

## Chapter 5:

### On the Task of a Realist

#### Historiography in Kracauer's History:

#### The Last Things Before the Last

Siegfried Kracauer's plans for a project on history can be traced back to early 1960, during the busy months in which he was completing the final draft of *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*.<sup>1</sup> In a letter to Leo Löwenthal (dated February 15, 1960) Kracauer states that – upon completion of the book – he plans to have a “creative break”, during which time he would like to “read a lot”, and write “a couple of essays on history”.<sup>2</sup> Upon return from a four month trip to Europe between July and October of the same year, Kracauer notes that, although he has not yet “brought anything to paper”, he “meditated a lot about history on the trip”. “I am very enthusiastic [*passioniert*]”, he writes, “about my attempt to make an incursion in this field. What may come out of it, I don't yet know; perhaps a series of interrelated [*zusammenhängender*] essays”.<sup>3</sup>

By December of 1960, Kracauer's plans for a series of essays on

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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. Letter to Löwenthal, 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. The letter has also been published in *In Steter Freundschaft, Leo Löwenthal – Siegfried Kracauer: Briefwechsel 1921-1966*, ed. by Peter-Erwin Jansen/Christian Schmidt, Sprunge: zu Klampen 2003, pp. 226-228. Hereafter referred to as *In Steter Freundschaft*.

3. Letter to Löwenthal, October 29, 1960, Kracauer Nachlaß. See also: *In Steter Freundschaft*, p. 231.

history had turned into preparations for a book-length project. In a letter to Lucienne Astruc, Kracauer states that he is “deeply steeped in work toward a new book, dealing with problems of history”<sup>4</sup> – the concerns of which are intimately bound with his writings on the significance of the photographic media.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, echoing his analysis – in *Theory of Film* – of the task of the realist photographer, one of the key characteristics which defines his conception of the task of a realist historiographical practice is “the degree to which a historian is able to efface his self in his contacts with the given data”.<sup>6</sup> As Kracauer notes to Löwenthal in a letter written during the early stages of the project, the “[h]istorian has traits of the photographer, and historical reality resembles camera-reality”.<sup>7</sup>

In Kracauer’s “Introduction” to *History: The Last Things Before the Last* (which was completed posthumously in 1969 by Kracauer’s friend and associate Paul Oskar Kristeller<sup>8</sup>), the significance of the relationship between Kracauer’s final book, and *Theory of Film*, is further confirmed. “[R]ecently”, Kracauer writes,

I suddenly discovered that my interest in history [...] actually grew out of the ideas I tried to implement in my *Theory of Film*. In turning to history, I just continued to think along the lines manifest in that book. And all the time I had not been aware of this but, rather, assumed that I was moving on new ground and thus escaping preoccupations which had kept me under their spell for too long a time. Once I had discovered that I actually became absorbed in history not because it

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4. Letter to Astruc, December 12, 1960, Kracauer Nachlaß. See also Kracauer’s letters to Löwenthal (March 18, 1961) and Astruc (March 14, 1962) for insights into the research undertaken by Kracauer in the early stages of the project. Kracauer Nachlaß.

5. See Kracauer’s letter to Löwenthal, February 10, 1961, Kracauer Nachlaß.

6. Siegfried Kracauer: *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, Princeton, Markus Wiener Publishers 1995, p. 213. The book will hereafter be referred to as *History*.

7. Letter to Löwenthal, February 10, 1961, Kracauer Nachlaß.

8. As Kristeller writes in his “Preface” to the book, chapters “one to four, seven, and the first half of chapter five” were pretty much completed by Kracauer prior to his death, while “the second half of chapter five” and “chapters six and eight” were finished by Kristeller, who drew closely on “written drafts or synopses that were quite readable but in need of careful editing”. Kristeller also added a foreword and an epilogue to the book. See “Preface” in *History*, p. vii.

was extraneous to my drawn-out previous concerns but because it enabled me to apply to a much wider field what I had thought before. I realized in a flash the many existing parallels between history and the photographic media, historical reality and camera-reality.<sup>9</sup>

