

Chapter 4:
**“Film as the Discoverer
of the Marvels of Everyday Life”:**
**Kracauer and the Promise
of Realist Cinema**

In the years following the publication of Siegfried Kracauer’s *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* in 1960¹, the book came under fire by a number of critics, whose reactions to Kracauer’s delineation of the promise of the medium were both patronising and acrimonious. As Miriam Hansen has argued in her introduction to *Theory of Film*, foremost among those analyses of the book which “assumed an unusually condescending tone”² were Pauline Kael’s hostile account of Kracauer’s “German pedantry” and Dudley Andrew’s dismissive references to the “utterly transparent” nature of the concerns addressed in Kracauer’s “huge homogeneous block of realist theory”³. Indeed, as revealed by Richard Corliss’s highly critical account of the book, it appears that Kracauer’s “irredeemable sin” lies in the perceived extent to which,

1. Siegfried Kracauer: *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1997. Hereafter referred to as *Theory of Film*.

2. Miriam Bratu Hansen: “Introduction”, *Theory of Film*, p. ix

3. See *ibid.*, pp. ix-x, Pauline Kael: “Is There a Cure for Film Criticism? Or: Some Unhappy Thoughts on Siegfried Kracauer’s Nature of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality”, *Sight and Sound*, 31.2 (Spring, 1962), p. 57, and J. Dudley Andrew: *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction*, London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press 1976, p. 106. Kracauer’s theory, Andrew argues, “comes down solidly, unmistakably, even fanatically on the realist side”. p. 129.

in focusing upon the significance of cinematic realism, he “manages to debase the potentialities of film”.⁴

What is interesting to note is the extent to which Kracauer himself actually anticipated the vehemence of such criticism, despite his own belief in the significance of the project. In a letter written to Rudolf Arnheim in the early stages of the book’s production, Kracauer admits that despite his feeling that he has “found something essential”, “[t]he worst is that [his] whole outlook antagonises most people”.⁵ While in a letter to his good friend Leo Löwenthal written upon completion of the project, Kracauer states that the book “will arouse violent controversies”, and that “the art-minded will, all of them, be against it”.⁶

One of the main sources of the antipathy expressed by the so-called “art-minded” critics anticipated in Kracauer’s letter can be traced to the very specific criteria he employs in his analysis of the properties and possibilities of the medium. What appears to have particularly inflamed the ire of his critics is the extent to which his delineation of these possibilities is based not upon a comprehensive analysis of cinema as it exists⁷, but on his own conception of what he describes as the task of the medium to “assist [...] us in discovering the material world with its psychophysical correspondences”.⁸ In a manner reminiscent of Benjamin’s analysis of the camera’s capacity to extend our vision beyond the realm of subjective intention, Kracauer argues that film “renders visible what we did not, or perhaps even could not, see before its advent”.⁹ It

4. Richard Corliss: “The Limitations of Kracauer’s Reality”, *Cinema Journal*, 10.1 (Fall, 1970), p. 22. Kael makes a similar point at the end of “Is There a Cure for Film Criticism”. See p. 64.

5. Letter to Arnheim, September 14, 1951, Kracauer Nachlaß, Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar. The source of all references to materials contained in this archive will hereafter be referred to as the Kracauer Nachlaß.

6. Letter to Löwenthal, November 29, 1959, quoted in: Siegfried Kracauer, 1889-1966: *Marbacher Magazin*, No. 47, ed. by Ingrid Belke/Irina Renz, Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft 1989, p. 117.

7. In a letter to Löwenthal dated April 6, 1957, Kracauer describes that “which is considered film here and now” as “very remote” from his own concerns. Kracauer Nachlaß. This letter has also been published in *In Steter Freundschaft, Leo Löwenthal – Siegfried Kracauer: Briefwechsel 1921-1966* ed. by Peter-Erwin Jansen/Christian Schmidt, Springe: zu Klampen 2003, pp. 194-195.

8. *Theory of Film*, p. 300.

9. *Ibid.*

enables us to “redeem this world from its dormant state” by allowing us to “experience it through the camera”.¹⁰

In contrast, however, to the claims of “naïve realism”¹¹ that have been directed against the book, Kracauer’s analysis of the significance of the redemptive task of the medium is bound, as Hansen has argued, not with the camera’s capacity to “reflect its object as real but rather with [its] ability to render it strange”¹². Indeed, in stark contrast to Andrew’s claim that, for Kracauer, there is “little essential difference between perception in the cinema and in the world at large”¹³, what I will demonstrate in this chapter is the degree to which Kracauer’s conception of the promise of realist cinema is intimately bound with the extent to which it facilitates a mode of perception that is not inflected by the “ideas”, “value judgements”, and “desires” which actively shape and delimit our perception and experience of the world.¹⁴ In this regard, Kracauer argues in a letter to Lucienne Astruc (dated September 10, 1959), *Theory of Film* is a “philosophical venture which goes far beyond film”.¹⁵ Similarly, in a letter to Theodor W. Adorno, Kracauer claims that his analysis of cinema in the book functions only as a “pretext” (*Vorwand*) which enables a much broader exploration of certain aesthetic

