effects on the *inside of the film itself* served to distract from the cinematic promise of the reality of the street. In films such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, and Paul Wegener's 1920 film *Der Golem*, elaborate, life-sized cities were constructed using papier-maché and mirrors, only to be subsequently destroyed or dismantled. The opportunity for architects to participate in the creation of these heady spectacles struck Kracauer as an "all-too-tempting substitute for the building shortfalls of the crisis-ridden Weimar reality," enabling them to forget the social purpose of their work and create instead "visual architectural effect for its own sake."<sup>96</sup>

In "Calico-World," Kracauer laments the wastefulness that inheres in creating visual effects just for film: the objects made for the camera possess no life of their own,

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 145

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 155.

no possibility for interacting with the world, or to become other than the props they were originally intended to be.<sup>97</sup> He writes that: “There is nothing false about the materials: wood, metal, glass, clay. One could make real things out of them, but as objects in front of the lens the deceptive ones work just as well.”<sup>98</sup> The fake film worlds made of props and sets draw Kracauer’s criticism for several reasons, the first being that they steer precious creative and material resources toward the manufacture of objects that have no use value and will never be able to take on new meanings by interacting with time and people. More importantly however, these impostor objects are deployed in the service of creating a closed, pre-determined aesthetic totality. The theatrical film puts forward an illusion of a unified, auratic “whole” world that distracts viewers from the exciting, distressing and fractured world outside the theatre. Reflecting on the movie-making process that constructs these totalities, he observes critically that: “There are many such scenes, pieced together like the little stones of a mosaic. Instead of leaving the world in its fragmented state, one reconstitutes a world out of these pieces.”<sup>99</sup>

In his review of Josef von Sternberg’s famous 1930 film, “The Blue Angel,”

Kracauer expresses disappointment in films that

seek through the use of monumental architecture to raise the illusion that the content which this architecture surrounds is indeed content. One places decorative walls in front of subjects that are only pretexts and claims that they are real subjects. ... People here want to stifle unpleasant realizations, i.e., realizations which make us conscious of that reality from which we are fleeing.<sup>100</sup>

In a landscape of post-war modernization, Kracauer’s observation that cinema uses architectural elements to build a larger-than-life reality is intimately connected to his fear

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<sup>97</sup> Kracauer, “Calico-World: The Ufa City at Neubabelsberg,” in *The Mass Ornament*, 286.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>100</sup> Kracauer, “The Blue Angel,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 631.

that people are fleeing from a confrontation with their own experience of alienation and death. From the façades, to the interiors, to the monumental set construction, Kracauer watches the visionary energies of architecture being put to the task of regressively steering an exciting new medium back toward the already exhausted aesthetic of the bourgeois theatre. Not only this, but these elements, combined with film's inherent qualities, are able to add to the bourgeois melodrama an unprecedented ability to captivate and enthrall. Rather than forcing the public to examine its present conditions, for Kracauer, films seem to be creating a world of escapism by concentrating on banal details that get blown up to cinematic-sized proportions, and he cautions that: "If the outer conditions of our existence are to move out of our consciousness then the inner life must rush to fill out the external world, and develop into an ostentatious façade behind which the real exterior can disappear unnoticed."<sup>101</sup> He reminds his readers that just because they are hiding from bleak circumstances behind the oversized melodrama of the cinema, the conditions of material distribution have not actually changed, and are not yet changing. Kracauer boldly pronounces that the cinema is distracting the proletarian masses from the fact that the old social hierarchy continues to be perpetuated by feeding them a cult of personality instead of change—a prescient observation with a distressing political outcome.

The architectural effects that impersonate a world on the inside of the film paired with the architectural effects of the grand movie palaces are, for Kracauer, a particularly dangerous constellation that saps both film *and* architecture's power to serve the needs of the people with which they co-exist. He believes that the underemployed architects who

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.



create monumental sets and theatres would become more realistic and responsive to social needs if they were given real projects to work on. He likewise fears that the cinematic architecture they practice serves to romanticize the significance of high culture, rather than allowing cinema to be “[d]istracted—which is meaningful only as improvisation, as a reflection of the uncontrolled anarchy of our world.” Instead, he laments, it “is festooned with drapery and forced back into a unity that no longer exists.”<sup>102</sup> The creation of an illusion of wholeness through these techniques is perceived to be an attempt to suture together the productive ruptures of modern life through an aureatized cinema culture. If the expressions of surface culture become spectacles as an end in themselves—a “total artwork of effects”<sup>103</sup>—then they have lost their revolutionary potential to become a site of self-discovery and experimentation. In “Cult of Distraction,” Kracauer expresses a desire that people might discover an image of themselves that shows them forced together by the unique circumstances of modernity: “The more people perceive themselves as a mass, however, the sooner the masses will also develop productive powers in the spiritual and cultural domains that are worth financing.”<sup>104</sup> Again, his hope is invested in the public’s discovery of a vision of themselves from which “the masses” could begin to develop a culture that grows from their experience as heterogeneous, fragmented, and startled modern beings.

In *Weimar Surfaces*, Ward tells us that Kracauer does not give the Weimar movie palaces enough credit for being an accurate reflection of the life concurrently taking place on the street. She writes that the “dynamic, functionalist style within accurately mirrored the streamlined façades of the street without,” and that this accuracy of reflection did

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<sup>102</sup> Kracauer, “Cult of distraction,” 328.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 324.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 325.

create a “total artwork of effects,” but one that was “true to the new surface culture, not contradicting it towards a prior state of wholeness as Kracauer would have us believe.”<sup>105</sup>

While it is true that the New Objectivity style of architecture that was re-making the surface of Berlin certainly made its way into the movie palaces themselves, this fact doesn’t refute Kracauer’s criticism as completely as Ward suggests it does. It was the “total work of art” as an effect in itself—the aura of wholeness—that troubled Kracauer as a threat equal to that being posed by the “ahistorical” re-façadism of the New Architecture.

It was never his intention to insist that the film experience should reflect the prevailing style of street architecture; his real demand was that film come to reflect the *collisions* between the new architecture and the old; between the pedestrians and transportation; the city as it was, the city as it was trying to become, and “the masses” who inhabited it. When Kracauer laments that the “streets without memory” are “screaming out their emptiness,” he is speaking of this same turn to a deluded wholeness that threatens the cinema. As the New Objective architects worked to create the city of the future, they eliminated the “ornament that used to form a kind of bridge to yesteryear,”<sup>106</sup> and in so doing, began to eliminate the exciting disorder of a modernity that confronted the public with its stimulating cacophony of decaying hierarchies, sleek modernism, and aggressive sensationalism. In order to better understand the hope that film excited in Kracauer, and following that, the reasons why he was so critical of cinema’s architectural qualities, we have to get a better grasp on his larger sociological theory of the photographic media.

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<sup>105</sup> Ward, 180.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

## **Discovering Death in Photographic Detritus**

Where we can develop a finer appreciation for Kracauer's hope for the revolutionary potential of the filmic media by way of its intrinsic connection to his historical moment, is from a careful reading of his 1927 essay, "Photography." In it, he reads the indexical, reproducible, and omnipresent nature of photographs within its historical context, and he analyzes the effects of this nature on modern experience and perception. He sees modern modes of perception as distinct from traditional ones, resulting from an experiential break for which he finds evidence manifest in the material of surface culture. Many of his Weimar essays track and comment upon the opportunities and repercussions that arise from the changing physical and cultural landscape of modern experience, and he seeks out a theory of modernity that is grounded in everyday objects and situations. Kracauer's essay on photography offers a window into his sociologically based theory of perception in the modern world.

In order to theorize the break between eras, he distinguishes between a "memory image" and a "photographic image." He characterizes a "memory image" as the effect given off from a piece of artwork that has been made in its totality by an artist's hand, such as for example, a painting that has been produced in order to communicate a meaningful narrative of its subject. While it is certainly the case that there are many photographs that are composed artistically to portray very specific ideas, the majority of "snapshot" photos are meant to capture a single subject, while the remainder of information that makes it into the frame is entirely incidental. He writes that, "from the

perspective of memory, photography appears as a jumble that consists partly of garbage;”<sup>107</sup> i.e. there is very little that is *narratively* significant in the photographic image, and the context that surrounds its subject matter is not put there to illuminate understanding of an implied meaning, but is simply the physical world at a particular moment in time.

While the snapshot can speak volumes about rituals of looking and performance, it is able to say very little about the photographer’s intimate knowledge of its subject. From the perspective of one’s lived relationships to a person who may be frozen in a snapshot, or the events and histories that lead up to a crisis that is immortalized in a single image, the experiential depth that animates someone’s first-hand knowledge of the subject matter does not register on the un-edited photograph itself (which is can only ever be an indexical imprint of whatever materials were present at the time). Experiential depth lies outside of a photograph—it rests within the viewer—and it must be supplied externally by what s/he can bring to the image through explanation. What is captured photographically is comprised mostly of the aesthetic/ornamental details of life that, once drained of the first-hand knowledge that animates them (as happens in photo portraits of unknown people), become a jumble of visual information whose only internal relationship is that of being physically adjacent to each other. Or as Kracauer writes, “[i]n a photograph, a person’s history is buried as if under a layer of snow;”<sup>108</sup> their story is not intentionally transmitted by way of the bits and bobs that surround them. While a photograph of unknown subjects can remain stimulating and captivating, when left on its

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<sup>107</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “Photography” in *The Mass Ornament*, 51.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

own, it has difficulty speaking with a fixed aesthetic language that is culturally understood.

In the modern era, a photographic understanding of events/places/people/objects comes to dominate the perceptual world: by way of their continual exposure to mass media, most people learn to read things spatially. For Kracauer, the growing presence of “surface culture” contributes to the privileging of objects’ spatial relationships to one another over and above other possible types of relations. The rise of the spatial relationship in popular culture is a source of ambivalence for Kracauer, as it both opens up new possibilities, while shutting down others. In his critique of popular trends in film making in 1928, he is particularly frustrated when meaningless visual montages *purport to demonstrate narrative continuity* between scenes by simply superimposing or fading one object or person into another who otherwise have no connection at all.<sup>109</sup> Today we see much digital ink spilled over the “crisis of attention spans” that suffer from a world of unlimited virtual distractions. Similarly in his own time, Kracauer worried that the new perceptual landscape full of pictorial information may come at the cost of a reduced capacity to discern the *historical* contours that objects can yield to a sustained and familiar gaze.<sup>110</sup> He believed that the more this mode of perception took over, the entire world and the totality of its contents faced a limiting imperative to present themselves using a “photographic face,” so that they were not lost in the public’s acts of perceptual consumption. In the time of modern mass media, objects *need* to be consumed pictorially so they are not lost to cultural memory, and by extension, to some form of history. The

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<sup>109</sup> Kracauer, “Film 1928,” 315.

<sup>110</sup> Kracauer, “Photography,” 58.

result is that large, interconnected, and complex events, institutions, places, cultures, and people strive to produce snapshots of themselves so as not to be forgotten entirely.

Kracauer writes that: “In the illustrated magazines the world has become a photographable present, and the photographed present has been entirely eternalized. Seemingly ripped from the clutch of death, in reality it has succumbed to it.”<sup>111</sup> The very attempt to avoid death by eternalizing the literal present in the photograph mortifies objects in an ironic unending death, giving them a primarily visual and therefore spatial existence, which cannot account for their changes and trajectories through historically conceived and remembered time. They are thus frozen in a configuration that lasts indefinitely, but has no capacity to change, live, die, and participate in organic cycles.<sup>112</sup> The photograph that distracts from death by eternalizing an unchanging present threatens society’s sense of itself in the same way as the eternal present of the architectural style of New Objectivity, or the melodrama that hides the material conditions of existence behind “universal” character types and relationships. An eternal present avoids confronting its own death, and as a result, cannot ever truly confront itself.

Photographic, or “pictorial representations,” Kracauer writes, have been irreparably detached from “symbol,” or the cultural meanings that accrue to an image generated from within the aesthetic world of a community that engages with that image over time. In photography, one does not *necessarily* see cultural or historical meanings as depicted in a particular *style* of aesthetic representation, but rather the “mere nature”

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>112</sup> This is not to suggest that these aspects do not co-exist in one’s perceptual or affective experience of a photographic image, which can contain uncanny shadows of its subject’s ‘alternate lives,’ but rather to point out that these uncanny aspects are rarely what is *intended* in capturing the world photographically for popular publications.

that presents itself to the lens.<sup>113</sup> This is not to suggest that photographic media do not have aesthetic vernaculars that speak of the cultural values of the time in which they were taken, which they certainly do. However, the indexical properties of the photographic image are rarely intentional communicative aides, which, as it is with older artistic forms such as painting, tell the background story of the object of focus by their inclusion and artistic representation (although compositional and post-production properties can perform this task). For this reason, the proliferation of images that the modern person perceives cannot speak of the *histories* of the depicted subjects, which for Kracauer can only be transmitted artistically, not indexically. Thus, “[t]he blizzard of photographs betrays an indifference toward what the things mean,”<sup>114</sup> and swirls around, burying objects under interpretations that are literally frozen in time.