As Kracauer goes on to argue in the book, the similarities between the concerns addressed in *History* and his writings on the photographic media are not, however, limited to comparisons with *Theory of Film*, but can be traced back considerably further to the articles he wrote for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in the 1920s.<sup>10</sup> “Lately”, Kracauer writes, “I came across my piece on ‘Photography’<sup>11</sup> and was completely amazed at noticing that I had compared historicism with photography already in this article of the ‘twenties”. “This discovery”, he claims, “made me feel happy for two reasons:”

it unexpectedly confirmed the legitimacy and inner necessity of my historical pursuits; and by the same token it justified, in my own eyes and after the event, the years I had spent on *Theory of Film*. This book of which I had always conceived as an aesthetics of the photographic media, not less and not more, now that I have penetrated the veil that envelops one’s most intimate endeavors, appears to me in its true light: as another attempt of mine to bring out the significance of areas whose claim to be acknowledged in their own right has not yet been re-

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9. *History*, pp. 3-4.

10. On February 15, 1962, Kracauer wrote to Erika Lorenz (a masters student of Theodor W. Adorno who was writing a thesis on Kracauer’s work entitled *Siegfried Kracauer als Soziologe*) asking her to inform him as to whether any ideas about history could be found in the essays that he wrote for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. In her reply to Kracauer’s letter (dated February 25, 1962), Lorenz lists 6 articles (all of which were published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* between 1923 and 1928): “Die Wissenschaftskrise” (“The Crisis of Science”), “Der verbotene Blick”, “Die Reise und der Tanz” (“Travel and Dance”), “Das Ornament der Masse” (“The Mass Ornament”), “Die Photographie” (“Photography”), and “Zu den Schriften Walter Benjamins” (“On the Writings of Walter Benjamin”). All of these essays (except for “Der verbotene Blick”) have been translated and published in English under the above listed titles in: *Siegfried Kracauer: The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. by Thomas Y. Levin, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press 1995. Both of the letters cited above are contained in the *Kracauer Nachlaß*.

11. See Kracauer: “Photography”, in: *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, pp. 47-63.

cognized. [...] So at long last all my main efforts, so incoherent on the surface, fall into line – they all have served, and continue to serve, a single purpose: the rehabilitation of objectives and modes of being which still lack a name and hence are overlooked or misjudged.<sup>12</sup>

However, while Kracauer's delineation of the alienated gaze of the realist historian does (as I will argue in this chapter) bear a number of important similarities to his analysis, in *Theory of Film*, of the rejuvenation in the capacity for perception precipitated by the realist photographer, the relationship between *History* and his 1927 essay on photography is more complicated than is suggested by the theoretically consistent image of his oeuvre outlined in the above passage. Indeed, as Inka Mülder-Bach has argued, although an understanding of the relationship between Kracauer's early and late writings is "crucial for an understanding of *History*", "[i]n order for his 'incoherent efforts' to 'fall into line'", Kracauer's writings would have to be viewed from a perspective that could "transform the discontinuities of his works into a surface expression of an underlying continuity".<sup>13</sup> Taking her lead from Kracauer's own analysis of the shortcomings of historicism (a mode of analysis which irons out the specificities of the past in its charting of a linear narrative driven by progress) Mülder-Bach argues that such a "perspective is not to be trusted". For, she claims, "when one is dealing with totalities, contours become blurred; the overall picture can be obtained only at the price of important specifics".<sup>14</sup>

However, while it is true to say that – in the some thirty-five years separating "Photography" and *History* – the emphasis of Kracauer's analysis of the relationship between photography and history did undergo a change of focus, it is less accurate to claim that this shift of focus "testifies to a fundamental change in [Kracauer's] theoretical position".<sup>15</sup> Indeed, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, Kracauer's analysis, in the final pages of "Photography", of the "confrontation [...] with nature"<sup>16</sup> provoked by photographic images actually serves as a precursor to the positive conception of perceptual alienation that stands at the heart of both *Theory of Film* and *History*.

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12. *History*, p. 4.

13. Inka Mülder-Bach: "History as Autobiography: The Last Things Before the Last", *New German Critique*, No. 54 (Fall, 1991), p. 140.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 142.

16. "Photography", p. 62.