10. Ibid.

11. Dudley Andrew: *Concepts in Film Theory*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press 1984, p. 19

12. Miriam Hansen: “‘With Skin and Hair’: Kracauer’s Theory of Film, Marseille 1940”, *Critical Inquiry* 19 (Spring, 1993), p. 453. Hansen is referring, more specifically, here to Kracauer’s analysis of the significance of photography. However, as I will discuss in detail in this chapter, Kracauer’s analysis of the significance of photography is intimately bound with his analysis of the promise of cinema. In recent years, Kracauer’s *Theory of Film* has been re-evaluated by critics who have sought to defend the book from the, at times, misguided claims made by the aforementioned critics. In addition to Hansen’s “Introduction” to the book, see Heide Schlüppmann: “The Subject of Survival: On Kracauer’s Theory of Film”, *New German Critique*, No. 54 (Fall, 1991), and Chapter 6: “Space, Time, and Apparatus: The Optical Medium ‘Theory of Film’”, in: Gertrud Koch: *Siegfried Kracauer – An Introduction*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2000, pp. 95-113.

13. See *Concepts in Film Theory*, p. 19.

14. See Kracauer’s “Tentative Outline of a Book on Film Aesthetics” which he wrote in 1949, in *Siegfried Kracauer – Erwin Panofsky, Briefwechsel: 1941-1966* ed. by Volker Breidecker, Berlin: Akademie 1996, p. 83.

15. Letter to Astruc, September 10, 1959, *Kracauer Nachlaß*.

and philosophical questions.¹⁶ As I will explore in this chapter, these questions revolve around the extent to which film – in circumventing “the prejudices and preoccupations which normally interfere with our vision”¹⁷ – can, in rejuvenating our capacity for perception and imagination, play a part in reanimating our capacity to conceive of the possibilities of the future in different terms.

4.1 Photography, Proust, and the Task of a Realist Cinema

In the “Preface” to *Theory of Film*, Kracauer argues that his analysis of the possibilities of the medium is based on “the assumption that film is essentially an extension of photography”.¹⁸ Kracauer’s conception of the “nature” and “task” of photography is, however, a very specific one, which is bound with his analysis of the camera’s unique capacity to “record and reveal physical reality”.¹⁹ The history of photography, he claims, can be divided into two opposing groups – one of which is characterised by “realist” traits, the other by “formative” tendencies. In contrast to the “artist photographers” of the “formative” camp (who are defined by their attempts to produce “artistic creations” which reflect

16. Letter to Adorno, February 12, 1949, Kracauer Nachlaß. This letter is also quoted in Belke and Renz: Siegfried Kracauer, 1889-1966, p. 107. See also Kracauer’s letter to Rudolf Arnheim requesting that he review *Theory of Film* in the *Journal of Aesthetics* or the *Art Bulletin*: “You are one of the very few people”, Kracauer writes, “who really understand what I want to convey and therefore may lend words to my inmost conviction – that this book reaches far beyond film; that actually it concerns general aesthetics and our whole attitude toward life. And so on. You know what I mean”. Letter to Arnheim, October 16, 1960, Kracauer Nachlaß. Arnheim’s review of the book was published as “Melancholy Unshaped”, in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Spring, 1963). See also Kracauer’s letter to Wolfgang Weyrauch in which he describes his interest in film as “only a hobby” and a “means for making certain sociological and philosophical statements”. In this letter, Kracauer also asks Weyrauch not to introduce him as a “film man”, but as a “cultural philosopher”, a “sociologist”, and a “poet”. Letter to Weyrauch, June 4, 1962, Kracauer Nachlaß.

17. See Kracauer’s undated “Entwurf über das Verhältnis direktor visueller Erfahrung und der durch Photographie vermittelten”, Kracauer Nachlaß.

18. *Theory of Film*, p. xlix.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 27 and 28.

“painterly styles and preferences”²⁰) Kracauer argues that the “realist” photographers remain true to the medium insofar as they are driven by a desire to capture “nature in the raw”.²¹

The conception of “nature” which emerges from *Theory of Film* is, however, not bound with the natural world. As Kracauer himself points out, throughout the book the term “nature” is used interchangeably with “physical reality”, “material reality”, “physical existence”, “actuality”, and “camera reality”²² in order to designate photographic scenes which – “alienated from ego-involved frames of reference”²³ – transform our conception and experience of the world. The camera, Kracauer states, has an affinity for that which is “fortuitous” and “indeterminate”, and so if photographs are to be “true to the medium”, then “it would seem natural to imagine the photographer as a ‘camera-eye’, an “indiscriminating mirror” who is “devoid of formative impulses”.²⁴

