

Past(s) & Prologue(s): Berlin Dialogues

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Siegfried Kracauer was not the most reflexive of cultural on-lookers, although he did have a remarkable eye for the vitality of city life, especially its 'surface' texture and feel. His work ranges across popular culture, historiography, photography and film studies but it is his work on city life, and Weimar Berlin in particular, that captures the juxtaposition of feelings and the (often) tragic ironies of modern metropolitan existence. As a student of Georg Simmel, Kracauer was able to combine his understanding of the meaning of urban life with a sense of the cross-cutting and often unsettling nature of co-existing lives within city spaces. In this paper, this understanding of cultural space is explored through Kracauer's treatment of the 'surface' flux of daily life (as exemplified in his Weimar essays) and his sense of montage (drawn from his film and photography studies) in which people's lives may randomly touch yet remain unaware of the other.

The trope of 'surface' is not a particularly easy one to work with, given its obvious connotations of a smooth, flat, depthless plane. Its fixed meaning may serve to distract us from what it means to live on the face of reality; to be in the midst of the jumble of people's lives as they go about their business, often unaware of or quite oblivious to the fluidity and connections that make up what we take to be city life in all its unfathomable plenitude. Much of Kracauer's efforts are given over to deciphering this elusive subject matter. Inka Mulder Bach (1991, 1998), Miriam Hansen (1991), Thomas Levin (1995), among others, have drawn attention to this characteristic of Kracauer's approach and pointed to the analogous qualities of camerawork and film described by him which also attempt to reveal something of the unstaged and unscripted nature of everyday life by framing its uncontrived movement.

In Kracauer's final text, *History: The Last Things Before the Last* (1969), he drew explicit attention to the analogous procedures of historiography and the photographic media, stressing the importance of the on-looker to immerse ones self in the frame of meaning, as he did himself when attempting to

decode the spatial hieroglyphics of Berlin in the 1920s and early 1930s. A glance at the cultural spaces of Berlin explored by Kracauer reveals their inconspicuous nature – streetlife, dances, lobbies, arcades, repair shops, employment exchanges, and the like – as well as their significance for the city's leap towards modernity. The period itself was marked by contradictory expectations and aspirations. Weimar Berlin, as the vanguard of modernity, to use David Frisby's description, expressed these through the juxtaposed worlds that touched, co-existed and often smothered one another, as much through their built form as through their social proximity and obliviousness.

Both Weimar Berlin and present day Berlin were and are cities in the process of 'becoming', attempting to negotiate the past in a period of uncertainty and flux (see Cochrane and Jonas, 1999). In what follows, the different histories which make up contemporary Berlin are approached in ways reminiscent of Kracauer's mode of representation, where the traces of different surface meaning, what is revealed and what is not, are teased out. Here, though, the focus is less on the phenomenology of surfaces and more on the montage of experiences which comprise them.

First, however, we need to gain a better sense of Kracauer's style and mode of understanding, as well as something of the substance of his observations on Weimar life.

FROM THE NEWEST GERMANY . . .

Berlin of the 1920s was a city of change and sharp contrasts. The staggering growth of the city which almost doubled in size over the decade, the influx of 'outsiders' and immigrants, and the vast scale of construction described by Alexander Richie (1999), the new roads, factories, offices, hospitals, theatres, galleries, opera houses and the like, gave Berlin its modern 'vanguard' status. The air of progress and the celebration of the

new also witnessed a new class of worker, many of whom were women, taking their place.

Kracauer, in true journalistic fashion, was attracted by the emergence of this new brand of worker and especially by its role in shaping mass cultural pastimes and practices. As with many other of his observations in this period, his commentaries were serialized in the daily newspaper, *Die Frankfurter Zeitung* (of which he was both journalist and editor before being fired for his left wing views) and published in book form in 1930 under the title *Die Angestellten* (The Salaried Masses, 1998). A mix of reportage, anecdote, dramatic observation, selective conversations, documentation and judgement, the book wears its opinions unreflexively, as with much of Kracauer's ethnographic writing. Subtitled, 'From the newest Germany', the book attempts to convey what it means to be a member of the new service class, the experience of vulnerability and the general feelings of resignation in the face of sweeping economic change.