## 5.1 Photography, History, and Memory

Kracauer's essay on photography revolves around a discussion of two photographs. The first image (which featured on the cover of an illustrated magazine) depicts a twenty-four year old "film diva" in front of the Hotel Excelsior on the Lido. A member of the dance-troupe "The Tiller Girls"<sup>17</sup>, the woman (who is sporting a hairstyle with bangs) is depicted holding her head in a seductive pose befitting the caption on the cover that reads "our demonic diva".<sup>18</sup> The second image (which is also "more than sixty years old") was taken in "the studio of a court photographer", and depicts a smiling twenty-four year old woman (who in the proceeding years became a grandmother) wearing a Zouave jacket and a dress with a cinched waist and a crinoline.<sup>19</sup>

The tension around which the essay is structured is borne out of the incongruity between the image of this twenty-four year old woman and the memories of the grandmother retained by her grandchildren. Although the photograph does, to all known accounts, accurately depict the now deceased grandmother as she appeared as a young woman, the image of this twenty-four year old speaks so little to the memories of her grandchildren that she appears to them as a mannequin – a mere sign or representative of her period. "This mannequin", Kracauer writes,

does not belong to our time; it could be standing with others of its kind in a museum, in a glass case labeled 'Traditional Costumes, 1864'. There the mannequins are displayed solely for the historical costumes, and the grandmother in the photograph, too, is an archaeological mannequin which serves to illustrate the costumes of the period. So that's how women dressed back then: chignons, cinched waists, crinolines, and Zouave jackets. The grandmother dissolves into fashionably old-fashioned details before the very eyes of the grandchildren.<sup>20</sup>

In what appears, in the first part of the essay, to be a reversal of the conception of the promise of photographic alienation elaborated in *Theory of Film*, Kracauer argues that what is troubling about the photograph of this young woman is not only the extent to which the camera's "indifference" to its subject has produced an image that is estranged from the

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17. For Kracauer's analysis of this troupe, see "The Mass Ornament", in: *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, pp. 75-86.

18. "Photography", p. 47.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

20. *Ibid.*

memories of her grandchildren but, more significantly, the degree to which this indifference reduces the contents of the image to mere spatio-temporal signs or markers of a certain period. In this regard, Kracauer argues, photography could be said to provide the “spatial continuum” which supports the “temporal continuum” established by historicism: “Were it the photograph alone that endowed [the] details [of the photograph] with duration, they would not at all outlast mere time; rather, time would create images for itself out of them”.<sup>21</sup> Thus, he argues that

from the nothingness of the grandmother, the gaze is thrown back onto the chignons. It is the fashion details that hold the gaze tight. Photography is bound to time in precisely the same way as *fashion*. [...] The tightly corseted dress in the photograph protrudes into our time like a mansion from earlier days that is destined for destruction because the city center has been moved to another part of town. [...] Even the landscape and all other concrete objects become costumes in an old photograph.<sup>22</sup>

The significance of this conception of photography for an understanding of Kracauer’s criticism of historicism hinges on the sharp distinction he draws between the radically different experiences of the past evoked by photography and memory. In the 1927 essay, Kracauer states that the alienated image of the past preserved by photography is inescapably bound with the time in which it came into existence. Such images, he claims, stand in stark contrast to memory images, which retain only those aspects of the past which have significance for the person who is remembering them. In a similar vein to Proust’s delineation of the incongruity between “the calendar of facts” and the impressions evoked by involuntary memory<sup>23</sup>, Kracauer argues that “[s]ince what is significant is not reducible to either merely spatial or merely temporal terms, memory images are at odds with photographic representation”. “From the latter’s perspective”, he writes, “memory images appear to be fragments – but only because photography does not encompass the meaning to which they refer and in relation to which they cease to be frag-

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21. *Ibid.*, p. 49

22. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

23. Marcel Proust: *In Search of Lost Time*, London: Vintage 1996, Vol. 4, p. 180.

ments. Similarly, from the perspective of memory, photography appears as a jumble that consists partly of garbage".<sup>24</sup>

Anticipating Benjamin's analysis of the negative effects associated with the rise of "information" as a means of communication<sup>25</sup> (the details of which will be discussed in Chapter 7), Kracauer argues that such "garbage" finds itself at home in the pages of illustrated newspapers. "The aim" of such papers, he claims, "is the complete reproduction of the world accessible to the photographic apparatus. They record the spatial impressions of people, conditions, and events from every possible perspective".<sup>26</sup> For Kracauer, the danger of the proliferation of such images lies not only in the extent to which the alienated gaze of the camera "effaces the contours of its [subject's] history" (sealing such images off from the contexts via which they could be rendered meaningful for the viewer), but also the extent to which they become "eternalized" (that is, *historicised*) as markers or signs of a particular period.<sup>27</sup>