Kracauer does not fault the technologies of reproducibility for creating this lost dimension of communicability, he maintains that these technologies are an integral component of a capitalist mode of production and the distracted relationship to the material world that this engenders; in other words, for Kracauer, there is a direct correlation between social production (labour), aesthetic production, and people’s mode of experience. He sees evidence of his modern public’s loss of experience in their increased desire for thrills that “fill their day without making it fulfilling.”<sup>115</sup> For Kracauer, working with the thesis put forward by his teacher Georg Simmel, the loss of experiential depth that is articulated in the photographic image comes as a result of the shock effects sustained by people from working in modern industries and daily city life. The shocks that people constantly sustain by living a modern life eventually creates a

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<sup>113</sup> Kracauer, “Photography,” 61.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>115</sup> Kracauer, “Cult of Distraction,” 325.

perceptual numbness, which in turn, increases people's appetites for increasingly aggressive aesthetic spectacles that can penetrate this numbness.<sup>116</sup> He writes that “[s]uch a lack demands to be compensated, but this need can be articulated only in terms of the same surface sphere that imposed the lack in the first place. The form of free time busy-ness necessarily corresponds to the form of business.”<sup>117</sup> He makes an explicit connection between alienated ‘surface’ labour—exemplified by Fordist and Taylorist industrial rationalization—and concomitant ‘surface’ aesthetic production, reminding us that “both phenomena, Americanism [Fordism and Taylorism] and film composition, after all belong to the same sphere of surface life.”<sup>118</sup>

In “Photography,” a concept emerges that he continues to develop in his writings over the next 40 years.<sup>119</sup> While the photograph effectively dismantles a narratological/historically significant relationship between the viewer and the depicted subject, this same photograph puts the viewer in touch with the material detritus that constitutes and surrounds the subject. Kracauer's seeds of hope lie in the viewer's ability to recognize that the arbitrary physical material that makes up the substance of the photographed image is the same arbitrary material that surrounds the viewer her/himself; he writes that: “The images of the stock of nature are offered up to consciousness to deal with as it pleases. Their original order is lost; they no longer cling to the spatial context that linked them with an original out of which the memory image was selected.”<sup>120</sup> The exciting upshot of photographic images' time-frozen indexicality is two fold: in the first

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<sup>116</sup> Simmel's concept of modern urban shock effects and its legacy in Kracauer and Benjamin's writing is explored in more depth in the following chapter.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>118</sup> Kracauer as cited in Hansen, “America, Paris, the Alps,” 368.

<sup>119</sup> see Siegfried Kracauer's 1969 book *History: The Last Things Before the Last*.

<sup>120</sup> Kracauer, “Photography,” 62.



case, representation is no longer beholden to entrenched, hierarchical aesthetic meaning systems, and as a result, what we see in an image is no longer weighted down with fixed, symbolic messages. In the second case, with the loss of a fixed meaning system, all the pieces of the world inside the photograph's frame become free agents with the potential to mean whatever we want them to mean. As in the contemporary debate on "diminishing" attention spans, there are those who claim that alongside the loss, we see the emergence of new skills and capacities as a result of a changed informational terrain. The question for Kracauer is: what to do with these new skills?

The key to finding a suggested answer that hides inconspicuously in this essay, lies in his anecdote of the "demonic grandmother." Kracauer opens "Photography" with a story about a photograph of a smiling, then-fashionable diva—"our demonic diva," she is captioned—at the age of twenty-four. The grandchildren look at this image that resembles nothing of the old woman they knew, and it causes them to laugh and shudder.<sup>121</sup> The laughter comes from seeing the old, out-of-date getup of the young diva—the ridiculousness of the aesthetics of a long time past. The shudder (and here is our key) is the realization that one day, our present, too, will be long past, and the configurations of our world that make so much sense to us now will be both dead and laughable. This shudder is a small yet horrifying glimmer into the world's mortality and arbitrariness. Kracauer had faith in this tiny death rattle. He hoped that with this glimpse into our world of arbitrary configurations, we could learn to take hold of things that seem hard and fast, and shake them upside down. The tiny death rattle inherent in indexical media opened a crack in the façade of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—in the eternal, presently

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 47-9.

existing future of the New Objectivity architecture—and in this small space, Kracauer tried to use his essays to wedge it open further still. The profane disorder that erupts with the realization that the objects of culture are not more than arbitrary configurations of nature (rather being immovable parts in a pre-ordained sacred order), is the same disorder that emerges on the Weimar street. As Kracauer observes, “In the streets of Berlin, one is often struck by the momentary insight that someday all this will burst apart. The entertainment to which the general public throngs ought to produce the same effect.”<sup>122</sup> His hope is that when we encounter this disorder on film or elsewhere, it stimulates the public to “improvisation”—to an imaginative re-configuration of the now free-floating pieces.

Although they interpreted the medium in significantly different ways, both Kracauer and his contemporary, Benjamin, thought that film could act as a unique and productive encounter between people and their own modernity. They nested their hope that film could work toward cultural emancipation with its ability to shake up the status quo of everyday life and offer its profane material back to viewers for imaginative improvisation. In the next two chapters, I will look in more detail at this hope of Benjamin’s, noting significant comparisons to Kracauer’s theory on film’s role in the struggle over the meanings of modernity. In his own analysis of modernity, Benjamin worries that urban and industrial shock is training our consciousness to resist acquiring traces of lived experience. Benjamin’s own theoretical approach to promoting social revolution uses the traces of experience left upon bourgeois aesthetics of the nineteenth century to uncover an unwritten social history. In the all-important project of discovering

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<sup>122</sup> Kracauer, “Cult of Distraction,” 327.

traces in order to re-discover the history of the oppressed, film enters as a medium through which traces may be left upon modern people's consciousness by entering their minds while they are in a state of distraction.

## CHAPTER 3: DESTROYING ORDER AND AURA: SHOCK, EXPERIENCE, AND THE VELVET-LINED CASE

*Apparently merely ornamental, Victorian interiors had a practical purpose: to cover the emptiness left behind by the absence of tradition. Material proliferation was legitimized by the pretended usefulness of things that contained other things—albums, armoires, boxes, glass cases—often protecting them from this era’s arch enemy, dust. —Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: On the Kitsch Experience**

### Politicization without political action

“Left-Wing Melancholy,” published in 1931, is a short critical review of Erich Kästner’s poetry. In it, Walter Benjamin takes an uncompromising position on the development of the left-leaning cultural elite of Weimar Germany. The rise to prominence of what he calls the “middle stratum,” composed of “agents, journalists, heads of departments,” is criticized as the “rise of a stratum which took unveiled possession of its economic power positions and prided itself as none other on the *nakedness*, the *unmasked* character of its economic physiognomy.”<sup>123</sup> Through the prism of left-wing poetry’s development during the Weimar period, he laments more generally that the “position of this left, radical intelligentsia is a lost one”<sup>124</sup> that fails by underestimating its opponents, and turning vital revolutionary impulses into art objects intended for consumption. He is uncomfortable with the poets’ stance toward the bourgeois culture (of which they are simultaneously a part of, and challenging), accusing

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<sup>123</sup> Benjamin, “Left Wing Melancholy” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 304.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

them of falling back on an all-embracing irony with which they cushion themselves from the fact that they live well because of their cosy relationship with the means of cultural production that they are critiquing.

Benjamin, unimpressed by their ironic self-mocking *cum* embrace, argues that this stance has the effect of foregoing any possible corresponding political action, and in fact, helps to facilitate a reconciliation of the “higher-income bracket” to themselves. He is wary of this pseudo-revolutionary impulse that produces political-*sounding* art and nothing else, because it remains cloistered within artistic practice. By keeping politics locked within art, the cultured bourgeois practitioners are able to maintain a bond of identity between their private and their professional lives. A belief that one’s private and professional life are one and the same works very well for those who can afford to work in jobs that serve to create a positive self-identity. The political necessity of maintaining a distance between work and self becomes painfully apparent, however, when we are forced to consider the masses of people for whom their profession is hardly something worth identifying with on any kind of spiritual level. To do so would be to establish a caste system. For Benjamin, the essential distance between work and self is necessary for a sense of self-worth and the resulting politicization among the proletarian masses, and a recognition of this necessary distance should fuel revolutionary fervour among *all* people of socialist persuasions, comfortable bourgeois artists or otherwise.<sup>125</sup> In this short review of Kästner’s poetry, Benjamin opens a door for us to view some of the key aspects of his investment in, and eventual dissatisfaction with the gradual transformation of the

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 306.

revolutionary energies that proliferated in the Weimar cultural sphere beginning at the end of the First World War.

Benjamin's indictment of pseudo-revolutionary artistic practice compares the ironic, apolitical embrace of old cultural ideals by New Objectivity poetry to the velvet-lined depressions of boxes from which the objects that once nestled in them have long since disappeared.

What is left is [sic] the empty spaces where, in dusty heart-shaped velvet trays, the feelings—nature and love, enthusiasm and humanity—once rested. Now the hollow forms are absentmindedly caressed. A know-all irony thinks it has much more in these supposed stereotypes than in the things themselves, it makes a great display of its poverty and turns the yawning emptiness into a celebration. For this is what is new about this objectivity—it takes as much pride in the traces of former spiritual goods as the bourgeois do in their material goods. Never have such comfortable arrangements been made in such an uncomfortable situation.<sup>126</sup>

In his critique, we can read his restlessness with the path that the New Objectivity trend was blazing through the cultural sphere, and his fear that revolutionary energies that had built up within it were being dissipated into political-sounding artistic gestures. Although Benjamin does not map the early development of the Weimar cultural sphere through its more popular iterations as Kracauer does in his essays on architecture and cinema-going culture, he too, is passionately committed to tracing its changes and possible futures through (in the earlier years of the period) literary criticism. Analyzing changes using literary works his observations are certainly no less profound, and they give us a form through which to grasp his more wide-reaching thoughts on the Weimar cultural sphere, modernity, memory, and human experience. One might even say that his disappointment

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 305.

in the developments within many strands of literature may have contributed to his later turn toward the most relevant popular medium of the time: film.

Looming large in his writings on the development of a Weimar cultural public sphere are markers of a deep ambivalence. While he was able to see extraordinary revolutionary potential in many of its trends and changes, he rarely seems convinced that these changes are necessarily leading to processes of liberation on the one hand, or decay on the other. In almost all of his subject matter we can feel the historical needle quivering among different directions: in one, an increasingly potent public poised on the verge of seizing the means of production; in another, the same public becoming mortified in cyclically renewed versions of a dead bourgeois world of cultural commodification; and worse yet, a road toward the deadly fascist anaestheticization of aesthetics that threatens to turn the public's desire for change against itself.<sup>127</sup>

Benjamin expresses some hope in the energies of the artistic avant-garde who, for him, are the most illustrative example of a (however pale) Western counterpart to the Russian revolution. He cannot express this hope, however, without appending the worry that the artistic revolt has not and will not attach itself to substantive political revolution, and thus remain an impotent gesture. The primary danger with the artistic avant-garde is that in *describing* the "new" culture for "the masses," the people that comprise these masses will once again become lost in the process. For Benjamin, the constructive, proscriptive energies of cultural change cannot take root unless they are planted in ground that has already been cleared by the equally necessary destruction of earlier cultural forms. In order for this destruction to lead to emancipatory change, it must be

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<sup>127</sup> The terminology for this clause is borrowed from Susan Buck-Morss' essay "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics," October 62, 1992 pp.3-41, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4.

done by the cooptation and use of cultural forms and institutions by a proletarian public. He expresses scepticism that this necessary cooptation is possible. Because of the shock effects that the war and modernity heap on people's minds, the barriers that they develop to protect themselves may inhibit the acquisition of crucial forms of experience and memory. Indeed, these barriers may help to trap people in a monotony of endlessly repeating phantasmagoric commodity culture. In the growing public embrace of film, however, there emerges a particularly fertile training ground where audiences might be learn tools for the future cooptation of culture, and in it, Benjamin plants the seeds for his famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility."

In this chapter I will use Benjamin's short prose piece, "The Destructive Character," as an entry point for examining his deep investment in the development of the Weimar cultural public sphere, which he tries to nurture with his work of uncovering material traces of historical experience. I will also look at a couple of theories of modern shock and how Benjamin used them to express both concern and hope over the changes in experience for the modern urban individual. His worry that modern people were losing an ability to retain traces of their experience in their consciousness, puts film in the spotlight as a medium that holds the potential to transmit and store a *new* kind of experiential trace. In chapter 4, I will take a closer look at his eventual turn to film as the site where the energies set adrift by cultural destructions would compete for the future of the public sphere. Benjamin sees that film, like architecture, has the ability to shape the habits of the public by building up unconscious traces of experience into new languages of mimetic reception. The final problem, then, will be to consider the viability of



Benjamin's desperate hope that the mimetic language of film could mature into a self-conscious cry from the proletariat for radical social change.