The figure who had the greatest influence on Kracauer’s conception of the significance of the camera’s capacity to “transcend human vision”²⁵ was Marcel Proust, whose examination of the alienating effects of photography in *In Search of Lost Time* had an important impact on Kracauer’s understanding of the promise of the photographic media.²⁶ The passage in *In Search of Lost Time* to which Kracauer refers most frequently appears in Volume 3 of the book, and revolves around Marcel’s chance encounter with his grandmother, who – “absorbed in thoughts” in the drawing-room – is unaware that her grandson has arrived home.²⁷ Upon entering the room, Marcel – not having anticipated his grandmother’s presence – is suddenly transformed into a “spectator of [his] own

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 12 and 6 respectively. See, for example, Kracauer’s analysis of the work of the “artist-photographer” Adam-Salomon, who employed “Rembrandt lighting” and “velvet drapery” in the production of his photographic portraits. p. 6.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 18. For a more detailed account of the differences which separate the “formative” and “realist” camps, see Chapter 1 in *Theory of Film*, pp. 3-23.

22. See *ibid.*, p. 28.

23. “Tentative Outline of a Book on Film Aesthetics”, p. 84.

24. *Theory of Film*, pp. 19-20, and 14-15.

25. “Entwurf über das Verhältnis direktor visueller Erfahrung und der durch Photographie vermittelten”.

26. See Kracauer’s letter to Lucienne Astruc (dated September 10, 1959) in which he describes the prominent role that Proust’s ideas occupy in *Theory of Film*. Kracauer Nachlaß.

27. Marcel Proust: *In Search of Lost Time*, London: Vintage 1996, Vol. 3, p. 155. Only the volume and page numbers will be given hereafter.

absence”, whose alienated view of the scene, he claims, is comparable to that of a “stranger”, a “witness”, or a “photographer”.²⁸ “The process”, Marcel argues,

that automatically occurred in my eyes when I saw my grandmother was indeed a photograph. We never see the people who are dear to us save in the animated system, the perpetual motion of our incessant love for them, which, before allowing the images that their faces present to reach us, seizes them in its vortex and flings them back upon the idea that we have always had of them, makes them adhere to it, coincide with it. [...] I, for whom my grandmother was still myself, I who had never seen her save in my own soul, always in the same place in the past through the transparency of contiguous and overlapping memories, suddenly [...] saw, sitting on the sofa beneath the lamp, red-faced, heavy and vulgar, sick, day-dreaming, letting her slightly crazed eyes wander over a book, an overburdened old woman whom I did not know.²⁹

Proust’s analysis of the rejuvenation of the capacity for perception which emerges from this state of “self-effacement”³⁰ is not limited, however, to this passage in the book, but is a concern which winds its way like a thread through the six volumes of Proust’s novel.³¹ Like Kracauer, Proust’s more general concern lies with the extent to which the memories, value judgements, desires, and expectations that colour and shape our perception of the world prohibit our capacity to conceive of both the promise of the past – and the possibilities of the future – in different terms. In a passage that anticipates Kracauer’s criticism of the form and structure of “theatrical” cinema (the details of which will be elaborated in the following pages) Marcel argues that “our eyes, charged with thought, neglect, as would a classical tragedy, every image that does not

28. Proust, Vol. 3, pp. 155-156.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 156-157. Kracauer quotes this passage in more detail in *Theory of Film*, p. 14.

30. Kracauer: *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, Princeton, Markus Wiener Publishers 1995, p. 84. Hereafter referred to as *History*.

31. See, for example, Proust’s description of the painter Elistir, and the “effort” which he made to “strip himself [...] of every intellectual notion” when painting his subjects. Vol. 2, p. 485. Another figure to whom Proust points in his delineation of an alienated perceptual state is the person who wakes up in an unfamiliar environment feeling somewhat disoriented and who is, for a moment, “newly born, ready for anything, the brain emptied of that past which was life until then”. See Vol. 4, p. 440.

contribute to the action of the play and retain only those that may help to make its purpose intelligible”.³²

For Proust, this mode of perception stands in stark contrast to the alienated perceptual state he aligns with the photographer, whose estranged gaze – aided by the neutrality of the photographic plate – is comparable to the alienated state borne out of an unexpected encounter with something or someone to which one has become habituated. Referring back to the unexpected encounter with his grandmother as his example, Marcel claims that it is “chance” which prompts our eyes to “set to work mechanically, like films”, and which reveals to us, “in place of the beloved person who has long ago ceased to exist but whose death our tenderness has always hitherto kept concealed from us, the new person whom a hundred times daily it has clothed with a loving and mendacious likeness”.³³

As per his analysis of the history of photography, Kracauer argues that the history of film is also marked by a split between “realist” and “formative” tendencies. This split, he claims, can be traced back to the beginnings of the cinema and, more specifically, to what he describes as the divergent conceptions of the possibilities of the medium embodied in the films of Georges Méliès and Louis Lumière. In keeping with his analysis of the significance of the realist photographers, Kracauer argues that the “bulk of [Lumière’s] films” (he cites *Arrival of a Train*, *Lunch Hour at the Lumière Factory*, and *Baby’s Breakfast* as examples) “recorded the world about us for no other purpose than to present it”.³⁴ Lumière’s films, he claims, are “[d]etached records”³⁵ of “nature caught in the act”.³⁶ Their significance lies in the extent to which they reveal to us the state of the world as captured by the objective eye of the camera.