In a passage which clearly influenced Benjamin's analysis of the decline in the capacity for experience precipitated by the proliferation of information<sup>28</sup>, Kracauer argues that such images do not aid, but rather "sweep [...] away the dams of memory".<sup>29</sup> "In the hands of the ruling society", he writes, "the invention of illustrated magazines is one of the most powerful means of organizing a strike against understanding". "Never before", he claims, "has a period known so little about itself".<sup>30</sup>

Up to this point, one can see (as Mülder-Bach has argued) that although Kracauer's understanding of photographic alienation – as a mode of vision which bypasses subjective perception and memory – remains largely unchanged across the years which separate his early and late writings, it is true to say that, in "Photography", the effects of this alienated gaze are described as largely negative. In the final pages of the essay, however, Kracauer's delineation of photographic alienation is re-framed within a context in which its effects are rendered significantly more positive – a shift that paves the way for the development, some

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24. "Photography", pp. 50-51.

25. Walter Benjamin: "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov", in: Benjamin: Illuminations, ed. by Hannah Arendt, London: Fontana Press 1992, pp. 83-107. Hereafter referred to as "The Storyteller".

26. "Photography", pp. 57-58.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

28. "The Storyteller", pp. 88-90.

29. "Photography", p. 58.

30. *Ibid.*

thirty years later, of the conception of perceptual alienation elaborated in both *Theory of Film* and *History*.

The context within which this change of focus manifests itself is in a discussion of the photographic archive – the significance of which (as elaborated in the introduction) lies in the extent to which images of diverse origin (of “all possible manifestations which present themselves in space”<sup>31</sup>) are “incorporated into [a] central archive in unusual combinations which distance them from human proximity”.<sup>32</sup> Employing concepts that also play a central role in both *Theory of Film* and *History*, he argues that this “distance from human proximity” is manifested both at the level of the camera’s alienated relationship to its subject, and in the mixed-up jumble of images itself – the meanings of which can no longer be determined by their relationship to the present. “Once the grandmother’s costume”, Kracauer writes,

has lost its relationship to the present, it will no longer be funny; it will be peculiar, like an ocean-dwelling octopus. One day the diva will lose her demonic quality and her bangs will go the same way as the chignons. This is how the elements crumble, since they are not held together. The photographic archive assembles in effigy the last elements of a nature alienated from meaning.<sup>33</sup>

If, in the first part of the essay, this alienation from meaning is (via a comparison with the impressions evoked by memory) described as largely negative, in the final pages of the essay, it is injected with a sense of promise. In a passage reminiscent of de Maistre’s delineation of the shake-up of the relationship between the past and the present precipitated by the damage sustained by the natural history museum, Kracauer argues that what is significant about the disorganised jumble of materials contained in the photographic archive is the extent to which it prompts a re-thinking of the possibilities of both the past and the future outside of the linear, evolutionary conception of history propagated by historicism. Elaborating on this point in more detail, he claims that, within this schema, it is “incumbent on consciousness to establish the *provisional status* of all given configurations, and perhaps even to awaken an inkling of the right order of the inventory of nature”.<sup>34</sup> In a passage in which he draws a connection between his own ideas and those of

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31. *Ibid.*, p. 60

32. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

Franz Kafka, Kracauer states, however, that “a liberated consciousness absolves itself of this responsibility by destroying natural reality and scrambling the fragments”.<sup>35</sup>

For Kracauer, it is in the space opened up by the “scrambling” of “natural reality” performed by the photographic archive that an emancipatory confrontation with the non-necessary relationship between the past and the present can manifest itself. As he states in “Photography”, to create the conditions for such a confrontation is the “go-for-broke game of the historical process”<sup>36</sup> – the political stakes of which he elaborated some thirty-five years later in his analysis of the task of a realist historiography in *History*.