## **Architecture and the Destructive Character**

Benjamin expresses a degree of ambivalence about the New Objectivity trend in architecture. In a few places he notes that these skeletal designs show promising mobility—an ability to be porous and conduct substances through them, rather than stagnating in the dark, heavy bourgeois interiors of which he himself often wrote. He praises “Gideon, Mendelsohn, Corbusier, [for] turn[ing] human abodes primarily into transient spaces with all imaginable energy and waves of light and air.” In his essay “Walter Benjamin and the Utopia of the ‘New Architecture,’” Christoph Assendorf sees Benjamin’s interest in new architectural forms as inextricably connected to his utopian aspirations. Assendorf writes that this connection is revealed when Benjamin follows the preceding quote with the sentence: “Whatever comes does so under the sign of transparency: not only space but time, since the Russians are supposedly planning to abolish Sunday as well as the weekly calendar in favour of flexible leisure time.”<sup>128</sup> By linking the porosity of New Architecture to the flexible reinvention of time in Soviet Russia, Benjamin connects the transparency of aesthetics with communist re-

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<sup>128</sup> Benjamin as quoted in Christoph Assendorf, “Walter Benjamin and the Utopia of the ‘New Architecture’” in *Social Utopias of the Twenties: Bauhaus, Kibbutz and the Dream of the New Man*, ed. Jeannine Fielder (Germany: Müller + Busmann Press 1995), 24.

configurations of clock time, and by extension, to social utopia.<sup>129</sup> Where experimentation with design favoured lightness and movement, Benjamin saw the seeds of future social structures that could act as a facilitator and function of the type of affective communication and circulation enacted in the social utopia described by Charles Fourier's "Phalanstères,"<sup>130</sup> a concept that was hugely influential in Benjamin's thinking.<sup>131</sup>

Though Assendorf has been able to find a few references to modern architecture scattered throughout Benjamin's work, admittedly, there is not that much to be found. Benjamin has not left behind much substantive commentary on the developments of surface culture during the Weimar period; a fact that has certainly not gone unnoticed by critics. At the beginning of her article "America, Paris, The Alps," Miriam Hansen points out that Benjamin's interest in modernism appears to be slightly less *practically* rooted in the heterogeneous Weimar public sphere than Kracauer's.<sup>132</sup> Hansen recognizes however, that despite the criticism that is often leveled at Benjamin for being stuck in the bourgeois frippery of the nineteenth century, he is no less committed than Kracauer to advancing the social concerns of his own time. In a curious depiction of someone he calls "The Destructive Character," Benjamin reveals his deep desire for practical change in the very present public landscape. By following this character's misleading similarities to the New Man that the New Objectivity inherited from Expressionism, we can get a better understanding of Benjamin's stance toward the changes that were already

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>130</sup> Charles Fourier developed the concept of Phalanstères in the early 1800's. A design for a utopian community, these buildings were to house self-contained communities where all industrial, agricultural, leisure, familial, and social life took place within a single large compound.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>132</sup> Hansen, "America," in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, 366.

taking place in the public sphere. Where the destructive character fearlessly blazes his own trail, we can see what Benjamin thought was missing from the New Objectivity, and how his own work tried to forward its cause.

Where Kracauer discovers a productive modernism in the totality of the conflicting publics, Benjamin, at least in the earlier years of the republic, finds inspiration in what he sees as the closest Western counterpart to Russian Bolshevism. In the work of the avant-garde, which for Benjamin includes architectural figures such as Adolf Loos and LeCorbusier, the fight to force their artistic work out of the cultural ghetto and into the realm of everyday life and design is a potentially productive mimicry of the plasticity and experimentation with form and institution that took place when the Russians tried to build a new society.<sup>133</sup> This “revolt” on the part of the arts to try to get out of its cloisters and into the everyday world is important to Benjamin as the only instantiation of revolution that Western Europe had to work with at the time. The danger with an artistic revolution given the political structure of Weimar, however, was that it remained top-down, and was always already pre-figured by the imaginative designs of artists. Benjamin cannot help but ask, as he does in his essay on the French Surrealists, whether this “constructive, dictatorial side of revolution” is enough: “How are we to imagine an existence oriented solely toward the boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle, in rooms designed by LeCorbusier and Oud?”<sup>134</sup>

While the avant-garde’s attempts to push open boundaries and re-imagine social forms are vital aspects of this productive re-imagining, they cannot exist without the

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<sup>133</sup> Irving Wohlfarth, “No-Man’s Land: On Walter Benjamin’s ‘Destructive Character’” *Diacritics*, Vol. 8, No. 2, June 1978, pp.47-65, 62.

<sup>134</sup> Benjamin, “Surrealism,” in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1999), 215.

parallel contribution from the character that emerges in one of Benjamin's short essays published by the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1931. "The Destructive Character" is a piece that chronicles the huge and necessary impact of those people who are truly willing to "clear away," such as his *Angelus Novus*. Benjamin's destructive character can be a tricky one to understand, and in fact he "has no interest in being understood.... Being misunderstood cannot harm him. On the contrary, he provokes it."<sup>135</sup> His unapologetic nature, and the heavy ambivalence that results from his bold and thorough actions, mean that this character is subject to many interpretations.

On the surface, the Destructive Character holds affinities with the New Man and the New Objectivity that followed in his forward-gazing footsteps. It is certainly possible to interpret this character as Ward has in *Weimar Surfaces*, seeing him as a veiled criticism of New Objectivity's confident stripping down of the old Wilhelmine surfaces. An interpretation of the destructive character as a version of the New Man, however, fails to pick up on a crucial point: that the destructive character is only *half* the man that the New Man is: he does not build, he *only takes away*, and it is in the exaggerated destructive half that Benjamin locates his unique and invaluable power.

The destructive character knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away. His need for fresh air and open space is stronger than any hatred.... The destructive character sees no image hovering before him. He has few needs, and the least of them is to know what will replace what has been destroyed. First of all, for a moment at least, empty space—the place where the thing stood or the victim lived.<sup>136</sup>

Benjamin's character cannot be comfortably conflated with the architects of New Objectivity because he does not build a new world out of crystal and purity. His only

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<sup>135</sup> Benjamin, "The Destructive Character," in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 2, 1931-1934*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1999), 542.

<sup>136</sup> Benjamin, "The Destructive Character," 541.

concern is to purge, and he does so without worrying about what will come to follow in his wake.

The destructive character is difficult to pin down for precisely this reason. He makes no effort to communicate himself or his position clearly because he does not care about what will be done in the open space he has created. Despite the one-sidedness of his activities, the destructive character performs an incredibly important function that dovetails with, and indeed carves the way for his opposite: the “creator” of the avant-garde. While the destructive character does not suggest new forms for institutions and practice, he eagerly and successfully chases the sanctity out of the old ones. By knocking the holy relics off the shelf and leaving them on the ground to be picked up and played with, he frees them up for public use. This leaves the door open for the inevitable interventions and transformations that come from allowing institutions to be shaped by needs and time rather than tradition and reverence. Benjamin tells us that: “The destructive character stands in the front line of traditionalists. Some pass things down to posterity, by making them untouchable and thus conserving them; others pass on situations, by making them practicable and thus liquidating them. The latter are called destructive.”<sup>137</sup> By turning a tradition into a forum for practice, the destructive character gives it permission to change and become indefinitely malleable and responsive, and reminds us of his indispensable role in revolutionary action.

Irving Wohlfarth sees Benjamin’s destructive character as an all-important resource in the struggle of the political left against the swelling tides of Fascism. To be able to liquidate without remorse, to be blithe and cheerful, to feel confident that most

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 542.

structures can afford to be wiped away without being afraid of what will replace them, these are characteristics that need to be embraced by a group intent on progressive action.

Wohlfarth writes that:

only advance positions had any prospect of success in the struggle against fascism.... Benjamin's concept of destruction, while easily misunderstood is no less unequivocal. That there were wrong ways of liquidating tradition and purging the world was not something of which in 1931 one needed to be reminded.... *The Destructive Character* rests on the political assessment that liberal humanism is no match for a daemonic perversion of the *Übermensch*. Only the new *Unmensch* who has no dealings with a "noble, time-honoured [...] image of man" but only, like Brecht, with "people" is equal to the situation.<sup>138</sup>

Where the destructive character dismisses the sacred images of man, he comes closer to a productive, inviting liquidation of tradition, and in this move, helps us to see that Benjamin was not just interested in images of the nineteenth century for their own sake, but that he was deeply invested in the living, dynamic, and complicated public of Weimar. Fascism on the other hand, was happy to use these sacred images of man, deftly wielding a picture of "das Volk"—complete with all-embracing traditions—as a harmonious, unified corrective to the intimidating heterogeneity of the chaotic Weimar masses. Key in Wohlfarth's reading of Benjamin's destructive character is his recognition that this character refuses to *create* images, allowing an empty space that clears the way for individual "people" to be rescued from the unified image of "the mass."

While the destructive character's sweep creates room for people to remake traditions in their own image, like the resurfacing of Wilhelmine façades this sweep has the potential to destroy the traces of another time and sever the public's links to the past.

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<sup>138</sup> Wohlfarth, "No Man's Land," 54.

As it does for Kracauer, this potential poses no small risk in Benjamin's mind. Wohlfarth writes that:

[t]he effacement of traces and, correlatively, the loss of aura are objectively ambiguous developments. [...] *The Destructive Character* is counterbalanced by *The Storyteller*, which singles out the trace of the artisan's hand as the hallmark of a disappearing world of "experience." It is not, at least, not primarily, these authentic traces that invite destruction but rather the secondary substitutes that cover up their actual historical effacement. The scene of their monstrous accumulation is the bourgeois interior.... Traces have come to belong to the artificial paradise of interior decoration. They are 'phantasmagorias of the interior' based on denial and substitute-gratification.... All the destructive character has to do is to introduce bourgeois matter of factness into places from which it has been elaborately screened.<sup>139</sup>

Benjamin's ambivalence to this approach is made significantly clear when one examines his larger body of work and the historical materialist technique that he employs through it all, and articulates finally in his last published work.<sup>140</sup> While the New Objectivity forced the destructive "matter of factness" into the home of the working class who occupied the new housing projects, and attempted to usher it in elsewhere by way of moral imperative, Benjamin's own work does not always appear to follow suit.

While, as Assendorf demonstrates, the New Architecture suggested to Benjamin elements of a future that he hoped would arrive, the work that Benjamin himself dedicated to helping make such a future possible relied heavily on the type of spaces that the New Architecture was clearing away. It seems clear from much of his writing that although Benjamin has given us a sympathetic characterization of Klee's *Angelus Novus* as one who "takes away" for the future good of Man, he is himself a great bard of the rich interior spaces that are being emptied out in this process. Using precisely the type of

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>140</sup> See Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin, Essays and Reflections*.

objects and spaces that are being taken away, works such as “A Berlin Childhood in 1900,” “Berlin Chronicle,” and even his later “Arcades Project” enact intimate literary and philosophical encounters with that which remains to gather dust:<sup>141</sup> in the overcrowded bourgeois home; the abandoned arcade; the no-longer-fashionable city quarters. He interrogates these objects in order to retrieve the multitude of silent histories that are inscribed within them, and it is these objects of investigation for which Benjamin’s commitment to his modern present is often critiqued. On the surface, it seems that the method of the destructive character and his own historical materialist approach could not be more different, however, there are important and telling similarities between the two.

Benjamin’s historical materialist project works to destabilize the myth of official histories of progress by “reading” the unwritten histories of use, attraction, and labour that reside in the built environment—even in the overcrowded parlour of the bourgeois apartment. Michael Taussig’s book *Mimesis and Alterity* opens with an excerpt from T.W. Adorno’s “Über Walter Benjamin” that reads: “He is driven not merely to awaken congealed life in petrified objects—as in allegory—but also to scrutinize living things so that they present themselves as being ancient, ‘ur-historical’ and abruptly release their significance.”<sup>142</sup> Benjamin does not look to the ornaments of nineteenth century life in order to preserve them or any kind of inherent value they might possess, rather, he breaks them open in order to see if they contain an explosive kernel of utopian desire that could be used to blast open the present’s stagnant conditions.

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<sup>141</sup> For a thorough discussion of the importance of the concept of dust and the outmoded in Benjamin’s work see Celeste Olalquiaga’s book *The Artificial Kingdom: On the Kitsch Experience*.

<sup>142</sup> Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (London: Routledge 1993), 1.