32. Proust: Vol. 3, p. 156. See also the passage in Vol. 6, p. 224 which anticipates Kracauer’s analysis, in History, of the formativist impulse of “historicism”. In this passage, Marcel argues that our conception of the possibilities of the present “languishes” in “the anticipation of a future which the will constructs with fragments of the present and the past, fragments whose reality it still further reduces by preserving of them only what is suitable for the utilitarian, narrowly human purpose for which it intends them”. Kracauer’s analysis of the formativist impulse of historicism will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

33. Proust: Vol. 3, p. 156.

34. Theory of Film, p. 31.

35. Ibid.

36. Kracauer is quoting Henri de Parville’s description of the films of Lumière. Ibid.

Kracauer argues that, in stark contrast to Lumière's "photographic realism", Méliès' films are organised around the creation of illusion and fantasy. Echoing his criticism of the artist-photographers, Kracauer claims that – in contrast to the presentation of everyday scenes and phenomena for which Lumière had become famous – Méliès' films are based upon "imagined events" which have been staged "according to the requirements of his charming fairy-tale plots."³⁷

The distinction which Kracauer draws – between filmmakers who seek to "exhibit and penetrate physical reality for its own sake"³⁸, and those who employ the camera in aid of the creation of a fictional story or universe – is not limited to his discussion of Méliès and Lumière, but is a distinction which forms the basis of his analysis of the realist/cinematic, and formative/theatrical camps into which he divides the history of the medium.³⁹ In contrast to the "open-ended" quality of realist films (which focus upon such "cinematic" subjects as "trees", "waves", "buildings", "passers-by", and "inanimate objects"⁴⁰) Kracauer argues that the emphasis which the formative/theatrical film places upon storytelling runs counter to the promise and capacities of the medium.

Building on his criticism of the "total work of art" elaborated in "Cult of Distraction", Kracauer claims that what is troubling about the theatrical film is the extent to which its tightly woven narrative structure is organised around the creation of "a whole with a purpose"⁴¹. According to Kracauer, the theatrical film's "purpose" is intimately bound with

37. *Ibid.*, p. 32. In a prospectus in which he distinguishes his own work from that of Lumière, Méliès claims that his films "specialize mainly in fantastic or artistic scenes" and "reproductions of theatrical scenes" which differ "entirely from the customary views supplied by the cinematograph – street scenes or scenes of everyday life". Méliès quoted in *Theory of Film*, p. 32. Although Kracauer does acknowledge the enormous impact that Méliès' films (he cites *A Trip to the Moon*, *The Haunted House*, and *An Impossible Voyage* as examples) had on the subsequent development of cinematic technique, his criticism lies in the extent to which Méliès – in "interfering with the photographic reality" to which both the camera and the realists aspire – fails to transcend the limitations of the theatre in which he had previously worked as a director. See *Theory of Film*, pp. 32, 33, and 104.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

39. Kracauer argues that "[i]n strict analogy to the term 'photographic approach' [...] the cinematic approach materializes in all films which follow the realistic tendency". *Ibid.*, p. 38.

40. See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 27 and 170.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 221

the creation and implementation of a story. Every element of the theatrical film, he writes, “has the sole function of serving that purpose”⁴², and images of the environment, of faces, gestures, and inanimate objects are shown only insofar as they aid, or feed directly into the unfolding of the narrative.⁴³

As Hansen argues in her introduction to the book, it would, however, be wrong “to label Kracauer’s stance as *anti-narrative*”. A better title, she suggests, is “*anti-classical*” – a designation which is more apt in its distancing of Kracauer’s conception of realist film from classical narrative cinema (with its emphasis on tightly woven, character driven narratives, the creation of a unified sense of time and space, stylistic continuity, and narrative closure).⁴⁴ Indeed, in contrast to the classical/theatrical film (which, he claims, is organised around the creation of “a whole with an ideological centre”) the film practice favoured by Kracauer must be “permeable” to environmental phenomena that is not subservient to the telling of a story⁴⁵. While cinematic films will not “exhaust themselves in depicting these phenomena”, Kracauer maintains that it is essential that the material world be allowed to speak to the viewer on its own terms.⁴⁶ Any films, he writes, “in which the inanimate [world] merely serves as a background to self-contained dialogue and the closed circuit of human relationships are essentially uncinematic”.⁴⁷

Echoing Sergei Eisenstein and Alberto Cavalcanti’s concerns (as elaborated in the 1920s and 30s) about the impact that the coming of sound would have on the development of filmmaking, Kracauer argues that the emphasis that the theatrical film places upon dialogue undermines the properties and possibilities of the medium.⁴⁸ “At the beginning of sound”, he writes, “the screen went ‘speech-mad’, with many film makers starting from the ‘absurd assumption that in order to make a sound film it is only necessary to photograph a play’”.⁴⁹ For Kracauer,

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid., p. 223.