## 5.2 The Task of a Realist Historiography

In keeping with his analysis, in *Theory of Film*, of the formative/realist split that characterises the history of both film and photography, Kracauer argues in *History* that the history of historiography can also be divided into two groups – one of which is characterised by formative traits, the other by realist tendencies. In a similar vein to his analysis of the “storytelling bias” of the theatrical film (the tightly organised composition of which resembles the form of traditional works of art<sup>37</sup>), Kracauer argues that the historians associated with what he variously describes as the “formativist”, “historicist”, and/or “narrative” camps are characterised by their attempts to construct an appearance of continuity out of a series of incommensurate and discontinuous events by “synthesizing” a select collection of past occurrences into “a succession of events which lead straight to the present”.<sup>38</sup> “The result”, Kracauer states, “is a more or less closed success story which, because of its necessary reliance on teleological considerations, not only spawns falsifying hindsight but further tightens the bonds between the elements of the narrative, thereby smoothing away all the existing rifts, losses, abortive starts, inconsistencies”<sup>39</sup>.

Citing the work of Benedetto Croce and R. G. Collingwood as

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35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid., p. 181.

38. *History*, pp. 183, and 170.

39. Ibid., p. 170.

examples<sup>40</sup>, Kracauer argues that what underlies the work of the formative historians is a tendency to construct history according to the concerns and assumptions of the present. Croce's "dictum", he writes, is that "only an interest in the life of the present can move one to investigate past fact", while Collingwood describes the historian as a "'son of his time' who 're-enacts' the past out of his immersion in present-day concerns".<sup>41</sup>

What troubles Kracauer about this "present interest" theory of the task of historiography is the extent to which the present is conceived of as the endpoint and goal of the past, and "historical truth" as a mere "variable of present interest".<sup>42</sup> Underpinning this conception of historiography is an understanding of history which conceives of the relationship between the past and the present as a continuous and linear process, within which each period or event is represented as another step in history's so-called march of progress toward the present. Citing Karl Marx's conception of historical materialism as an example, Kracauer argues that what is troubling about the conception of history as progress which stands at the heart of Marx's project is the extent to which history is imbued with the "kind of necessity" ordinarily associated with the "workings of nature".<sup>43</sup> To reiterate a point made earlier, for Kracauer, what is reactionary about this evolutionary understanding of history is not only the extent to which it is "bound up with the idea of chronological time as the matrix of a meaningful process"<sup>44</sup>, but the degree to which it precludes one's capacity to conceive of the possibilities of the future in terms which would challenge the historicist delineation of history as progress.

The alternative conception of the task of historiography outlined by Kracauer in *History* is built upon his analysis of the significance of photographic alienation elaborated in the final pages of "Photography" – the contours of which provided Kracauer with the basis for his delineation of both the realist photographer in *Theory of Film*, and the realist historian

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40. See, for example, Benedetto Croce: *History: Its Theory and Practice*, New York: Russell and Russell 1960, and R.G Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, New York: Galaxy Books 1956.

41. Kracauer (quoting Croce and Collingwood) in *History*, p. 63.

42. *History*, p. 64. For a more detailed account of Kracauer's analysis of the "present interest" theory of the task of historiography, see Chapter 3: "Present Interest" in: *History*, pp. 62-79.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

in *History*. According to Kracauer, the task of the latter is to explore the past in the same manner in which the realist photographer explores and penetrates physical reality. In stark contrast to the formative aspirations of the historicists (who seek to shape the past in the image of their own conception and understanding of the period), Kracauer argues that what is crucial to his own conception of the charge of a realist historiography is the extent to which the realist historian is able to alienate himself from his preformed ideas and expectations while engaging with the materials in question. Like the realist filmmaker (whose portrayal of physical reality is not governed by a preoccupation with form) Kracauer argues that it is only by “bracketing” himself off from both the “macro assumptions” of the historicists and the expectations which had previously shaped his understanding of a certain period, that historical data will be able to speak to the realist historian anew on its own terms.