In his essay “Construction has the Role of the Unconscious: Phantasmagorias of the Master Builder (with Constant Reference to Gideon, Weber, Nietzsche, Ibsen, and Benjamin),” Wohlfarth reminds us that Benjamin perceived that alongside the “disenchantment of the world”<sup>143</sup> that occurred during the Enlightenment, there was a attendant re-enchantment that emerged to compensate for what was being lost in the erosion of a religious world view. Wohlfarth writes: “Benjamin describes such re-enchantment in terms of the manifold ‘phantasmagorias’ of nineteenth-century bourgeois society, among them those of the interior.”<sup>144</sup> Thus the interior of the home became a pseudo-spiritual shrine, or a chamber of artefacts that stood in for a lost spirituality. In this context, the destructive character becomes “the agent of a *renewed* disenchantment. He comes to disenchant re-enchantment. The traces he effaces are, in the first instance, less those of a crime than those of its luxuriating concealment.”<sup>145</sup>

Benjamin’s and the destructive character’s work run parallel in the recognition that the objects within the bourgeois shrine are not what they appear to be on the surface. The destructive character has no time for their phoney spirituality, and moves in to clear them away. Benjamin, working as a historical materialist, also recognizes their misleading presence, but his act is to pull them apart rather than merely sweep them off the shelves. His readings of Marx’ substructure/superstructure and Freud’s subconscious/conscious theories tell him that although the surface is not to be taken at

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<sup>143</sup> Weber in Wohlfarth, “Construction has the Role of the Unconscious: Phantasmagorias of the Master Builder (with Constant Reference to Gideon, Weber, Nietzsche, Ibsen, and Benjamin),” in *Nietzsche and “An Architecture of Our Minds”* eds. Alexandre Kostka and Irving Wohlfarth (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999),146.

<sup>144</sup> Wohlfarth, “Construction,” 146.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

face value, there is important work to be done uncovering an object's socio-historical unconscious. Or as Wohlfarth puts it:

The materialist historian is thus faced with the double task of uncovering the substructure and of studying how the superstructure covers it over. In this latter connection, he is to attend to the images, ornaments, and drapery that disguise the underlying construction. Even and precisely at their most superficial, such images express the fantasies of the collective unconscious.... As such, they are not simply to be effaced; there is other work to be done alongside that of the "destructive character"—namely *Passagenwerk*.<sup>146</sup>

For Benjamin, the lost trappings of the nineteenth century contain, among other things an expression of utopian desire and imagination; thus the ornamentation that disguises it is precious material that deserves to be broken open. If there is something of value inside, it can be used to build a theoretical structure for dismantling the constructed reality of the present.

True, Benjamin's work rests on discovering those objects that have been left behind rather than taken away, but what he does with those objects resonates strongly with the destructive impulse. His methodological theory tells us is that he does not wish cultural aspirations to remain trapped in the stuffy confinement of the bourgeois interior. Where he fears that current trends of his time are doing so, this is where the decisive actions of the destructive character can push further than more cautious approaches; s/he has no time for the imprints of those who seek shelter inside their plush interiors:

The destructive character is the enemy of the *etui*-man. The *etui*-man looks for comfort, and the case is its quintessence. The inside of the case is the velvet-lined track that he has imprinted on the world. The destructive character obliterates even the traces of destruction.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 177 "Passagenwerk" refers to Benjamin's unfinished *magnum opus*, which was a monumental attempt to mine the surfaces of nineteenth century bourgeois life for the social history that lay underneath it.

<sup>147</sup> Benjamin, "The Destructive Character," 542.

In *Weimar Surfaces*, Ward reads “The Destructive Character” as a warning about the dangers of New Objective clearing, and the *etui* (case)-man as a Benjaminian figure who nestles in the velvet tracks.<sup>148</sup> The above quote does indeed sound a warning that human imprints are being lost, but, as Benjamin explains in “Left-Wing Melancholy,” it is the New Objectivity that is not yet doing enough; the destructive character is his more radical and necessary counterpart. It is more likely that the *etui*-man is a pseudo-destructive character as embodied by the poetry of Kästner. Here Benjamin sees the New Objectivity as forfeiting its destructive potential to hold on to the empty cases, celebrating and lamenting its emptiness with an ironic nostalgia that cannot bring itself to let go completely.

Because Benjamin’s own working material is often the very velvet-lined case that he criticizes, he himself relies upon the fact that the bourgeois home has acted as a shell that receives imprints: a yielding substance that acquires traces of the lives that are lived inside of them. While the hygienic living cube of the New Architecture may work in a social utopia, in the imperfect world that exists, it threatens to be a human container that wants to eternally look the same, refusing the imprints of living: “That is what new architects have achieved with their glass and steel: created spaces in which it is not easy to leave behind a trace.”<sup>149</sup> Benjamin had reason to be ambivalent about the loss of the interior and its ability to receive traces—to hold layers of memory—as his work of excavating interiors depended on it. What distinguishes the usefulness of the velvet case in his own work from the source of dangerous ironic nostalgia that it enacts in Kästner’s, is his use of this case as a tool for a historical materialist project.

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<sup>148</sup> Ward, 73.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

The velvet case then becomes an ambivalent metaphor; on the one hand, it is used to enact nostalgia for out-of-date ideals. On the other, it is an important repository for the traces of experience. Traces were an essential concept for Benjamin—they were invaluable links to the unwritten histories that were revealed by objects, and were key in connecting with these alternate histories. Despite his appreciation of the destructive character, a fear remains that traces were being eliminated not only by the “sweeping away” of the New Objectivity, but that traces upon the human psyche were being prohibited from accruing in the first place due to the barrier that arose to protect people from assaults on their consciousness by shocks from war and everyday modern culture.

## **Shock and Sensationalism**

The smooth, unified vision of the city that modern architecture was trying to create at the level of the horizon was disrupted by the sensual stimuli that were battling out on the level of the streets. Ward writes that “[a]ggressive street advertising constituted the first significant assault on the original ‘harmony’ ... of urban architecture, distracting the passerby into lingering, looking, and longing.”<sup>150</sup> Flashing, erupting, colourful light advertisements evolved into objects of increasing grandeur and sophistication in order to gain notice over and above the density and pace of the crowds and traffic on the streets themselves.

The “shock effect” of life in the urban metropolis post WWI is a subject that has been given no small amount of attention, but in order to discuss Kracauer and Benjamin’s

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<sup>150</sup> Ward, 116.

analyses of modern life, it is important to look briefly at the theories of urban shock that influenced their work. Ben Singer, in his essay “Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism,” reminds us that even before the shattering experience of World War I, in the early decades of the 1900’s, citizens of large European and North American cities were having to acclimatize to ongoing changes in the pace and content of modern life, often experiencing accelerations of stimulus and mechanization that were “overwhelming, strange, and traumatic.”<sup>151</sup> The rapid increase in urban populations, the popularity of street advertising, the unprecedented rise in commercialism, ongoing proliferation of mechanized labour, goods, and services, and the increasing density of urban transportation, made city life a process of continual adaptation for the people forced to reckon with it. Singer demonstrates that in the early 1900’s the illustrated press was constantly reflecting (and helping to stimulate) a popular anxiety and fascination with the increased nervous stimulation and physical danger that the modern environment foisted on its denizens. Newspaper illustrations often reflected and exaggerated the intensity of metropolitan street scenes, focusing on the chaos of mobs and traffic, with a particular emphasis on the horror of violent and gruesome collisions: “This fixation underscored the sense of a radically altered public sphere, one defined by chance, peril, and shocking impressions rather than by any traditional conception of safety, continuity, and self-controlled destiny.”<sup>152</sup> On top of the fear and anxiety that was already acutely developed in this earlier era, the advent of the First World War violently exaggerated and

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<sup>151</sup> Ben Singer, “Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism,” in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern life*, ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press 1995), 88.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 79-82.

amplified the experience of modern shock beyond anything that had previously been experienced.

Two key theorists, Georg Simmel, who wrote on pre-war urban modernity, and seventeen years later, Sigmund Freud, who published his famous theories on shell-shocked soldiers returning from battle in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, wrote influential passages on the psychological, sociological, and neurological effects of shock. They had a particularly profound impact on the thinking of Kracauer and Benjamin, both of whom had been students of Simmel. In *Fragments of Modernity*, Frisby argues that

[t]he urban context is ... central to Simmel's account of modernity.... [He] was the first sociologist to reveal explicitly the social significance of spatial contexts for human interaction. Spatial images of society were later to be crucial to Kracauer's own 'topography of social space' as well as Benjamin's analysis of the relation between ... the bourgeois *intérieur* and the spatial location of commodities.<sup>153</sup>

In Simmel's essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life," he develops a theory of the "shock effect" of modern urban life that is taken up by Benjamin in his essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," and is a key foundation for understanding the role of aura and experience in Benjamin's theory of film.

Simmel writes that "the increased stimulus of city life on the nervous system of the urban citizen was believed to shape the receptive and cognitive capacities of what he dubbed: "the metropolitan type," who creates "protective organs for himself against the profound disruptions with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it."<sup>154</sup> Simmel hypothesizes that the metropolitan type relocates their reaction to violent or unexpected changes from the emotional to the rational sphere,

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<sup>153</sup> Frisby, 71.

<sup>154</sup> Georg Simmel, *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (US: Public Domain, 1903), 326.

which is less sensitive and can better absorb shock. This relocation, which couples with the attributes of punctuality, calculability, and exactness that develop as a result of the urban living and the types of interactions that it fosters (such as relating to most of the people one encounters on the basis of money and professional typological roles such as bus driver, customer, bank teller, etc.), is said to produce a “capitalistic and intellectualistic” character structure that is dominated by the “blasé outlook.” Simmel’s hypothesis of urban life is that its overly stimulating character “makes one blasé because it stimulates the nerves to their utmost reactivity until they can finally no longer produce any reaction at all.... This incapacity to react to new stimulations with the required amount of energy constitutes that blasé attitude.”<sup>155</sup>

When he wrote “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” after observing shell-shocked soldiers returning home from WWI, Sigmund Freud noted a similar response to over-stimulus. To describe shock’s impact on the human consciousness in this state, he uses the image of a cell whose outer layer becomes deadened to stimuli in order to protect the inner regions of the organism. This dead outer layer then serves as a “protective shield” that absorbs stimuli without registering them, saving the interior layers from becoming deadened by the same shocks. The effect of this protection, however, is said to leave the organism incapable of perceiving any stimulus that is not strong enough to penetrate the protective shield.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 329.

<sup>156</sup> Ward, 123.

Historiographers of this period note that popular entertainment post WWI<sup>157</sup> became increasingly bombastic as a way of ‘breaking through’ the blasé shield of urban dwellers.<sup>158</sup> Popular sensationalism in arts and culture was able to both mimic and make up for the frenetic experience of urban life: “For Kracauer, Benjamin, and their many predecessors, this broad escalation of sensational amusement was clearly a sign of the times: Sensationalism was the aesthetic counterpart to the radical transformations of space, time, and industry.”<sup>159</sup> Singer relates that the saturation of the visual environment—entertainment in particular—with shocks and thrills is seen by social theorists as a reflection of and contribution to the deadening outer layer of urbanites’ perceptual capacities, with their need for increasingly more aggressive experiences in order to capture their attention.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud suggests that people actually seek out controlled, minor shocks, such as those experienced in certain forms of entertainment (like film viewing) in order to cope more effectively with those that occur by chance. In his own practice he had found that WWI veterans were less likely to suffer from shell shock when they had “fixated repeatedly and anxiously on the potential horror of modern technological warfare prior to actually experiencing it in the trenches.”<sup>160</sup> Film, with its rapid succession of images, quick edits, and special effects, offered an ideal forum for experiencing the thrill and wonder of the modern world while keeping its participants housed in a safe, controlled environment. The birth of the cinematic “eye” extended the

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<sup>157</sup> also marked by many as the decisive ‘event’ that both rained technological and psychological shocks upon European citizens on an unprecedented scale, and inaugurated the period of intensified industrial life that the theory of urban shock pertains to.

<sup>158</sup> See Janet Ward, Miriam Bratu Hansen, Tom Gunning, and Ben Singer in publications referenced in the Works Cited.

<sup>159</sup> Singer, 91.

<sup>160</sup> Ward, 123.



realm of the perceptually possible: physical danger could become filmic stimulation, and the panoramic scope of the gaze provided “infinite, if illusory, powers of expansion to the participant.”<sup>161</sup> Many forms of entertainment that offered controlled doses of sensational experience functioned in this innoculatory way. Indeed, Tom Gunning, in his essay “Aesthetics of Astonishment” places early film within a well-established performative tradition that includes the magic show, the sideshow, and illusionists, all catering to audiences hungry for thrills and excitement. Film’s potential to interact profoundly with modern viewers held a particular promise and fascination for many of Weimar’s cultural critics. In order to look in more detail at the role of this medium in Benjamin’s theories of modernity in particular, it will be important to look at how film fits into his larger theory of modern perception.