44. Hansen: “Introduction”, p. xxxii.

45. *Theory of Film*, pp. 261 and 254.

46. Ibid., p. 271.

47. Ibid., p. 46.

48. See, for example, S.M. Eisenstein, W.I. Pudovkin, and G.V. Alexandroff: “The Sound Film: A Statement from U.S.S.R” in: *Close Up, 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*, ed. by James Donald et al., Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1998, pp. 83-84.

49. Kracauer, quoting Cavalcanti, in *Theory of Film*, p. 104.

this emphasis on the spoken word (and the foregrounding of character with which it is associated) results not only in the abandoning of the inanimate world as a subject, but marks a shift in the history of cinema which he describes as “extremely dangerous”. What troubles him, in particular, about this foregrounding of dialogue and character is the extent to which it “opens up the region of discursive reasoning, enabling the medium to impart [...] those rational or poetic communications” which – because they “do not depend upon pictorialization to be grasped and appreciated” – are not only “alien to”, but fail to engage the capacities of the medium.⁵⁰

In his search for an alternative cinematic practice, Kracauer turns his attention to avant-garde artists of the 1920s (such as Jean Epstein, René Clair, Joris Ivens, and Germaine Dulac) whom he claims were driven by a desire to create a “purified cinema” which was not organised according to the dictates of a theatrical narrative.⁵¹ What particularly interests Kracauer about these filmmakers is not only their disregard for tightly woven narrative structures⁵², but the extent to which they employed specifically cinematic techniques and devices (such as “close-up”, “slow motion”, “quick-cutting” and “unusual camera angles”⁵³) in their presentation of “cinematic subjects” such as street scenes and inanimate objects.

For Kracauer, the magnified images revealed by the close-up, in particular, play an important role in disclosing “hidden aspects of the world about us”.⁵⁴ In a passage reminiscent of Benjamin’s analysis of the plant photographs of Karl Blossfeldt, Kracauer claims that “[i]n magnifying the small, the camera exposes to view fantastic shapes too tiny to be normally noticed”. These close-ups, he writes, “cast their spell over the spectator, impressing upon him the magic of a leaf or the energies which lie dormant in a piece of cloth”.⁵⁵

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 104 and 223.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 178.

52. “The avant-garde artists”, Kracauer writes, “broke away from the commercialized cinema not only because of the inferior quality of the many adaptations from plays and novels that swamped the screen but, more important, out of the conviction that the story as the main element of feature films is something alien to the medium, an imposition from without”. See *ibid.*

53. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 280. See also p. 45, in which Kracauer – quoting Fernand Léger – argues that “only film is equipped to sensitize us, by way of big close-ups, to the

For Kracauer, as for Benjamin, the significance of such images lies not only in the degree to which they disclose – albeit in a larger format – familiar aspects of our environment, but rather the extent to which they fundamentally challenge our previously held conceptions about the material world. Paraphrasing Benjamin, Kracauer claims that the significance of such images (which feature frequently in the work of Hans Richter, René Clair, Jean Epstein and others) lies in the extent to which they “blow up our environment in a double sense: they enlarge it literally; and in doing so, they blast the prison of conventional reality, opening up expanses which we have explored at best in dreams before”.⁵⁶

Also reminiscent of Benjamin’s analysis of film in the “Work of Art” essay is Kracauer’s delineation of the extent to which this opening up of our everyday environment facilitated by the camera revitalises the spectator’s senses. “The salient point”, Kracauer writes,

is that these discoveries [...] mean an increased demand on the spectator’s physiological make-up. The unknown shapes he encounters involve not so much his power of reasoning as his visceral faculties. Arousing his innate curiosity, they lure him into dimensions where sense impressions are all-important.⁵⁷

possibilities that lie dormant in a hat, a chair, a hand, and a foot”. Kracauer also quotes Gilbert Cohen-Séat to similar effect: “And I? says the leaf which is falling. – And we? say the orange peel, the gust of wind. [...] Film, whether intentionally or not, is their mouthpiece.” Kracauer’s analysis of the camera’s capacity to reveal aspects of our environment which are ordinarily unseen is not limited to material too small to be noticed, but extends to the revelation of what he describes as “temporal close-ups” of the movement of clouds and waves, “the growth of plants”, and “the manes of galloping horses” – all of which are either too transient or too slow to be perceived directly. See pp. 52-53.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 48, and Walter Benjamin: “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” (Third Version), in: Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 4, ed. by Howard Eiland/Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press 2003, p. 265. Hereafter referred to as “Work of Art”.

