

Key Contemporary Thinkers



siegfried

KRACAUER



graeme gillock

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Siegfried Kracauer

Our Companion in Misfortune

Graeme Gilloch

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For Peter

There are a lot of people these days who, although unaware of each other, are nevertheless linked by a common fate. ... [T]hey are overcome by a profound sadness which arises from the recognition of their confinement in a particular spiritual/intellectual *[geistige]* situation, a sadness that ultimately overruns all layers of their being. It is this metaphysical suffering from the lack of a higher meaning in the world, a suffering due to an existence in an empty space, which makes these people companions in misfortune.

Siegfried Kracauer, 'Those Who Wait' (1922), in *The Mass Ornament*

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Our Companion Introduced: An Intellectual Schwejk

1 The Path to Be Followed

I imagine the critical theorist Siegfried Kracauer standing at a crossroads, the kind of junction envisaged by the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre in his study *Everyday Life in the Modern World* when he reflects:

We have now reached a junction, a kind of crossroads, and we could do worse than to examine the lie of the land before we proceed any further. Behind us, as we stand at their point of intersection, are the way of philosophy and the road of everyday life. They are divided by a mountain range, but the path of philosophy keeps to the heights, thus overlooking that of everyday life; ahead the track winds, barely visible, through thickets, thorn bushes and swamps. (2000: 17)

There would be those among us who, fearful of the meandering path ahead and what might be lurking unseen in its undergrowth, would turn tail and head for the security and prospects of the high ground. Others, wrinkling their noses in distaste, would seek to preserve their dignity and distance by treading with disdain as they seek to circumnavigate the difficult terrain ahead, all the while bemoaning their lot and the foolishness of their guide.

There are those rare talents who have come thus far by old smugglers' routes, and who have the arcane wisdom to find yet more long forgotten and forbidden tracks through the mire (Walter Benjamin is one such perhaps). And there are

those, like Kracauer, for whom, with pipe clenched between the teeth, nothing could be more intriguing, enticing and, indeed, important than the overgrown wilderness ahead.

The concrete world of the everyday was his terrain of choice. This is not to say that he was unfamiliar with the high ground of philosophy – after all, he was Theodor W. Adorno's first unofficial tutor in Kantian thought¹ – or that his works lacked philosophical themes, insights and profundity. Far from it – these are all present and correct though often in curious guise. But he was drawn unerringly to those uninviting ‘thickets, thorn bushes and swamps’ of everyday life. This is the true landscape, not only of his own thinking, but of film, his most beloved medium and the dominant motif of his later writings. ‘Landscape’, though, is perhaps not the right word here: *cityscape* is more appropriate. For Kracauer remains one of the most sensitive and subtle analysts of the experience and culture of metropolitan modernity – its teeming crowds and noisy traffic; its brilliant lights and sparkling surfaces; its streets and architecture; its manifold distractions and diversions; its dismal leavings and left-overs. He had an acute eye for all those seemingly insignificant and ephemeral phenomena of the city that others blithely overlook and undervalue.² As a radical ‘ragpicker at daybreak’³ he recognized their profound potential for the critical unmasking and debunking of prevailing capitalist power and its central mythology of rational technological progress. All such myriad and momentary figures and forms of quotidian life fascinated Kracauer and found exquisite expression in writings penned in five great cities – Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Paris, Marseilles and New York – and spanning the calamitous events and catastrophes of the first half of the twentieth century.

For me, three things distinguish Kracauer's works and make them so enjoyable and exciting for the reader today, nearly fifty years after his death. Firstly, there is the sheer variety of his writings in terms of their *form*, let alone their thematic and conceptual range: long unpublished treatises dating from the years of the Great War, steeped in the tenets and traditions of *Lebensphilosophie*;⁴ feuilleton fragments of all kinds written as journalist, reviewer and editor for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and attesting to the daily life of Frankfurt and Berlin during the Weimar years; assorted fictional writings, including a novella, a short story or two, and two full-length quasi-autobiographical novels; 'biographical' studies of a peculiar and pioneering kind; sketches of screenplays and film 'treatments'; scripts and questionnaires for a psychological experiment; articles for both academic journals and popular magazines; confidential reports for government agencies; essay collections; three books written in his adopted English language in 'permanent exile' in post-war New York; and even a few adolescent poems. Kracauer was a prolific and hugely adaptable writer who managed to live through the most turbulent and traumatic of times by means of his typewriter.