## **Perceiving Modernity**

Freud’s and Simmel’s descriptions of the modern shock experience and its neurological/psychological effects were taken up by Benjamin and Kracauer, who used shock theory to contemplate the effects of modern city life on the sphere of politics and culture. Benjamin was particularly interested in the effect of shock on the modern individual’s faculties of memory and experience. Although in this study, I am focused primarily on their work from the 1920’s and early 30’s, it would be difficult to fully flesh out the importance of film for Benjamin without looking at an essay published in 1939 on the poetry of Baudelaire (though he had been working on Baudelaire’s poetry for many

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

years before writing this essay). At this time, with escalating Fascist terror in Germany and the descent into a Second World War, and after many of the gambles he took on film's mimetic training seemed to be proving fruitless, he finds a crucial articulation of an emergent kind of urban experience as expressed by nineteenth century poet Baudelaire. In his essay, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin sees Marcel Proust's attempt to retrieve the buried, unconscious memories from his life in his epic *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, as a Swann song of modern people's ability to obtain and access what he refers to as "mémoire involuntaire."<sup>162</sup> "Mémoire involuntaire," for Benjamin, refers to a form of memory that collects in an individual's mind *without* her/his conscious realization. He explains that the memories acquired without the attendant realization that they will be remembered, are able to slip past the deadened outer layer of consciousness that protects people from shock. In the modern world of stimulus saturation, Freud's shock-deflecting layer of consciousness hardens to create a near impenetrable barrier that blocks the average pedestrian and trench soldier's ability to receive the particular, material, and substantive impressions from that which is encountered, making it near impossible to experience events or objects for what they are in their entirety. Instead of receiving the shocks of perception that would build an understanding of the world, the shock-deflecting consciousness gets its information by taking *signs* and *cues* from objects, using them to refer to a pre-existing understanding of what things are—an understanding that is *already* embedded in one's mind. Instead of continually discovering the subtle differences between phenomena and their changes through time, Benjamin feels that the over-taxed consciousness protects people from

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<sup>162</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" in *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin, Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn ed. Hannah Arendt (NY: Schocken Books 1968), 182.

sensory overload and collapse, by deferring back to typological assumptions about what it thinks it perceives, instead of taking on the shock of the new. This, he writes, leads to an erosion of the number of impressions that actually enrich our “experience” [*Erfahrung*]  
—a term that he contrasts with impressions that are merely “lived” [*Erlebnis*].<sup>163</sup>

This protective function of the shock-deflecting consciousness allows people to survive an industrial or urban setting with its mass of people, traffic, lights, advertising, industrial machines, and noise, but Benjamin worries that this protective function comes coupled with a loss of the “*Mémoire Involuntaire*.” “*Mémoire Involuntaire*” are those memories (or rather the impressions that become memories) that are *not* filtered through the prior understandings and frameworks that can over-determine them by molding and obscuring what has actually happened into “kitsch” images. “*Mémoire Involuntaire*,” rather, must enter as something that is not registered consciously, and it can only be retrieved from a memory bank by encountering something that unexpectedly triggers a release of experiences and impressions.<sup>164</sup> It must reside in what Benjamin calls the “unconscious” memory.

As a result of the proliferation of technologies of mass production and reproduction, Benjamin believes that there is a disintegration of the “aura” that surrounds any given object, most particularly (and famously theorized), a work of art. When aura is dissolved, an object loses its specificity, no longer occupying a precise locus in a web of time and space that is woven by an intact cultural worldview. This web charts, frames, and holds objects in particular places based on the cultural worldview and that

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<sup>163</sup> Benjamin, “Baudelaire”, 163.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 160-161.

worldview's historical relationship to the religious or the archaic. The erasure of aura dislodges objects from their web, freeing them to be moved around in human-made (political) configurations that can disregard older fixed forms and their hierarchies of tradition, class, and sacredness. This, of course, is a productive event that gives Benjamin hope. His hope is that rather than mourn the loss of a fixed and binding worldview, people, especially those formerly restricted from playing with the configurations of cultural objects, will seize this opportunity for creative play and re-configuration. The dangerous side of this coin, however, is that the loss of aura also unmoors a sense of collectively understood order-of-things, disabling cultural objects from participating in acts of ritual that integrate the individual's experiences into a larger collective story of 'location' and meaning. For Benjamin, the loss of aura means that objects lose their power to "look back" at their beholders with understanding. That is, they lose their power to be identified within fixed meaning systems, and thus to structure and reflect our own position in an ordered cosmology.

To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return. This experience corresponds to the data of the *mémoire involuntaire*. (These data, incidentally, are unique: they are lost to the memory that seeks to retain them. Thus they lend support to the concept of the aura that comprises the "unique manifestation of a distance." This designation has the advantage of clarifying the ceremonial character of the phenomenon. The essentially distant is the inapproachable: inapproachability is in fact a primary quality of the ceremonial image.)<sup>165</sup>

When an object loses its aura, its ability to speak to us of a time and place beyond our own history, beyond our 'here' and 'now' is lost, and along with it, it loses its ability to penetrate the shock-resistant consciousness of the modern urbanite and disrupt their

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 188.

preconceived notions of what life is already understood to be. For Benjamin, this eroded relationship to the material world is exemplified by the figure of Baudelaire, who is “someone ... past experience[ing],” which leaves him in an impotent relationship with his life which seems to be an endless monotony of meaninglessness. Baudelaire laments: “And, minute by minute, Time engulfs me./As the snow’s measureless fall covers a motionless body.”<sup>166</sup> For Benjamin, a world where the ‘aura’ is fading becomes a world that cannot see its own connections to anything larger or outside of itself, and time begins to feel like a blizzard of indistinguishable moments whose meaninglessness paralyzes people’s profound urge to be a part of something that transcends themselves and their lived experiences. Benjamin talks about this ‘trapped-in-an-endlessly-repeating-present’ quality of modernity in other texts where he refers to it as “the time of Hell.”<sup>167</sup> In an attempt to ward off death, modern commodity and media culture perpetually create ‘new’ and ‘different’ instantiations of themselves, giving the illusion of change and linear time, while in effect consumers remain trapped within an endlessly repeating system of production and re-production. Benjamin points to the illusory cycles of modernity embodied by fashion as the dominant strata of society’s attempt to eternalize its foothold in culture by aesthetically banishing death by way of a constant timely re-styling of the same general configurations.<sup>168</sup> He writes that: “The *durée* from which death has been eliminated has the miserable endlessness of a scroll. Tradition is excluded from it. It is

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>167</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, (US: MIT Press 1999), 99.

<sup>168</sup> Buck-Morss *The Dialectics of Seeing*, 99.

the quintessence of a passing moment that struts about in the borrowed garb of experience.”<sup>169</sup>

The aura-less landscape of modernity, while bleak when being self-perpetuated through the phantasmagoria of commodity culture, is not merely a scene of devastation and loss. The modern landscape of urban spaces and industrial production presents opportunities for adaptation and re-configuration. It is in this context that Benjamin’s interest in modernist architecture’s porous, open qualities and suggestions of a yet unachieved future take on meaning. Benjamin was not an advocate of conservative longing for bygone days of order and oppression, nor for a return to a lost state of connection to an “unspoiled nature.” Rather, he urged people to conceive of the contemporary environment and all of its productive (technological/industrial) capacities as a “second nature” which needs to be understood, adapted to, and re-configured in order to release its liberatory potentials. He tried to establish that it was the very aura-destroying apparatuses of technological reproducibility that were simultaneously liberating culture’s aesthetic and material wealth to be used in the service of political re-organization and development.<sup>170</sup>

Cinema holds the potential to be a powerful forum for imaginative experimentation with culture’s liberated material, but its power is an ambivalent one. In the final chapter, I will frame film as a Benjaminian “destructive character” that opened a path for social change in the Weimar republic, which was subsequently fought over by the dominant political powers. Benjamin hoped that film would act in the service of a further politicization of the proletariat by being a site for acquiring traces of experience

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<sup>169</sup> Benjamin, “Baudelaire,” 185.

<sup>170</sup> The concept of “second nature” is presented in Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” and explored in depth in Buck-Morss’ *Dialectics of Seeing*.

that could accumulate into mimetic languages. In order for film to become a useful political tool in the hands of the public, however, there had to be some way for them to consciously see and feel themselves within the images of the masses as historical actors.

## CHAPTER 4: FILMIC DESTRUCTIONS

Benjamin's image of the "destructive character" connects us to Weimar's film culture in a couple of very important ways. The first connection, and this is critical, is the destructive character's action of "pass[ing] on situations, by making them practicable and thus liquidating them."<sup>171</sup> It was precisely this type of relationship that film was simulating for the culture-consuming public, and this excited Benjamin's hopes that film might be able to pick up where the artistic avant-garde and the New Objectivity had failed to follow through. While film was not putting movie cameras and co-operatively run cinemas in the hands of the proletariat, what it did do was to take everything from historical events, to far away lands, to Shakespeare, and transform them into popular objects of mass consumption. In his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," Benjamin notices that technological reproduction of art erodes its unique aura, but in the process, "*it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence*" and brings these proliferating copies into the very hands and homes of its beholders.<sup>172</sup> In these actions there obtains

a massive upheaval in the domain of objects handed down from the past—a shattering of tradition which is the reverse side of the present crisis and renewal of humanity.... Their most powerful agent is film. The social significance of film ... is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic side: the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Benjamin, "The Destructive Character," 542.

<sup>172</sup> Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 22.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.



In film, the destructive character appears to have found a most effective medium. During the Weimar period, as discussed earlier, film was sweeping the country, overtaking other cultural forms in growth and popular interest. As Benjamin writes in “The Work of Art,” classic fairy tales, plays, literary epics, and other art objects were being transposed to the screen; cultural traditions were being processed for popular consumption, and in the translation, taking on entirely new meanings.

While this “destructive” quality of film excited his hopes, unlike some other critics of his time,<sup>174</sup> Benjamin was not satisfied that film had reached its full maturity by turning fairy tales into moving images. Until the production of film had been seized by a proletarian class that was using it to understand itself *as a class*—to view itself prosthetically as a labouring people—the content would not equal the medium’s potential. His desire for film to evolve into a tool for class-consciousness did not, however, nullify its existing value or importance, and here we come to film’s second connection with the destructive character.

Wohlfarth reminds us in “No-Man’s Land,” that “[t]he effacement of traces and, correlatively, the loss of aura are objectively ambiguous developments,” and the destructive character is counterbalanced by the traces that accrue from the workmanship of a practiced, productive hand such as that of “the storyteller.”<sup>175</sup> Although the destructive character liquefies traditions by allowing them to be used, their development into something that will eventually serve the public as a forum for practice demands some

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<sup>174</sup> Benjamin quotes Abel Gance to have “ferverently proclaimed in 1927, “Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven, will make films.... All legends, all mythologies, and all myths, all the founders of religions, indeed all religions, ...await their celluloid resurrection, and the heroes are pressing at the gates.” *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>175</sup> Wohlfarth, “No-Man’s Land,” 60. In Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller,” he argues that the ability to communicate is diminished by modernity’s dismantling of the relationship that manual craftsmanship builds between eye, hand, and experience.

kind of training that will allow it to be used *productively*. Benjamin's period crackled with a deeply important destructive energy, but without some kind of political revolution the Weimar period seemed to lack the resources to transform existing cultural institutions into viable shelters where the public could practice and nurture their own form of culture. In this respect, Benjamin's observation of film's destructive character parallels Kracauer's critique of the New Objectivity's clean sweep, and as a result of the upheaval caused by these destructions, both critics find themselves and their society at a historical crossroads that opens up onto three starkly diverging paths. Benjamin and Kracauer both decide to gamble on the potential that filmic media contain, and through their writings, do their best to describe how this potential might actualize toward a socialist future. Wohlfarth points out that "*The Destructive Character* [sic] is, like *The Work of Art* [sic], a historical gamble. The vindication of destruction in the one corresponds to the rehabilitation of 'disreputable' categories in the other."<sup>176</sup> In "The Work of Art," Benjamin sketches out what has become a controversial theory on the kind of training that film might be able to provide its publics. In the early 1930's, with Fascism gaining ever more ground in its bid for power over Weimar's cultural public sphere, the hope that film could provide a progressive training ground for the proletariat and white-collar workers was a gamble<sup>177</sup> on the popular media that came burdened with a growing fear that it may be too late.

In this chapter I review some of the key arguments in Benjamin's gamble that film could follow up its destructive nature by simultaneously leaving behind a new kind of trace that could be acquired through the experience of the world that film projected

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<sup>176</sup> Wohlfarth, "No-Man's Land," 60.