Although Kracauer frequently refers to Proust’s novel – and more specifically, to Marcel’s alienated encounter with his grandmother – in his analysis of the significant role that this state of “self-transcendence” occupies in his analysis of the task of a realist historiography, it is Kracauer’s delineation of the “extraterritorial” state of the exile which serves as the “model” for his analysis of the alienated approach of the realist historian.<sup>45</sup> As Karsten Witte has pointed out<sup>46</sup>, Kracauer’s employment of the term “extraterritorial” first emerged in the chapter “The Boulevards, Home of the Homeless” in *Orpheus in Paris: Offenbach and the Paris of his Time* (a book which Kracauer wrote between 1934 and 1936 while living under very difficult conditions in exile in France). In a passage in this chapter which anticipates his use of the term in *History* many years later, Kracauer describes the life spent by dandies and exiles in the Parisian boulevards of the 1840s as “extraterritorial” (“*exterritorial*”), owing to the “attitude of aloofness” which they maintained in relation to the existing order.<sup>47</sup>

More than twenty years later, the relationship between exile and “extraterritoriality” emerges again, in *History*, in Kracauer’s analysis of

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45. Gertrud Koch: “‘Not yet accepted anywhere’: Exile, Memory, and Image in Kracauer’s Conception of History”, *New German Critique*, No. 54 (Fall, 1991), p. 105.

46. Karsten Witte: “Siegfried Kracauer im Exil”, *Exilforschung: Ein Internationales Jahrbuch*, Band 5, München: edition text + kritik 1987, p. 138.

47. Siegfried Kracauer: *Orpheus in Paris: Offenbach and the Paris of his Time*, New York: Vienna House 1972, p. 68, and Kracauer, *Jacques Offenbach und das Paris seiner Zeit*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1994, pp. 74-75.

the transformation of one's perceptual and experiential relationship to the world provoked by the experience of exile. Once the exile, Kracauer writes,

settles elsewhere, all those loyalties, expectations, and aspirations that comprise so large a part of his being are automatically cut off from their roots. His life history is disrupted, his 'natural' self relegated to the background of his mind. To be sure, his inevitable efforts to meet the challenges of an alien environment will affect his outlook, his whole mental make-up. But since the self he was continues to smolder beneath the person he is about to become, his identity is bound to be in a state of flux; and the odds are that he will never fully belong to the community to which he now in a way belongs. (Nor will its members readily think of him as one of theirs.) In fact, he has ceased to 'belong'. Where then does he live? In the near-vacuum of extra-territoriality, the very no-man's land which Marcel entered when he first caught sight of his grandmother. The exile's true mode of existence is that of a stranger.<sup>48</sup>

Like Benjamin, Kracauer and his wife Lili experienced firsthand the effects of exile. Within days of the Reichstag fire of February 27, 1933, the Kracaues fled Berlin to France, where they lived in Paris, and later Marseilles, between 1933 and 1941. As revealed in letters written by Kracauer during this period<sup>49</sup>, the years spent in France (during which time he was interned for a period of almost two months in camps outside of Paris<sup>50</sup>) were extremely difficult, to say the least. However, in April of 1941 – following a period of nine months spent in “fear and misery” in Marseilles<sup>51</sup> – Siegfried and Lili Kracauer (with the help of

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48. History, pp. 83-84.

49. See, for example, Kracauer's letter to Walter Benjamin (dated February 24, 1935) in: Walter Benjamin: Briefe an Siegfried Kracauer (Mit vier Briefen von Siegfried Kracauer an Walter Benjamin), ed. by Rolf Tiedemann/Henri Lonitz, Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft 1987, pp. 82-85.

50. Siegfried Kracauer, 1889-1966: Marbacher Magazin, No. 47, ed. by Ingrid Belke/Irina Renz, Marbach am Neckar: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 1989, p. 95.

51. Letter to Adorno of February 12, 1949, Kracauer Nachlaß. For an account of the atmosphere that characterised Marseilles at the time of Kracauer's (and Benjamin's) stay there, see Klaus Michael: “Vor dem Café. Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer in Marseille”, in: Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her: Texte zu Walter Benjamin, ed. by Michael Opitz/Erdmut Wizisla, Leipzig: Reclam 1992, pp. 203-204, and 214-215.