Rather than simply expressive of cultural life at one moment in time, his commentaries contextualize the social mood within the broader sweeps of history. Perhaps more than anywhere, this combination of cultural detail and attention to the fullness of change is present in the collection of his essays published as *The Mass Ornament* (1995 [1963]). Many of the essays in the collection (including 'The Mass Ornament' essay itself) prefigure Kracauer's awareness of the centrality of the new service workers to the formation of mass cultural forms, but with new styles of consumption, fashion, film and leisure jolting 1920s Berlin, he was not slow in both describing and judging the new mood. Whereas some quickly embraced this world of mass entertainment as a welcome form of mood, and a valued form of distraction, Kracauer was to continually reassess its cultural worth and significance over the decade.

ORNAMENT WITHOUT FORM

As Hansen (1991) and others have argued, Kracauer's initial pessimistic evaluation of the direction of modern cultural life, as essentially empty and without meaning, was reappraised around the middle of the 1920s. The tension in his work between, on the one hand, the vitalism of everyday life largely inherited from Simmel and, on the other, an almost Weberian belief in the momentous logic of rationality and abstraction, coloured his early writings to the extent that, as Frisby (1986) has shown, he demonstrated a clear disaffection with the trappings of modernity. In many of the later essays collected in *The Mass Ornament*, however, this tension is acknowledged rather than resolved one-sidedly, and explored for the possibilities that it held for transcending the modern condition.

Rather than reject the consumerist 'follies' of modernism, orchestrated as they were along rational lines, as needless distraction, the phenomenon of distraction itself was subjected

to scrutiny by Kracauer. In his Weimar essays, 'Those who wait', 'The Mass Ornament', 'Cult of Distractions' and 'The Little Shop Girls go to the Cinema', he reworks the themes of cultural stagnation and loss of meaning to present a more ambivalent attitude to the spectacles of modern mass culture. With pointed a reference to the products of 'American distraction factories' (such as the Tiller Girls, a high drilled dance unit analogous in Kracauer's mind to the formless abstraction of Taylorist production), in particular, via mass cinema, theatre and dance, he attempted to show how this theme of distraction had become a *necessary* reference point to understand the modern condition, and not some whimsical tangent or secondary symptom (see Giles, 1999).

"Critics chide Berliners for being *addicted to distraction*, but this is a petit bourgeois reproach. Certainly, the addiction to distraction is greater in Berlin than in the provinces, but the tension to which the working masses are subjected is also greater and more tangible; it is an essentially formal tension, which fills their day fully without making it fulfilling. Such 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." (1995, 326)

Berliners, in this reading, seek refuge from the rationalization of their working lives in the equally formless spheres of consumption, which allow them simply to be. The role of film as escapism, for example, also provides a means of seeing themselves as they would like to be. This is not part of life's epiphenomena; on the contrary the dreams, desires and wishes that cinema articulates are part of its very constitution. Commenting on the lofty ideals of certain art forms which have lost touch with the needs of ordinary lives, Kracauer observes that

"In a profound sense, Berlin audiences act truthfully when they increasingly shun these art events (which, for good reason, remain caught in mere pretense), preferring instead the surface glamor 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. Were this reality to remain hidden from the viewers, they could neither attack nor change it; its disclosure in distraction is therefore of *moral* significance." (1995, 326)

Urban life, in this sense, for Kracauer, is lived on the surface, in all its fragmented, insignificant and often seemingly 'unreal' qualities. It may still hold for him a sense of disenchantment, but there was only one plane on which the thoughts and dreams of Weimar Berlin's everyday life were expressed: on the city's jumbled surfaces.

THE PLAY OF SURFACES

The shift in Kracauer's evaluation of surface expressions from one characterized by a lack of meaning to one of teeming substance, much of which resides in the "superficial" topography of everyday urban life, also struck a chord with another of his preoccupations: namely, that of film camerawork and photography. Reference was made earlier to the ability of the camera to represent the unstaged and unscripted character of everyday life, which of course is merely another way of describing the surface manifestations of culture in play. A first inkling of this is to be found in his 'Photography' essay, but it is in his *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960), that the close 'affinities' between film's representational practices and the flow of everyday culture are drawn.

Kracauer's *Theory of Film*, with its provocative subtitle, met with a largely hostile reception among its American audience, primarily as Martin Jay (1986) observed because it championed a kind of documentary realism that was unfashionable at the time. In vogue, by way of contrast, was the notion of cinema as an art form, concerned with stylizing the world through dramatic effect or techniques of artifice. Indeed, the message that photography and film had certain 'affinities' with reality as such – that the medium was ideally suited to convey chance configurations, random events, partial understandings and amorphous developments – was one that many people did not want to hear or even could hear.