<sup>177</sup> The idea that Benjamin's investment in film was a historical gamble is discussed in Hansen's "Room for Play" and Wohlfarth's "No-Man's Land."

onto its viewers. First, I look at his theory of the “optical unconscious,” how it connects to the tactile unconscious of architecture, and how Benjamin hoped that people would build up experience from these media by way of mimetic play. Finally, I take a gamble of my own and draw out a couple of concepts from his essay on the French Surrealists that I believe may describe ways in which he imagined these kinds of subconscious traces could be turned into politicized experience by way of mimetic empathy and “profane illumination.”

## **Taking Hold of Second Nature: Mimesis and the Optical Unconscious**

While Benjamin’s “Work of Art” essay has become canonized in virtually all areas of cultural theory, his theory of film remains problematic and contested territory. In a contemporary re-evaluation of Benjamin’s significance for film theory, Hansen draws our attention to important differences between the second and third versions of this essay, arguing that the second version’s notion of “play” in cinema is key to the particular (political) experience that photographic media can enable. She writes that for Benjamin, cinema is a “play form of second nature,”<sup>178</sup> that is, it is a form in which second nature—the natural landscape of modernity complete with its technologies and the hybrid creatures and societies that emerge as a result—comes to read, learn, and understand itself. Throughout his body of work, Benjamin writes about many of the emergent consequences of modernization: the numbing effects of being repeatedly subjected to shocks; the aestheticization of second nature (manifest in fascism); and the threat of

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<sup>178</sup> Hansen, “Room for Play: Benjamin’s Gamble with Cinema,” October 109, 2004, 7.

technological catastrophe that such an aestheticization combined with a numbness to shock enables.<sup>179</sup> Or, as Buck-Morss writes in “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics:” the numbness derived from being anesthetized by the aesthetics of the mass spectacle.<sup>180</sup> The potential horrors of these consequences of modernity left Benjamin with an impassioned desire to detect and nurture the simultaneous potentials for social emancipation and productive cultural exploration. He hoped to plug into these exciting potentials with his criticism, using them to theorize a reinvigoration of experience.

Benjamin suggests that art’s overall function is to rehearse “the interplay between nature and humanity,”<sup>181</sup> and that cinema, with its ability to reconfigure images through editing, and its indiscriminate use of all the information that passes in front of it (as opposed to focusing on particular parts because of their ritualistic value, as in icon or medieval painting for example) increases the “play” faculty in direct proportion to the aura that it dispels. Cinema shows us a new world from the one that we already know by bestowing upon our gaze all the technical capacities of both the camera and post-production editing. In this way, the relationship between film and viewer mimics the relationship between the external world and the development of a new generation of children. Benjamin sees the continual revolution from one generation to another as essential for the integration of new, emergent phenomena into the cultural lifeworld. This happens when children mimic the preceding generation, turning the material of their lived worlds into objects of play. Writing on the way that dreams make similar use of the objects of our daily life, he observes,

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>180</sup> Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,” October 62, 1992.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 18.

[t]he repetition of childhood experience gives us pause: when we were little, there was as yet no agonized protest against the world of our parents. As children in the midst of the world, we showed ourselves superior. When we reach for the banal, we take hold of the good along with it—the good that is there (open your eyes) right before you.<sup>182</sup>

Children's play, like the creation of dream images, is the way in which new structures and configurations of nature/technology are incorporated into the "image stock of humanity."<sup>183</sup> They both make use of all the observable elements of life—even the new and unsettling ones that the older generation or the waking consciousness don't yet know what to do with—as the taken-for-granted material of learning and creative self-construction.

Benjamin (drawing directly from Freud) sees repetition as the foundational principle of children's play. Children mimic what they encounter as a means of incorporating the world, and they seek to reproduce happiness by tirelessly repeating an originally satisfying action. Children do not initially recognize the hierarchies of value that the adult world perpetuates, and according to Benjamin, they are in fact

less intrigued by the preformed world that adults have created than by its waste products. They are drawn to the apparently valueless, intentionless things: "In using things they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifacts produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new intuitive relationship"<sup>184</sup>

Because the mechanism of film has aspects of this relationship built directly into it, Benjamin hopes that it might have the power to produce a creative, mimetic response in its viewers. The principle of repetition, on an optical level, exists in the series of subtly different still images that repeat rapid-fire in front of the viewers. As well, the very act of watching a film means that what is being watched, and on some level, experienced, is

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<sup>182</sup> Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch," in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 1, 1927-1930*, 4.

<sup>183</sup> Hansen, "Room for Play," 7.

<sup>184</sup> Benjamin as cited in Buck-Morss, *Dialectics*, 262.

something that has already occurred, thus repeating a historical event. If film were used to show scenes of life on the streets, the urban masses, and people working, as Benjamin suggests it ought to,<sup>185</sup> the movie-going public would have the opportunity to *re-experience*, and then hopefully re-formulate these experiences. Through the optical techniques of film, “valueless, intentionless things” can be brought to the fore and offered as items for creative reconfiguration, enabling us to experience that which we cannot face in life. Hansen writes that Benjamin sees the repetitive/mimetic qualities of film as a form of therapy (again informed by Freud) that shows us our social trauma over again, allowing a transformation of modernity’s “shattering experience into habit.”<sup>186</sup> This reconfiguration of everyday experience and the integration of traumatic shattering experience can work to produce a liveable future by “repairing a history gone to pieces.”<sup>187</sup>

Film allows spectators to integrate their shocking environment into their experience by giving them a chance to incorporate it mimetically. Benjamin maintains in this essay, as he does in his work on Baudelaire, that the modern consciousness remains relatively impervious to shock. Film, however, is able to bypass this protective layer by submerging its viewers in a sea of continuous minor shocks delivered by the rapidly changing images on the screen. In this environment, he believes that reflective contemplation, which has exemplified an ideal approach to artwork in the past, is no longer relevant. In the shocking presence of the movie screen, a state of distraction is both inevitable and part of the catalyst for its unique function.

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<sup>185</sup> Benjamin, “Art in the Age,” 34.

<sup>186</sup> Hansen, “Room for Play,” 27.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

In the radical developments of the New Objectivity, architecture tried to take on the persona of the destructive character by liquidating outdated forms, but in many cases it was its obverse, bearing *upon* the public in an attempt to educate them in the principles of a new culture. In the “Work of Art” essay, Benjamin outlines the principle that motivated the architects to hope that architecture might prove to be the ground from which a new kind of public might grow and flourish outside of traditional political confines. He writes that

[a]rchitecture has always offered the prototype of an artwork that is received in a state of distraction and through the collective. The laws of architecture’s reception are highly instructive.

Buildings are received ... tactilely and optically.... Tactile reception comes about not so much by way of attention as by way of habit.... Under certain circumstances, this form of reception shaped by architecture acquires canonical value. *For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed solely by optical means—that is by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually—taking their cue from tactile reception—through habit.*<sup>188</sup>

Habit is the base unit of architectural perception, and Benjamin’s key for unlocking film’s power to train people in a new form of experience gained by a mimetic response to what they perceive.

In his book *Mimesis and Alterity*, Michael Taussig writes that “[h]abit offers a profound example of tactile knowing and is very much on Benjamin’s mind, because only at the depth of habit is radical change effected, where unconscious strata of culture are built into social routines as bodily disposition.”<sup>189</sup> Habit is itself a form of mimetic language that masters its environments and routines, mirroring its affective contours and building them into a vocabulary of routines and unconscious action. As we learn to navigate built environments, the particulars of its shapes and passages embed themselves

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<sup>188</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 40.

<sup>189</sup> Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 25.

in our body's actions and responses in a way that by-pass our conscious notice. This eventually produces a physical language of movement that reflects the environment's terrain. Susan Buck-Morss describes this tactile/habitual learning in her essay "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics," by referring to our receptive/responsive selves as a "synaesthetic system." In this system, it is as if we have nerves that stretch far outside of the body, beginning in the space where the environment meets our sense perceptions. Sensual experience then continues from the space of the world into our bodies where they are filtered through each individual's history, memory and anticipation.<sup>190</sup> To explain how the perceptual synaesthetic system produces mimetic languages, Buck-Morss makes an example of an expressive face that registers three aspects all at once: physical sensation, motor reaction, and physical meaning-making. On the expressive face, signals and gestures reveal these three aspects simultaneously, producing a language that is at once expressive and experiencing, communicating and perceiving.<sup>191</sup> With her description of the expressive face as the producer of a mimetic language by taking in and projecting out at the same time, Buck-Morss illustrates an example of what Benjamin might have imagined when he wrote of the cinema as a perceptual training ground for the public. By building a mimetic vocabulary in relation to the world on the film screen—specifically a world that is always mediated by the technologies that face the proletariat in the industrial work of their everyday lives—Benjamin hopes that film can train viewers to navigate the modern world more effectively.

Hansen describes Benjamin's conception of mimesis as one of non-sensuous similarity—an act of "read[ing] what was never written"—that has crept into language

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<sup>190</sup> Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics," 13.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.



and writing and occasionally reveals itself over and above semiotic correspondence. For Benjamin, film has the capacity to ‘read’ similarities in objects and actions that are not yet perceptible to our senses, but may one day prove to become an unintended record of our “optical unconscious.”<sup>192</sup> Film shows us our environments in ways that are always necessarily mediated by an apparatus, and by doing so, can play with the pieces of nature—detritus from what was once perceived as a whole universe, that has now been shattered by the technological apparatus, the shock of war, and modernization—and dislodge them from expected configurations.

Writing on the developments of Russian film in 1927, Benjamin observes that “[w]ith film there truly arises *a new region of consciousness*. It is, succinctly put, the only prism in which the immediate environment—the spaces in which he lives, goes about his business, and takes his pleasures—reveals itself intelligently, sensibly, and passionately to the contemporary observer.”<sup>193</sup> Mediating our world through the technology of its own production and display apparatus, film is able to show us our world as we have never seen it before: it takes a landscape that we are used to seeing, and slows it down, speeds it up, zooms in and pans out, giving us a totally new perspective on an environment that was previously taken for granted as “second nature.” Benjamin writes:

Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split-second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Hansen, “Room for Play,” 38.

<sup>193</sup> Benjamin, “A Discussion of Russian Filmic Art and Collectivist Art in General,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 626.

<sup>194</sup> Benjamin, “Art in the Age,” 37.

This explosion of our taken-for-granted world on film opens new spaces for experience that we would not be able to perceive in the physical world. Benjamin suggests that due to the rapidity and intensity of the cinematic image, it is able to by-pass the shock-deflecting function of consciousness that protects us in the over-stimulating urban or industrial environment. Thus film delivers the world to us in fragmented forms, but then offers us the opportunity to integrate these fragments mimetically into our experience by leaving remembered traces on our consciousness.

### **Mimetic Empathy and Profane Illumination Ring Out to Wake the Masses**

While film and architecture are able to slip past the shock-proof consciousness by getting in when people are in a state of distraction, the question remains (and here is where Benjamin's essay stimulates a fierce debate): how are people supposed to gain conscious access to the traces left behind by film? Benjamin believed that the mimetic training enabled by film was useful, and perhaps even essential for the class of people forced to work daily with industrial machines. He also believed, passionately, that people should "wake up" from the dream state that capitalist consumerism promoted, and seize the means of production and direct them toward the creation of a socialist utopia.

Taussig re-iterates Benjamin's crucial, unanswered point, saying that "[t]he automatic pilot that functions while asleep has to be awakened to its own automaticity, and thus go travelling in a new way with a new physiognomy—bursting its 'prison-world asunder by

the dynamite of a tenth of a second.”<sup>195</sup> So we are left asking: how were people meant to “wake up” to the fragmented world that film was showing them?

The world that Benjamin wanted people to awaken to was (and still is, however differently conceived) one in a desperate state of crisis. He found that the French Surrealist writers had articulated this crisis in a way that needed to be recognized by everyone and acted upon immediately.

That history is a permanent routine emergency has become a self-evident truth. It requires the individual to pawn things of sentimental value, above all himself, and ‘exchange the play of his features for the dial of an alarm-clock.’ Only the destructive character knows how late it is. Where the economy has ‘as much stability as the high seas,’ the unsupported private initiative of the “builder” lacks any foundations to build on.<sup>196</sup>

The reason that the architect (a version of the “builder”) cannot transform the public is that the “builder” has no political stability on which s/he can realize her/his utopic architecture. For Benjamin, socialist-style housing projects could not help but rest on shaky ground, as they threateningly exposed society’s contradictions for all to see by pointing blatantly to what was missing, without being able to address the underlying politico-economic issues. In non-socialist countries, it seems, the destructive character must come *before* the builder can. In his essay on Surrealism, Benjamin finds in the work of Andre Breton in particular, examples of the productive gestures that might follow a destructive character without merely reproducing the empty velvet impressions where outdated culture once protected its treasures.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Taussig, 25.