Leo Löwenthal and Meyer Schapiro<sup>52</sup>) emigrated to the United States of America, where they settled in New York until their respective deaths in 1966 and 1972.<sup>53</sup>

Despite the many difficulties posed by exile, Kracauer's own experience of "extraterritoriality" clearly had a considerable impact on the development of his conception of an alienated mode of perception through which one's perspective of the world could be fundamentally altered.<sup>54</sup> As Mülder-Bach has pointed out, far from conceiving of this mode of estrangement in negative terms, Kracauer's own experience of extraterritoriality was viewed as a form of liberation: "[A] liberation from the effects of origin and native language, from the ties to a cultural tradition and a social system – and, above all, from the dates of one's own time, the 'labels of chronology'"<sup>55</sup>; the latter of which Kracauer sought to actively maintain by his adamant refusal to reveal his age to his publishers and readers.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, as Kracauer makes clear in a letter to

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**52.** For an account of the difficulties faced by Löwenthal and Schapiro in seeking to secure the Kracaues' emigration to the United States of America, see Leo Löwenthal: "As I Remember Friedel", *New German Critique*, No. 54 (Fall, 1991), pp. 11-12.

**53.** For a detailed account of the periods spent in exile in France and the United States, see "Ins Unpolitische abgeglitten? – Pariser Exil: 1933-1940", and "Im Niemandsland der Exterritorialität – Amerika: 1941-1966" in: Momme Brodersen: Siegfried Kracauer, Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch 2001, pp. 98-119 and 120-137 respectively.

**54.** Adorno has argued that Kracauer's own conception of himself as an "outsider" did not stem solely from his experience of exile, but was also the product of an unhappy childhood during which he was a victim of anti-Semitism. "Suffice it to say", Adorno writes, "that Kracauer told the story of carrying, in a pitiful parody of the little red book in which the teachers recorded their marks, a similar book in which he graded his fellow students on their behaviour toward him". Theodor W. Adorno: "The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer", *New German Critique*, No. 54 (Fall, 1991), p. 161. For an account of some of the difficulties which Kracauer faced as a child, see Martin Jay's comprehensive analysis of Kracauer's "extraterritoriality" in "The Extraterritorial Life of Siegfried Kracauer", in: Jay: *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America*, New York: Columbia University Press 1986, pp. 153-154.

**55.** Inka Mülder-Bach: "History as Autobiography: The Last Things Before the Last", p. 154.

**56.** See, for example, Kracauer's letter to Wolfgang Weyrauch (dated June 4, 1962). Kracauer Nachlaß.

Adorno (written on November 8, 1963), this refusal was driven not by a desire “to appear young or younger” to his readers, but by the “fear of being snatched away from chronological anonymity by the fixation of the date, and the unavoidable connotations of such a fixation”<sup>57</sup> – the overcoming of which is a central tenant of his analysis of the “extraterritorial” state of the realist historian.

Like the exile (who, in confronting an “alien environment”, finds himself “cut off” from the expectations and assumptions which had previously “comprise[d] so large a part of his being”<sup>58</sup>) Kracauer argues, in *History*, that “[i]t is only in this state of self-effacement, or homelessness that the historian can [effectively] commune with the material of his concern”<sup>59</sup>. “A stranger to the world evoked by [his] sources”, he claims that the historian is “faced with the task – the exile’s task – of penetrating its outward appearances, so that he may learn to understand that world from within”.<sup>60</sup> In contrast to the practices of the formativist camp, he argues that the manner in which this is achieved is not via the “outward projection[s]” of the historian, but rather through a process within which he is transformed into a “divining rod” or “receiving instrument”.<sup>61</sup>

In a passage in keeping with Benjamin’s criticism of the sovereign, contemplative gaze of the art critic, Kracauer states that the “most promising way of acquiring such knowledge is presumably for [the historian] to heed Schopenhauer’s advice to the art student”:

Anybody looking at a picture, Schopenhauer claims, should behave as if he were in the presence of a prince and respectfully wait for what the picture may or may not wish to tell him; for were he to talk first he would only be listening to himself. Waiting in this sense amounts to a sort of active passivity on the historian’s part. He must venture on the diverse routes suggested to him by his intercourse with the evidence, let himself drift along, and take in, with all his senses strained, the various messages that happen to reach him.<sup>62</sup>

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57. Kracauer Nachlaß. See also Kracauer’s letters to Adorno (dated October 25, and October 31, 1963) in which he discusses this “idiosyncrasy” in some detail.