In truth, the message, although ostensibly straightforward, only really makes sense in the context of Kracauer's journalistic essays that attempt similarly to seek a form of redemption by foregrounding surface connections, fluidity and the haphazard character of daily life. In much the same way that the sociological 'reported' may work with conversations, interviews and documentary evidence to reveal something of the rich texture of cultural life in 'close up', so the photographer may work with film to bring to life aspects of the everyday that we habitually overlook or fail to see simply because of their 'obviousness'. In *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, Kracauer unpacks the qualities involved:

"The photographer's approach may be said to be 'photographic' is his formative aspirations support rather than oppose his realistic intentions. This implies that he resembles not so much the expressive artist as the imaginative reader bent on studying and deciphering an elusive text. His 'intensity of vision' should be rooted in a 'real respect for the thing in front of him'. Owing to the camera's revealing power, he has also traits of an explorer who, filled with curiosity, roams yet unconquered spaces. The genuine photographer summons up his being not to discharge it in autonomous creations but to dissolve it into the substances of the real-life phenomena before his lens, so that they are both left intact and made transparent. If

photography is an art, it is an art with a difference: unlike the traditional arts, it takes pride in not completely consuming its raw material. (1969, 55)"

If Kracauer places too much faith in the ability of photographers to realize this quest, photography in this view nonetheless holds a certain potential for capturing the fullness of the world in indeterminate flow. In common with the attentive cultural ethnographer, the essential task of the mindful film maker is to decipher the play of surfaces: to grasp the jumble of people's lives, the odd juxtapositions of feeling and partial reckonings. As such, the end product of the two media are principally the same, in that, 'they help us to think *through* things, not above them' (1969, 192, emphasis in the original).

In attempting to capture the vitalism of people, crowds, artifacts and the like on the surface, the ethnographer and the film maker may also share a similar technique: that of *montage*. Mulder Bach, in her introduction to *The Salaried Masses* (1998), draws explicit attention to this resemblance in style and others have been quick to acknowledge the parallel.

It is important to recognize, however, that whatever common ground there may be in methodological style, Kracauer held definite views on montage and what it should represent as a technique. He had little time for what he saw as contrived sequences of film, overlays which failed to convey any intrinsic meaning or juxtapositions which fail to connect. This concern about misplaced images and expressions is one that recurs throughout his work, from his journalistic writings through to his studies of film and history. At root, it is a concern to avoid artifice and to recognize that even a single 'frame' is in many respects already a montage: for what it conveys, for what it leaves out and for what it smothers.

In that sense, anything that 'photographs life', to borrow Mulder Bach's phrase, by deciphering the incongruities of life, and revealing what is lost or not seen 'because it is within everybody's reach' may claim to be an urban montage. Even, that is, Berlin today.

. . . TO THE NEWEST BERLIN

Like Berlin in the 1920s, Contemporary Berlin is once again at the sharp end of modernity, intoxicated with the new, unsure of how to negotiate the past, and waiting to see what the future holds in store. In many ways, the new national capital is overdressed with symbolic meaning, from the distracting glass and steel towers at Potsdamer Platz and the branded consumer spaces along the length of Friedrich Strasse to Foster's glass-domed gesture to democracy, the Reichstag, as well as the many statements to a Prussian past echoed in the architectural makeover of prominent buildings. Away from this literal 'forest of symbols', the city is dotted with odd juxtapositions and

incongruous settings, especially in the former East where the drabness of old GDR dwellings co-exist with gentrified apartment blocks, where elusive open-air markets and contingent, informal and sometimes illegitimate spaces trade alongside global capital.

The Berlin of today has a history that is decipherable, but a present whose many surfaces do not so much resemble a mosaic (as Kracauer was fond of describing the urban experience), as a site of difference, crossings, haphazard connections and absences. Adopting Kracauer's (later) ambivalent attitude to the tension between the vitalism of urban life and its rationalistic side, it is possible to uncover these aspects in the current Berlin condition.

THOSE WHO WAIT

In his essay of the same title, written in 1922, Kracauer muses on what it is 'to wait' when faced with various possible routes to a more fulfilled future. Hansen (1991) identifies the essay as a turning point for Kracauer, from his earlier cultural pessimism to a more open understanding that people find meaning and security in various ways, including through pursuing a state of distraction from their tiresome existence. Present day Berlin shares much with this phenomenon of waiting, with parts of the city acting as a symbol of something yet to come. Perhaps nowhere more than at the modern development of Potsdamer Platz led by Sony and Daimler Chrysler and the elite fashion spaces of Friedrichstrasse is that sense of becoming, or rather waiting for the city to become something captured.