<sup>196</sup> Wolfarth, 62.

<sup>197</sup> Benjamin turns to the French Surrealists as a way of theorizing a productive destruction. I restrict my discussion to his reading of this particular artistic movement, as my intention is to map Benjamin’s theory of film and its possible extensions, and not Germany’s artistic avant-garde. It would be interesting to examine the intersections of Benjamin’s concept with other avant-garde movements, such as the German Dada, but a comprehensive look at the art history of the Weimar period is beyond the scope of this study.

While the cheerful destructive character takes blithe, carefree action to clear a path in the solemn, hallowed halls of tradition, Benjamin feels that the Surrealists are also able to harness an energy of intoxication that is so coolly overlooked by the sober, practical New Objectivists, and channel this energy toward progressive ends. Older expressions of the energies of intoxication had lost their traditional home in the church and community festivals, and despite being continually repressed by the rationalization of life by way of politics, style, and industrialization, had by no means disappeared. Life's irrational expressions, having been swept under the proverbial rug, were creating a dangerously bulging ground on which the public walked, worked, and built houses. Benjamin knew that the carpet was ready to burst, and he feared that the only people ready to harness the intoxicating "seepage of the repressed" on a large scale were the Fascists.

A continued resistance on the part of sober objectivists to enlisting cheerful destruction, surrealism, and "the energies of intoxication" in the service of progressive politics, was a ticking time-bomb for which Benjamin could already hear the alarm.

To win the energies of intoxication for the revolution—this is the project on which Surrealism focuses in all its books and enterprises. This it may call its most important task.... [F]anatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious takes us no further; we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday.<sup>198</sup>

With the technological advances that the camera lens makes upon the human eye, the cinema becomes a screen where the everyday becomes mysterious and new by way of close-ups, slow-motion, and long-distance shots. Though Benjamin himself does not

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<sup>198</sup> Benjamin, "Surrealism" in *Selected Writings Vol 2, Part 1*, 216.

make an explicit connection between the “everyday mystery” of Surrealism and cinema, he certainly recognizes that film is a potential site for a “dialectical optics” of the kind that he recognizes in the former. The possibility of dialectical intoxication presents itself as a desperately needed corrective to the distorted and non-dialectical forms of intoxication that mystify their own fractured and mediated nature. The enchanting, captivating aesthetics of the Fascists’ images of a united “Volk,” were multiplying and gaining converts. The intoxicating aesthetics of a new German mass are remarkably exemplified in Leni Riefenstahl’s famous film homage to Hitler and his party, “Triumph of the Will,” which used the camera to weave scenes of German people into a powerful visual unity. It is in reference to these types of images that Benjamin famously warns us at the end of “The Work of Art,” that fascism is harnessing the intoxicating qualities of film to aestheticize politics.

How did the Surrealists tap into this intoxicated energy, and what did they do with it that could be instructive for understanding Benjamin’s notions of a progressive “politicization of art?”<sup>199</sup> Two strategic actions that he ascribed to the insights of the Surrealists stand out for their resonance with the opportunities proffered by the cinematic form: their attempt to re-imagine the boundaries of the classical subject with a mimetic empathy achieved by living in an all-encompassing ‘dream-life’; and the experience of “profane illumination” that was realized through a recognition of the “revolutionary energies that appear in the ‘outmoded.’”<sup>200</sup> In the first of these actions, we once again find the dream: the life world in which when, like the child, “we reach for the banal, we

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<sup>199</sup> Benjamin, “The Work of Art.” He famously concludes this essay with the warning: “Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure. *Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art.*”

<sup>200</sup> Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 210.

take hold of the good along with it—the good that is there (open your eyes) right before you.”<sup>201</sup> Benjamin writes that the Surrealists found life worth living only where “it broke over its founders as an inspiring dream wave,”<sup>202</sup> a dream that swept away the divisions standing between categories such as art, life, work, and experience. In the waking dream of the Surrealists, the city, poetry, love, death, everything was incorporated into a molten language in which divisions emerge and retreat. Even meaning and the individual subject were submerged.

This language of the dream-state seems to me something comparable to the land that stands clear in the wake of the destructive character. In it, objects have stood, and in it they will stand again, but the clearing is the only thing that allows either of those iterations to take shape. The cleared ground reminds us that everything that is ever built upon it is within our means to dismantle and replace. What is most captivating about the dream language of the Surrealists with respect to film-as-a-training-ground, however, is the loss of the contained self that occurs in the intoxicated state of dreaming. For as Benjamin writes: “In the world’s structure, dream loosens individuality like a bad tooth. This loosening of the self by intoxication is, at the same time, precisely the fruitful, living experience that allowed these people to step outside the charmed space of intoxication.”<sup>203</sup> When the self drowns in a sea that contains everything else, a most acute form of empathy is enabled as we drift about encountering objects. Without a defined shape of our own, encountering, in a sense, is the same as becoming. For Taussig (reflecting on Benjamin’s writings), film also contains this ability to enact and embody empathy and mimesis. He likens a viewer’s ability to empathize with what they see on

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<sup>201</sup> Benjamin, “Dream Kitsch,” 4.

<sup>202</sup> Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 208.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

the screen to the imaginative power of a child before her/his ego has a definite shape, and can take on the substance of what s/he sees.

There is a fluidity, indeed porosity, of the ego here, and it is this ... that film stimulates and depends upon for its crushingly powerful reality effect achieved by a “smooth symbiotic sense of blending together, of dissolution into images and their movement....”

This provides a vivid notion of optical *tactility*, plunging us into the plane where the object world and the visual copy merge. “Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction,” noted Benjamin in his essay on film.<sup>204</sup>

In the work of the Surrealists, Benjamin calls this kind of porous encounter “esoteric love,” and makes an example of the relationship between the characters of Breton and Nadja in Andre Breton’s novel *Nadja*. Esoteric love, in keeping with the dissolution of the self, is not a romantic or erotic love—it is a love that “bestows or withholds gifts that resemble an illumination more than sensual pleasure.”<sup>205</sup> With this kind of love, Breton comes “closer to the things that Nadja is close to than to her;” and her love bestows upon him a “profane illumination” from the things she brings him close to.

Where the deep empathy of esoteric love finds the political spark that casts light into this surrealist sea of dream language is in the type of objects that Nadja brings to Breton’s perception:

[Breton] can boast an extraordinary discovery: he was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the “outmoded”—in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them. The relation of these things to revolution—no one can have a more exact concept of it than these authors. No one before these visionaries and augurs perceived how destitution—not only social but architectonic, the

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<sup>204</sup> Taussig, 35.

<sup>205</sup> Erich Auerbach as cited in Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 210.

poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects—can suddenly be transformed into revolutionary nihilism.<sup>206</sup>

To empathically perceive the destitution of the outmoded is to ourselves become passé; neglected; decayed. It is the tiny shudder of death that we feel when looking into the unexpected mirror of Kracauer's demonic grandmother. What gives this small death rattle its revolutionary power is the nihilism that reminds us that *this* moment is no more sacred than any other; these things around us do not represent a teleology of progress—they are simply historical detritus here to convince us that “now” is “forever.” In this moment of re-evaluation that empathy with the outmoded allows, the nihilism would have no revolutionary power without the flash of recognition that this moment, like any other, has not been predestined to be this way. It is in this moment with its shudder of recognition, its revolutionary nihilism, that a bridge appears to extend between now and the past. This bridge is formed by discovering the parallel contingencies that exist between one moment and all others.

## **A Historical Gamble: Feeling the Pain of the Crowd**

*The trick by which this world of things is mastered ... consists in the substitution of a political for a historical view of the past. “Open graves! You, the dead of the picture galleries, corpses behind screens, in palaces, castles, and monasteries! Here stands the fabulous keeper of keys holding a bunch of the keys to all times, who knows where to press the most artful lock and invites you to step into the midst of the world today, to mingle with the bearers of burdens, the mechanics whom money ennoble, to make yourself at home in their automobiles, which are beautiful as armour from the age of chivalry, to take your places in the international sleeping cars, and to weld yourself to all the people who today are still proud of their privileges. But civilization will make short work of them.” –Apollinaire cited by Benjamin, “Surrealism”*

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<sup>206</sup> Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 210.



For Benjamin, the past is not the one of the history books, locked down in an endlessly repeating cycle of heroes and kings, successes and defeat. It was and is a living, contingent, open field in which the state of things could always be different: casualties of war are also farmer's sons conscripted to fight by the lord who owns their land; the jewels set in the crowns of fashion have been traded for disease, enslavement, spiritual desolation, and slaughter. His revolutionary nihilism clings to the desperate hope that the present can learn to translate the meanings of history's dirty past all the way through to the present—to see the Weimar proletariat as the farmer's sons whose brothers did not return from the war; for the bourgeoisie to recognize their privileges as won not by birthright, but by the miners from whose bloodied hands the jewelled crowns of the factory owners are wrought. If this realization can come coupled with a politicization that sees the present moment in history to be as ripe as any other for redressing repression and exploitation, then a field for action has been cleared.

It is a horrifying fact that certain tendencies in the moment at which Benjamin was writing were not only ripe, but on the verge of rotting into the aestheticized violence of fascism. Taussig reminds us that for Benjamin, building an empathic connection between the present and every other moment in time, is key to actualizing a political praxis from profane illumination, and that “where history makes the difference, is precisely in this matter of grasping the actual as the obverse of the eternal in history.”<sup>207</sup> “Benjamin's philosophy of the image is profoundly historical... it is bound to a specific philosophy of history arching toward the flash of recognition of the past as an image that surfaces unexpectedly... in a moment of danger... to achieve a type of mimetic

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<sup>207</sup> Taussig, 39.

remembrance in the face of the erosion of experience in modern times.”<sup>208</sup> The historical flash of recognition in a moment of danger, or of obsolescence, is the leap in the “open air of history,” and it relies on a single, illuminating act of recognition: the sign of the mimetic.

In contemplating the power of an act of recognition, we cycle back to film’s importance as an accidental archive of the optical unconscious. The incidental content of film (background, extras, props, gestures), even more than the directed action, creates a storehouse of information about a particular moment in time that is then unintentionally filed away for as long as the celluloid lasts. The archival nature of film stores its potential power indefinitely, whereas its kinetic power becomes actualized if it can act as a catalyst for mimetic language in its viewers. Benjamin saw hope in the possibility that these two powers might one day come together to produce a mimetic language of experience, that, more than simply remaining unconscious, could become illuminated by a moment of historical recognition. His hope remained unrealized in the moment of danger in which Benjamin was writing. An illuminated language of empathy did not arise in time to quell the intoxicated aping of fascist politics. His gamble did not pay off, and it was paid for with his life and those of countless others. In that moment, the fascist aestheticization of politics, or as Taussig puts it, the miming of mimesis that used the repressed energies of the masses to intoxicate and dominate them, won out.<sup>209</sup>

Benjamin, like Marx, was doomed to hang his hopes for a total revolution on a process of proletarian politicization that did not complete itself. This does not mean that his project of working toward social and cultural emancipation of the oppressed has lost

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 68.

meaning or value. Clearly, Benjamin's robust contemporary popularity suggests that *something* in his theories and method continues to resonate as people work on their own contributions to social justice. When we evaluate the explosive role that the specificity of materialist history plays in his work, it seems to demand that in order to get the most out of his methodological theory, we likewise understand something of the time and place that he was attempting to detonate.

It is impossible (and dangerous), to forget that both Benjamin and Kracauer were writing in an environment of harsh censorship and accumulating danger. When the Republic's chancellor Gustav Stresemann, died in 1929, the widening cracks in the unity of the Weimar government could no longer be held together. Political engagement in the arts became much more intense, often carrying with it the feelings of a run-up to a new revolutionary situation. Within the radicalized art world, the debate was shifting from aesthetics to "the 'apparatus' of the arts, the eventual control of the media, and the cultural establishment in a changed society."<sup>210</sup> A faltering German economy had become the pretext for conservative influences in government to ramp up interference in left-wing socialist art, creating an atmosphere where the shutting down of performances, censorship, firings, and resignations were part of a day-to-day struggle. At the same time, the other side of the artistic political spectrum was waging a war of its own. There is no shortage of scholarship on the growth and style of fascist aesthetics in Weimar Germany and elsewhere, and I will not attempt to contribute to this discussion here. I will, however, pull a couple of points from Buck-Morss' insightful study of this topic in

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<sup>210</sup> Willett, 179.

“Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,” to give a sense of the contrast between Benjamin and Kracauer’s work and some of the trends they were struggling against.