58. *History*, p. 83.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

60. *Ibid.* See also Kracauer’s analysis of those “great historians who owe much of their greatness to the fact that they were expatriates”. *Ibid.*

61. See *ibid.*, pp. 102-103, and 85.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

This state of “active passivity” (which Kracauer argues is “a necessary phase of the historian’s work”<sup>63</sup>) bears a number of similarities to his analysis in *Theory of Film* of the alienated, “extraterritorial” state cultivated by realist cinema. Like the viewer of realist film, Kracauer argues that the realist historian’s perceptual and cognitive relationship to his material is characterised by a state of “productive absentmindedness”.<sup>64</sup> The historian, he writes, “opens himself up to the suggestions of his sources” which “ferment in his mind” and, in doing so, precipitate “a broadening of its scope”<sup>65</sup>.

Indeed, in a similar vein to his delineation of the role that realist film can play in triggering involuntary associations and recollections in the viewer, Kracauer argues that the state of self-effacement characteristic of the realist historian’s practice prompts him to engage imaginatively with the material of his concern – a mode of engagement which sparks thoughts and associations pertaining to both his specific field of inquiry, as well as connections that are more closely related to his own memories and experiences. Circumscribing this mode of engagement, Kracauer (quoting Isaiah Berlin) argues that the connections experienced by the historian in this context “resemble flashes illuminating the night”. “This is why”, he writes, “their emergence in the historian’s mind has been termed a ‘historical sensation’ and said to ‘communicate a shock to the entire system [...] the shock [...] of recognition’”.<sup>66</sup> In a similar vein to Benjamin’s analysis of the conditions under which a radical historical consciousness could manifest itself, Kracauer argues that this “shock to the [...] system” is borne out of the perception of a moment in which the historicist’s linear organisation of the past is burst asunder – laying bare not only the “indeterminacy” of historical events,

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63. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

65. *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

66. *History*, p. 101. See, for example, Benjamin’s account of this experience of time in “Convolute N” of *The Arcades Project*: “In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. (This point of explosion, and nothing else, is the death of the *intentio*, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth.) It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation.” [N3,1], p. 463. See also Kracauer’s letter to Rolf Tiedemann (dated February 21, 1966) in which he claims that key aspects of Benjamin’s thoughts on history are closely related to his own. Kracauer Nachlaß.

but the extent to which “the idea of a progress of humanity is untenable”.<sup>67</sup> “The upshot”, Kracauer states, “is that the period [with which the historian is concerned] [...] disintegrates before [his] eyes. From a meaningful spatiotemporal unit it turns into a kind of meeting place for chance encounters”<sup>68</sup> where the possibilities of both the past and the future can be renegotiated and re-explored.

Careful, however, to counteract any criticism of the degree to which the historian’s imaginative engagement with his materials could be said to reinstate the highly subjective mode of engagement with the past associated with the formativist historians, Kracauer argues that “subjectivity” in this context “is anything but a limiting factor”.<sup>69</sup> As he goes on to explain, this is because the “dynamization” of the historian’s character provoked by such an encounter in effect renders his ideas “independent of [their] location in time”.<sup>70</sup> In a similar vein to his delineation of the “extraterritorial” state of the exile (whose identity is characterised by a “state of flux”<sup>71</sup>) Kracauer argues that the connections and associations experienced by the historian in this context “invalidate [...] the commonplace assumption that he is the son of his time”. “Actually”, Kracauer writes, “he is the son of at least two times – his own and the time he is investigating. His mind is in a measure unlocalizable; it perambulates without a fixed abode”.<sup>72</sup>

Thus, in contrast to the tightly organised, linear conception of history outlined by the formativist historians (in which history is constructed according to the concerns and assumptions of the present) Kracauer argues that history “is the realm of contingencies, of new beginnings”, and that it is the realist historian’s task to bring to light “those possibilities which [the formativist historians] did not see fit to explore”.<sup>73</sup> If, as Kracauer himself writes, the concerns which he elaborated in *History* actually “grew out of the ideas [he] tried to implement in *Theory of Film*”<sup>74</sup>, then it is because his delineation of the promise of the medium rests not, as his critics have suggested, on film’s capacity to affirm the state of the world “as it is”, but rather on the extent to which realist film

67. *History*, p. 150.

68. *Ibid.*

69. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

70. *Ibid.*

71. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

73. *Ibid.*, pp. 31 and 6 respectively.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

can – in “stir[ring] up the elements of nature”<sup>75</sup> – play a part in re-animating our capacity to conceive of the possibilities of both the past and the future in different terms.

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75. “Photography”, p. 62.