57. *Theory of Film*, pp. 158-159. Elaborating on this point, Kracauer states that, although these “images of material moments are meaningful in their own right”, their significance lies in the extent to which we “do not confine ourselves to absorbing them but feel stimulated to weave what they are telling us into contexts that bear on the whole of our existence”. p. 308. Comparing this tactile,

However, while the commitment to a specifically cinematic language, and the eschewal of narrative that defines the work of directors such as Clair, Epstein, and Richter are characteristics which sit comfortably with Kracauer's analysis of the task of realist cinema, he argues that their conception of film as "an art medium in the established sense" meant that they "rejected the jurisdiction of external reality as an unjustified limitation of the artist's creativity, his formative urges".⁵⁸ The results of these "formative urges" can, Kracauer notes, be seen in the rhythmic films and visual symphonies produced by directors such as Oskar Fischinger and Walter Ruttmann, in which images of the environment (of crowds, trains, streetscapes, and inanimate objects) are edited together to produce total works of art which are organised around the creation of rhythmic or symphonic patterns.⁵⁹ "All this", Kracauer writes,

amounts to saying that the real-life shots in the rhythmical *avant-garde* films suffer from emasculation. Instead of suggesting the continuum of physical existence from which they are elicited, they function as elements of compositions which, almost by definition, shut out nature in the raw. True, the devotees of visual music trained their camera on natural objects, but their formative aspirations, manifest in a permanent preoccupation with formal values and sundry movements, blunted their sense of the medium's affinity for the unstaged, the incidental, the not yet shaped.⁶⁰

In addition to his negative assessment of the visual rhythms characteris-

creative mode of spectatorship with the mode of spectatorship cultivated by the theatre, Kracauer states that "[w]hile the theatregoer watches a spectacle which affects primarily his mind and only through it his sensibility, the moviegoer finds himself in a situation in which he cannot ask questions and grope for answers unless he is *saturated physiologically*". My emphasis. p. 309.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

59. See, for example, Kracauer's analysis of the formativist impulse apparent in Walter Ruttmann's 1927 *Berlin, die Symphonie der Großstadt* (a film which Kracauer claims has "the makings of a truly cinematic documentary"). *Ibid.*, p. 207.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 185. As a consequence, Kracauer argues that these films "must be lumped together [with average theatrical films] in spite of all that separates them". This is because "[f]ilms of this kind exploit, not explore, the material phenomena they insert; they insert them not in their own interest but for the purpose of establishing a significant whole; and in pointing up some whole, they refer us from the material dimension back to that of ideology". See *ibid.*, p. 301.

tic of many of the films made by the European avant-garde during this period, Kracauer is also critical of the manner in which music has been employed by both avant-garde and theatrical filmmakers in an attempt to generate a sense of visual and/or dramatic continuity. He claims that any deployment of music which serves to “prop up a theatrical narrative”⁶¹ by aiding or contributing to the creation of drama and/or continuity does a significant disservice to the perceptual and experiential possibilities that he associates with the promise of the medium.

In an attempt to evoke a sense of these possibilities, Kracauer recounts the memory of his own experience of attending a movie theatre where the screening of silent films was habitually accompanied by a drunken pianist, who “under the spell of a pleasant intoxication, [...] improvised freely, as if prompted by a desire to express the vague memories and ever-changing moods which the alcohol stirred in him”. Oblivious to the images on screen, Kracauer claims that the pianist was often

in such a stupor that he played a few popular melodies over and over again, mechanically adorning them with glittering runs and quavers. So it was by no means uncommon that gay tunes would sound when, in a film I watched, the indignant Count turned his adulterous wife out of the house, and that a funeral march would accompany the blue-tinged scene of their ultimate reconciliation.⁶²

What delighted Kracauer about this lack of affinity between the musical accompaniment and the image on screen was the extent to which it opened up a space within which he was able to view the film in a manner which differed significantly from the way in which he *would* have viewed it had the narrative and accompaniment been in harmony.⁶³ What is significant, for Kracauer, about the creation of this sense of discontinuity is the extent to which it shrouds the image on screen with

61. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

63. Kracauer’s delineation of the effects produced by this lack of continuity between the musical accompaniment and the images on screen echoes Adorno and Hanns Eisler’s analysis of the interesting effects which film music *could* generate if – “instead of limiting itself to conventional reinforcement of the action or mood” – it set “itself in opposition to what is being shown on the screen”. See Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler: *Composing for the Films*, London and Atlantic Highlands: The Athlone Press 1994, p. 26.

a veil of “indeterminacy” – a quality which, he argues, is ordinarily stamped out by the formativist aspirations of much narrative oriented cinema.⁶⁴

In contrast to the “utilitarian” structure of the formative/theatrical film, the film practice for which Kracauer argues would be organised around the inclusion of images which have “not yet [been] stripped of their multiple meanings”.⁶⁵ The director, he states, must “alienate” each shot “from any preconceived meaning” in order that each image may “exert its own independent impact” upon the spectator.⁶⁶ Anticipating Alexander Kluge’s analysis of the extent to which the indeterminacy of the image fuels the spectator’s imagination (the details of which will be discussed in Chapter 6), Kracauer claims that what is significant about the “indeterminacy” of images that have not been pressed into the service of narrative action is the extent to which they prompt the spectator to draw on his/her own imagination in an attempt to engage with the materials on screen.⁶⁷ Employing the concept in a manner reminiscent of Charles Baudelaire’s delineation of the imagination as a “faculty” which enables one to apprehend “the intimate and secret relations of things, the correspondences and analogies”⁶⁸, Kracauer claims that the indeterminacy of the image cultivates “moods, emotions, [and] runs of inarticulate thoughts” in the spectator that no longer revolve around the image on screen.⁶⁹