The shocking, fractured texture of post-war modern life was no secret to anyone, and as Kracauer reminds us in his essay “Those Who Wait,” there were different ways in which people were trying to grasp the totality of the pieces and put them back together into an identifiable unity. Buck-Morss describes fashionable images from the time that portrayed landscapes, cities, or crowds, taken from high up, where they gave their subjects an abstract pattern of totality and orderliness. These images provide a “reassuring perception of the rationality of the whole of the social body,” and though this technique is used in many forms and contexts, “this is the key to fascist aesthetics... this dilemma of perception is surmounted by a phantasmagoria of the individual as part of a crowd that itself forms an integral whole... that pleases as an aesthetics of the surface.”<sup>211</sup> She explains that the ability to perceive the crowd as a unified social body gives the viewer a double role as both part of the material that forms the crowd, and an observer of it. In this splitting-off of selves, the pain that might be felt by the self that is a member of a crowd being subjected to force, is displaced onto the self that is the observer who, instead of *feeling* it, *sees* it as an aesthetic spectacle. In other words: “The aesthetics allow an anaesthetization of reception.”<sup>212</sup>

Following this line of argument, we can contextualize much of Benjamin and Kracauer’s work as an attempt to reject this aesthetic unity and rescue what they saw to be a highly productive image of heterogeneity and fracture that emanated from the modern public. By establishing a forum for close, empathic perception of the fractured

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<sup>211</sup> Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,” 32.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

and the outmoded, their work tries to remind us of the shudder of death that resides in the images of our own world. In doing so, Benjamin and Kracauer work to bring physical sensation back into the synaesthetic system of reception. The resuscitation of sensation and empathy in perception was their way of coming as close as they could to the modern city and its heterogeneous public. By way of their own experiences, they tried show their colleagues among the intellectual elite that they too, needed to take the masses of the city seriously, and not be seduced into developing tools for an aesthetic renewal that didn't address the conditions of their daily lives. As the city became a site of renewal, both architectural and artistic, it was invested in by the cultural left as a utopic trope for a new, democratic Germany. Benjamin and Kracauer wanted to help bring an honest image of this city to the fore, so that its masses were not lost within it as mere decorative patterns in the streets.

In reference to the world of things that Benjamin identified as providing a “profane illumination” for the Surrealists, he notes that

At the centre of this world of things stands the most dreamed-about of their objects: the city of Paris itself. But only revolt completely exposes its Surrealist face (deserted streets in which whistles and shots dictate the outcome). And no face is surrealistic to the same degree as the true face of a city. No picture by de Chirico or Max Ernst can match the sharp elevations of the city's inner strongholds, which one must overrun and occupy in order to master their fate and—in their fate, the fate of their masses—one's own. Nadja is an exponent of these masses and of what inspires them to revolution: “The great living, sonorous unconsciousness that inspires my only convincing acts—in the sense that I always want to prove that it commands forever everything which is mine.”<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 211.

## CONCLUSION: TAKING CAREFUL AIM

*The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space. –Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities**

Whether through the prism of architecture, literature, or film, Benjamin and Kracauer's work wrestled with the terms of a changing cultural public sphere. Their political ideals made them want to contribute to a revolutionary change, and they both felt they could be the most productive by evaluating the contributions of their own class of educated, cultural elites and reminding them of their role in setting the terms for the new public sphere. The energies of a population psychologically, physically, and spiritually defeated by war, flattened by economic crisis, stirred toward revolution, and shaken up by the change in their political system, were volatile, unsettled, and pushing the limits of their old habits in search of a place to land. Benjamin and Kracauer saw that these seething energies would need new means of expression, and were coming up everywhere against old, outdated forms that had been merely repackaged to appear new. Both cultural critics were invested in challenging their own class to respond to the inevitable changes with open, functional cultural institutions that would enable the unsettled "masses" of Weimar to start engaging productively by building their own

means of expression and tradition. Both in their own ways (and Kracauer earlier than Benjamin), tried to look “on the ground” at what was happening in the public sphere for insight into where it might be going. It is on this ground from which I, too, draw my inspiration. Architecture and film were two media that, apart from growing and changing rapidly during this era, were literally shaping the public body into new forms and configurations, and trying to teach it what it meant to be modern.

As an architect, Kracauer was deeply sensitive to the ways in which other architects and designers were attempting to respond to and sculpt the needs of an emerging public. His architectural criticism was never purely about design *per se*, but with his ability to read built spaces, he was able to see how spaces interacted with his *true* object of analysis. In an essay on the work of his teacher Georg Simmel, he writes what could pass for a description of his own authorial approach to the world:

the objects that engage the philosopher’s reflections stem from the realm of experiences and encounters of the highly differentiated individual. It is always man—considered as a bearer of culture and as a mature spiritual/intellectual being, acting and evaluating in full control of the powers of his soul and linked to his fellow man in collective action and feeling.<sup>214</sup>

Circling ever back to “man” as his primary object, Kracauer’s analysis was able to move between media such as film, architecture, and literature, while holding on to a common theme and objective. It becomes clear how architecture and film, which profoundly shape the “experiences and encounters” of man would be of such critical interest to him in his attempt to make the external surfaces of the public sphere “suddenly become as

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<sup>214</sup> Kracauer, “Georg Simmel,” in *The Mass Ornament*, 262.

transparent as glass, enabling one to look in and through it into otherwise hidden layers of being which it reveals and simultaneously covers up.”<sup>215</sup>

Kracauer saw his own work in the unsettled environment of Weimar as that of the critic whose role it is to evaluate not only traditional art works that were being created for what was considered to be the legitimate public sphere, but to consider as well those objects that were circulating or being confronted with high frequency among the public at large. He knew that these objects were creating profound reverberations in everyday life, reverberations that might otherwise go unnoticed or be easily dismissed. Kracauer tried not to ignore these “surface-level” phenomena, and worked to “awaken” his own slumbering class to a cultural revolution that was taking place under their noses. To ignore them, he knew, was to simultaneously overlook great potential, and suppress great danger. Particularly in his work as a film critic for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Kracauer was not a judge of the artistic merits of individual films, but tried to be a kind of interpreter of the larger imaginative dream-world that the films gave shape to and disseminated throughout its viewers. He writes that: “although mainstream achievements might not demand evaluation as works of art, they are hardly indifferent commodities adequately treated by judgments drawn purely according to taste. It is much more the case that they exercise extraordinarily important social functions that no film critic deserving of the name is justified in neglecting.”<sup>216</sup>

Film in particular saddled Kracauer with the worry that the affective power of this increasingly popular medium was going unheeded as a mouthpiece for conservative ideals, and untapped as a resource for progressive politics. He asks his readers to

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>216</sup> Kracauer, “The Task of the Film Critic,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 634.



consider that “[t]oday the smallest village has a cinema, and every halfway passable film passes through one of a thousand channels to the masses in city and countryside alike. What do these films convey to their mass public and in what sense to they influence it? These are the cardinal questions, the ones that any responsible observer must ask of mainstream products.”<sup>217</sup>

As a way of addressing these questions, Kracauer maps out the role of a responsible film critic:

The task of the adequate film critic consists, in my opinion, in extrapolating from mainstream films other social intentions that often assert themselves very inconspicuously, and in granting them the kind of publicity they usually shun. He has to point out, for example, the image of society that innumerable films promote by raising a modest employee to unimagined heights or by representing some lordly gentleman as not only rich but full of feeling as well. Further, he has to compare the illusory world portrayed in such films with social reality; he must reveal the extent to which the former falsifies the latter. Briefly stated, the film critic of note is conceivable only as a social critic. His mission is to unveil the social images and ideologies hidden in mainstream films and through his unveiling to undermine the influence of films themselves wherever necessary.<sup>218</sup>

It is here, as social critics attempting to unveil the silent histories and ideologies hidden in cultural works, that Kracauer and Benjamin cross paths. Where Kracauer comes to see the “surface-level expressions” of Berlin through his attention to architecture, Benjamin arrives at the public sphere by way of literary criticism. Though his primary object of study was not initially as grounded in popular modernism as Kracauer’s, his insight that film was the maturation of a public medium *par excellence* brought him crashing into the discourse on public sphere with such force that hardly a cultural studies text can be found today that does not mention his famous essay or any number of his other works on

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 634-5.

memory, experience, storytelling, and the cultural media. Both critics resisted characterizing film as an authorial or canonic genre, but claimed that it was one that emanated directly from the problematics and possibilities of modernity itself. The *idea* of film, and the way they chose to write about it became a means of speaking about the very experience of modernity by all who were encountering it in the various guises in which it presented itself. In particular, film, because of its destructive role as the first cultural form that was not owned as the private property of bourgeois institutions,<sup>219</sup> gave them a vehicle for wrestling with the modernity that was confronting the vast public on whose lives, bodies, and consciousness its most significant effects were being inscribed.

As a critic and watch dog of the literati in Berlin and elsewhere, Benjamin reviewed his peer Kracauer's most comprehensive study of the Berlin public. In his "Review of Kracauer's *Die Angestellten*" ("The White-Collar Workers"), Benjamin asks of Kracauer: "What is the source of this ability to interpret political dreams?... What is evident... is that his interpretive practice is solidly based on the exact study of *his own most personal experience*."<sup>220</sup> It seems to me that Benjamin's answer holds insights into both of their writings, giving us a hint about what continues to make their work so popular and appealing today. Neither of them shied away from bringing themselves into their writing, and mining their personal experiences to discover the edges of an encounter with an object. They were both able to give their observations a poetic brilliance by refracting them through the hardened material of their experience, while simultaneously grounding these insights in the substance of the everyday and allowing them to become coated in the living historical residue of their time and place.

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<sup>219</sup> This idea was developed from a personal communication with Jerry Zaslove in 2009.

<sup>220</sup> Benjamin, "Review of Kracauer's *Die Angestellten*," in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2/1, 356, emphasis added.

In distinction to many other intellectuals of their time, both men in their Feuilleton journalism worked to transpose their academic tradition into a larger, more public heuristic medium and create dialogue within an extended sphere of the cultural elite who would have read the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. They addressed this circle's role in the larger public sphere that they helped to shape, and tried to stimulate productive engagement with it. They tried to ask vital questions about the responsibilities of a politicized left-wing intellectual and artistic class toward a volatile German public and its demands for revolution, before this public slipped into the far more dangerous grasp of the National Socialists. At the end of his essay on Surrealism, Benjamin asks explicitly about the role of the artist in the proletarian revolution, and reminds us that the traditional contemplative distance is losing its power. "If it is the double task of the revolutionary intelligentsia to overthrow the intellectual predominance of the bourgeoisie and to make contact with the proletarian masses, the intelligentsia has failed almost entirely in the second part of this task because it can no longer be preformed contemplatively." He follows by asking the provocative question: "Indeed, mightn't the interruption of his 'artistic career' perhaps be an essential part of his new function?"<sup>221</sup>

While they may not have interrupted their "artistic careers" to take on manual labour jobs, neither did they stay cloistered within the elite realms of academic philosophy and literature in which they were initially trained. Shifting between philosophy, literature, journalism, personal experience, architecture, film, and the larger public sphere, they used their mobility to try to bring a more thoughtful picture of those objects of fascination: "the masses" and "the city," into the field of cultural criticism.

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<sup>221</sup> Benjamin, "Surrealism," 217.

Their fear that a false image was obscuring the critical work that needed to be done drove them to pull apart these images in an effort to reveal its component parts. In an unpublished fragment of Benjamin's from 1930 titled "False Criticism," he reflects that

no one is claiming that it is essential, or even useful, for criticism to be based directly on political ideas. But this is absolutely indispensable for polemical criticism. The more individually the personal is brought to the fore, the more necessary it is for the critic and his public to agree about the image of the age that serves as backdrop and foil. Every authentic picture of the age, however, is political.<sup>222</sup>

Benjamin then criticizes the claims to impartiality made by the New Objectivity, saying that the dream of an impartial journalist reporting "the facts" merely re-rehearses the bourgeois critic of yesteryear who believed in the universality and un-prejudiced nature of his position. His invective makes the need to examine the politics that lie beneath impartiality abundantly clear. It also reminds us of Benjamin and Kracauer's relevance for our own contemporary public sphere.

Their commitment to a criticism that openly argued over the composition of an image of an age: the images that it makes for itself; the images made for it; and the image it ought to have, gave them the ground, if not to build upon, then certainly to test the durability of the structures that stood there, and the explosives to destroy ones that proved to be condemned.

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<sup>222</sup> Benjamin, "False Criticism," in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2/1, 406.

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## Figure Sources

Fig. 1. *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* 38.49 (December 8, 1929): 2232. © Stadtbibliothek Berlin. As printed in Janet Ward’s *Weimar Surfaces*, p. 46. Reprinted under “Fair Dealing” provision of Canadian Copyright Law

Fig. 2. Ullstein Bilderdienst, Berlin. As printed in Thomas Y. Levin’s *The Mass Ornament*, p. 322. Reprinted under “Fair Dealing” provision of Canadian Copyright Law