The Debis/Sony complex at Potsdamer Platz, a mix of high-rise office buildings, shopping and leisure facilities, is a conscious attempt to highlight a global future for Berlin. Built on the site of what in the late nineteenth century had been one of the busiest thoroughfares at the heart of Berlin, the development itself is designed as a distraction. It is a distraction from a more provincial Prussian past, but of equal significance is the fact that the Sony project is designed as a global distraction outlet rather than a Berlin factory – producing either a Germanic cultural product or a Germanic manufactured product. Effectively the space has been 'branded' by Sony as one of cultural consumption; as a vehicle for consuming its archive of films, music and entertainment software.

Roam around the complex and it is not hard to bring Kracauer's observations about ornamentation to mind. Many of the surface-level expressions parallel those of 'The Mass Ornament' and 'Cult of Distraction' essays: the decidedly rational organization of the cultural experience, its uniform nature, its rootedness in capitalist calculation *and yet* its indulgence in pure externality, fragmented sense impressions and dream-like qualities. As a self-styled space of 'edutainment', it represents a contemporary form of escapism which

articulates a modern sense of distraction: one that to Kracauer's eye may be empty of meaning but no less fulfilling because of that.

In contrast, the new facades of Friedrich Strasse are only too reminiscent of what went before, although this time round the street is more an 'empty showcase' than a bustling retail space. Certain memories are preserved, the gesture towards the world of the passerby and the arcade, whilst others are served by the construction of an elite shopping experience for those who have yet to come. The glamour of the street was erased under the grayness of the GDR regime, but its restoration is still waiting for the European city to arrive.

BERLIN JUMBLE

Despite the vast scale of construction across the city, there is much that is not part of 'the newest Berlin'. Rending the city 'from above', through its high profile construction sites smothers much of what is close by simply because it is within reach. Take the example of Treptow in the former East Berlin, close to the infamous Soviet war memorial, where the neighbourhoods have long fallen into a state of disrepair relieved only by the colourful improvements that stand out against the remorseless gray architecture (see Howe, 1998, for a vivid description of such reminders). Now, the location is taking on a new status as the site of a massive development for the headquarters of Allianz, one of the world's largest insurance companies. Situated next to the river Spree, Treptowers boasts the tallest office building in the city, a veritable icon to the west's penetration of the east's emerging markets.

Yet in the midst of such a landscape, reminders of a different sort of trade make up this chance configuration. The haphazard commerce of street trading, open air markets and a multitude of stalls crammed into old industrial warehouses continue to form part of the routine distribution network, prolonging the habit of 'getting by' that flourished in the interstices of the now defunct socialist regime (see Sik and Wallace, 1999). Alongside the necessities of shoes, clothing, and other consumption requirements, objects from the east and the west, the past and the present are jumbled up in the overall display. Cartwheels from a rural tradition, old engineering tools from an outmoded manufacturing era, 1950s plastic artifacts from a consumer rich west, kitsch and memorabilia of all kinds which now celebrate the 'peculiarities' of the old regime, collated GDR newspapers, and postcards, thousands of them, which act as visual mementos of a time that seems long past, are all on sale alongside one another.

Out of the hubbub of the trading, to borrow Kracauer's phrasing, rise the different ethnicities involved, side by side trading in whatever the market has in mind. The traders too are waiting, but unlike their global commercial counterparts at

Allianz, Sony and Debis, they are filling empty time. There is nothing marginal about such amorphous spaces, sites, activities and unendorsed developments. They are the contemporary and wholly active version of the as yet 'unconquered' spaces that Kracauer spent much of his time deciphering in 1920s Berlin.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult in such a short piece to convey Kracauer's multivalent sense of cultural understanding. In taking the figure of the montage and the trope of the surface, it is nonetheless possible to point to the representational ambitions that he held. The affinities between film and unstaged reality were deeply held by him, even if many around him remained skeptical. What it is possible to draw from his work, however, is the role of the onlooker as one who absorbs ones self in the frame of meaning in order to tease out what constitutes the many overlapping surfaces of daily life in a place like modern-day Berlin. What is perhaps even more important, is that this process of absorption allows one to acknowledge the reality that a majority of individuals and institutions remain unaware and oblivious to the other's unscripted and decidedly ordinary existence.

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