In keeping, however, with his analysis of the significance of the camera’s capacity to extend the spectator’s vision beyond the realm of

64. See also Kracauer’s undated notes on the formative aspirations of Hollywood cinema in “Über die lebensferne Tendenz des Hollywood Films”, Kracauer Nachlaß.

65. *Theory of Film*, p. 69.

66. See “Tentative Outline”, p. 87.

67. Upon the advice of Adorno, Kracauer wrote to Alexander Kluge on December 24, 1962, mentioning at the end of his letter that perhaps he had heard about his *Theory of Film* from Adorno. Kluge wrote back to Kracauer in early 1963 to thank him for the letter and to confirm that Adorno had indeed told him about the book. Unfortunately, however, Kluge does not mention anything in his very short letter about the contents of the book itself. Both letters are contained in the Kracauer Nachlaß.

68. Baudelaire: “Further Notes on Edgar Poe”, in: Baudelaire: *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, ed. by P.E. Charvet, London: Penguin Books 1992, p. 199.

69. *Theory of Film*, p. 68.

subjective intention, Kracauer argues that the “correspondences” evoked by the “indeterminacy” of the image are not consciously, but unconsciously generated. Pointing to Proust’s analysis of the experiences of the past in the present evoked by involuntary memory, Kracauer claims that the “loosely connected”, “indeterminate” images characteristic of realist film are “particularly fit to function as [...] ignition spark[s]” which “touch off” involuntary recollections in the viewer.⁷⁰

4.2 The Child’s Capacity for Perception and Imagination

What is interesting to note is the extent to which Kracauer – like Benjamin and Proust before him – foregrounds memories of childhood in his delineation of the significance of the experience of the past in the present evoked by involuntary memory. Although Kracauer does not provide examples of memories pertaining to his own childhood, he does quote extensively from the observations and reminiscences of Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Blaise Cendrars, both of whom argue that film is at its best when it aids the spectator in reviving memories of “childhood days which have sunk into his unconscious”⁷¹. Relating one such experience, Kracauer – quoting Cendrars – writes:

The screen showed a crowd, and in this crowd there was a lad with his cap under his arm: suddenly this cap which was like all other caps began, without moving, to assume intense life; you felt it was all set to jump, like a leopard! Why? I don’t know.⁷²

“Perhaps”, Kracauer writes,

the cap transformed itself into a leopard because the sight of it stirred involuntary memories in the narrator (as did the madeleine in Proust) – memories of the senses resuscitating inarticulate childhood days when the little cap under his arms was the carrier of tremendous emotions, which in a mysterious way involved the spotted beast of prey in his picture book.⁷³

70. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

71. Kracauer: quoting Hofmannsthal, in *ibid.*, p. 171. See Hugo von Hofmannsthal: “Der Ersatz für Träume”, *Neue Freie Presse*, March 27 (1921).

72. *Theory of Film*, p. 166. Kracauer is quoting from François and André Berge: “Interview de Blaise Cendrars sur le cinéma” in: *Cinéma* (Paris, 1939), pp. 138-142.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal takes this argument a step further, claiming not only that film has the capacity to revive childhood memories, but that – in doing so – it provides the spectator with a taste of that “fuller life” which he had dreamed of in his childhood, but which has been denied to him by society.⁷⁴ In an interesting connection which implicitly refutes the claims of “naïve realism” that have been directed against *Theory of Film*, Kracauer states that “[i]f Hofmannsthal is right”, then “the moviegoer again becomes a child in the sense that he magically rules the world by dint of dreams which overgrow stubborn reality”.⁷⁵ Although the relationship between cinema and childhood is not pursued explicitly in greater detail in *Theory of Film*, in “Dimanche: Ideen-Entwurf zu einem Kurzfilm” (an unpublished outline for a short film devised, but never made, by Kracauer) the child’s capacity to see and experience the world outside of the terms and assumptions which colour and shape the perceptual horizon of adults is described in some detail.⁷⁶ Although the film outlined by Kracauer in “Dimanche” does not follow the prescription for realist cinema outlined in *Theory of Film*, its exploration of the child’s capacity for perception and imagination is rendered significant when read in the light of Kracauer’s delineation of the rejuvenation in the capacity for perception and imagination cultivated by realist cinema.

The film envisaged by Kracauer is divided into two parts, both of which revolve around a Sunday afternoon outing undertaken by “Bébé” (a three or four year old boy) and his parents. In the first part of the film, the family’s journey (which begins and ends in their flat, but which includes – amongst other activities – a trip on a bus, and a ride on a merry-go-round, a visit to a café, and a stroll through a park) is shot entirely from the perspective of the child, whose capacity for imagina-

73. *Theory of Film*, p. 166.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

76. Kracauer: “Dimanche: Ideen-Entwurf zu einem Kurzfilm” (undated manuscript), Kracauer Nachlaß. A copy of the manuscript in French can also be found in the Kracauer Nachlaß. See “Dimanche: Exposé pour un court sujet”. Although the year in which Kracauer wrote this manuscript is not included on the document, the description “Anfang Mai” and “Paris [...] Madison Hotel” appear on the final page, indicating that it was written sometime during his stay at the Madison Hotel in Paris between 1933 and 1936. For an account of this period, see Belke and Renz: Siegfried Kracauer, 1889-1966, pp. 76-84.

tion transforms the outing into a “magnificent adventure”.⁷⁷ In a series of descriptions reminiscent of Benjamin’s analysis of the child’s mimetic capabilities, Kracauer describes how – under the gaze of Bébé – the space under the table at the café takes on the appearance of a “primeval forest”, while a ride on a merry-go-round is transformed into a marvelous journey through “the landscapes of [Bébé’s] coloured children’s books”.⁷⁸

In contrast to this presentation of events from Bébé’s perspective, Kracauer notes that the second half of the film would depict the family’s arrival home at their flat, and the recounting of the afternoon’s activities from the father’s perspective. “The joke”, he notes, “lies in the correction of the imaginings of the child”. The previous events are shown again from the perspective of the adults, and the occurrences that the child had experienced as wondrous are – through the eyes of the adults – transformed into banal activities and events.⁷⁹

Kracauer’s analysis of the child’s magical capacity to see and experience the world outside of the terms which govern and shape the perspective of adults is also manifested in a passage in the “Preface” to *Theory of Film*, in which an affinity is drawn between the child’s capacity for perception, and the revelatory capacities and possibilities of cinema. Recalling his first trip to see a film at the local moviehouse as a young boy, Kracauer claims that “[t]he impression it made upon [him] must have been intoxicating, for [he] there and then determined to commit [his] experience to writing”. “Whether [this project] ever materialized, I have forgotten. But I have not forgotten its long-winded title”⁸⁰: “Film as the Discoverer of the Marvels of Everyday Life” (“*Film als der Entdecker der Schönheiten des alltäglichen Lebens*”).⁸¹ “And I remember”, he writes, “as if it were today, the marvels themselves”:

77. “Dimanche: Ideen-Entwurf zu einem Kurzfilm”, p. 1.

78. *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

79. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

80. *Theory of Film*, p. Ii.

81. See Siegfried Kracauer: *Theorie des Films: Die Errettung der äußeren Wirklichkeit*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1985, p. 14, and *Theory of Film*, p. Ii. As revealed in Kracauer’s letter to his former translator Lucienne Astruc (dated March 14, 1962), Kracauer was so unhappy with the German translation of *Theory of Film* that he re-translated “almost every sentence” from the original English version himself. Kracauer Nachlaß.

What thrilled me so deeply was an ordinary suburban street, filled with lights and shadows which transfigured it. Several trees stood about, and there was in the foreground a puddle reflecting invisible house façades and a piece of the sky. Then a breeze moved the shadows, and the façades with the sky below began to waver. The trembling upper world in the dirty puddle – this image has never left me.⁸²

This passage – with its description of the image of an “ordinary suburban street” captured three times: first, by the objective eye of the camera; second, in the reflection of an indifferent puddle; and third, by the imaginative, curious gaze of the child – condenses in a small image much of what is essential to Kracauer’s conception of the promise of the alienated mode of perception cultivated by realist cinema. These “marvels” are significant for Kracauer not – as his critics have suggested – because they are faithful reflections of the state of the world “as it is”, but because they are the mark of a gaze which is alienated from those pre-formed ideas and expectations which shape and “delimit our horizon”.⁸³ In a similar vein to his description of the child’s capacity for perception and imagination in “Dimanche”, the broader significance of Kracauer’s analysis of the promise of realist cinema lies in the extent to which it can rejuvenate the way in which we both we perceive, and conceive of the possibilities and limitations of the world around us and, in doing so, fundamentally transform our conception of the possibilities of the future.

82. *Theory of Film*, p. ii. Kracauer’s description of this image is strongly reminiscent of any number of images which appear in Joris Ivens’ 1929 film *Regen*, which depicts – amongst other things – the reflection of buildings and trees in puddles and other wet surfaces following a rainstorm. Although Kracauer mentions this film in *Theory of Film*, he does not discuss it in any detail. See pp. 39-40, 181, 203, and 273. It is also interesting to note that the music for the film (“Fourteen Ways to Describe Rain – In honor of Arnold Schönberg’s seventieth birthday”) was composed by Hanns Eisler. The score is contained in *Composing for the Films*, pp. 158-165.

83. *Theory of Film*, p. 296.