Secondly, despite this heterogeneity of textual production and the most varied of circumstances across many years, Kracauer's works exhibit a characteristic style and exude a particular tone. Doubtless because they were so often intended to appeal to a wide public, his writings tend to eschew the technical language and tropes of scholarly writing in favour of the vernacular and the everyday. Unlike so much scholarship, then and now, Kracauer's texts are both accessible and readable.⁵ And this is true in some measure even of his earliest philosophical texts where the most intricate of ideas are presented with an enviable clarity of expression and precision in phrasing. This is

complexity of thought without convolution, sophistication of argument without showiness. For me, the very ease and directness of his writing belies the skill of his textual strategies. It would be easy to underestimate the powerful work of his prose, especially when it might seem a touch pedestrian. Time and again it winds its way through seemingly commonplace examples and turns of phrase to arrive suddenly at an extraordinary and unexpected insight. Looking back at the pages already turned, one realizes that what had hitherto seemed detours and digressions were in fact the only paths to this point. Not a word has been wasted en route: this is what one might term writing *recaptured*.

And then there is Kracauer's distinctive tone, one that is both enlivened and enlightened by wit and humour and yet, at the same time, imbued with a sense of melancholy.

Ginster, in many ways Kracauer's comic masterpiece,⁶ whose eponymous protagonist is a Chaplinesque⁷ everyman and would-be good soldier, like Jaroslav Hašek's unforgettable Schwejk,⁸ does not compel the reader to laugh out loud but, rather, to smile ruefully at the idiocy of characters and irony of social conditions against the apocalyptic backdrop of the Great War. And then there is the scorn which, years later, Kracauer heaps upon the incipient world of human resources and aptitude tests investigated in his 1929 ethnography of Berlin's white-collar workers, *Die Angestellten* ([chapter 3](#)). It is in the unlikely figure of the composer Jacques Offenbach ([chapters 5](#) and [6](#)) that Kracauer finds his kindred spirit: on the one hand, a delightful 'mocking bird' whose operettas parroted and parodied Parisian life under the Second Empire; on the other, a musician with an ear for the sorrowful condition of humanity, the sufferings attendant upon love and loss, and the hope of redemption embodied in the figure of Orpheus.⁹ His own proposals for films were

for comedies – not just the Offenbach motion picture ([chapter 6](#)) but also his suggestions for an adaptation of a Tartarin adventure (based on novels by Leon Daudet) and *Dimanche* ([chapter 10](#)). Indeed, American slapstick film comedies (*Grotesk*) and Hollywood musical romances constituted for him exemplary cinematic forms ([chapter 9](#)). Although there are high jinks to be had at high altitudes – as Tartarin, Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd and others certainly demonstrate – Kracauer's own way lay through the lowlands and not for fear of falling: for him, this was where the real fun was to be had.

This gravitation towards the comic has its serious side: as we will see in [chapters 9](#) and [10](#), there is a profound utopian aspect here. And, significantly, it draws Kracauer to popular culture, not only the madcap capers of slapstick film comedy but also the clowning of acrobats and others in theatrical revues, even the drunken reveries of washed-up piano players. My third point then is this: Kracauer had a genuine penchant for popular culture. Indeed, of all those who might have some claim to the title of critical theorist, Kracauer was the only one to treat popular modern culture both seriously as an object of analysis and in a spirit of openness and critical appreciation. He was not immune to the high cultural aesthetics vaunted by bourgeois *Bildung* and embodied in German *Kultur*; nor was he blind to the ideological functions and commodification processes inherent in the capitalist culture industries, as is evident in his more Marxist moments. But his writings point both to the search for a more sociological engagement with metropolitan mass culture and to the formation of a radically new set of criteria for evaluating the role and significance of the emergent mass media. His comments on the 'mass ornament' and his early response to photography, for example, are for the most part critical, but there is also a significant degree of ambivalence: as he makes clear in

each case, these are wholly *legitimate* expressions of the modern condition and important in that they exemplify its tensions and contradictions in acute form ([chapters 2](#) and [3](#)). And his endless critical reviews of the banal products of the film industry were always tempered by, and in tension with, a more phenomenological vision of the radical potential of the film medium itself, a view which eventually comes to the fore in his post-war *Theory of Film*. Indeed, the very normative purpose of the latter is to explore and establish definite and distinctive criteria for the appreciation of the unique qualities of the cinematic medium, criteria which run directly counter to the conventions and pretensions of art, both traditional and modernist.

Kracauer's writings do not elide, erase or ignore the catastrophes that beset his generation: a mechanized, bureaucratized and disenchanted modern world, utterly enamoured of its own claims to scientific progress yet prone to industrialized wars of mass slaughter; convinced of its own rationality yet blind to its lapse into a new mythology; fragile in its supposedly democratic structures and susceptible to tyranny and totalitarianism; so complacent in its claims to civilization that the Holocaust is simply unimaginable. Nor is he overwhelmed by them. With the means, with the media, at our disposal, with what is to hand, we can cunningly, courageously challenge these terrors and overcome them. This resoluteness, albeit not resolution, is the final message of Kracauer's 'Film in our Time', the polemical culmination of his writings on the cinematic medium, when the screen is transformed into Athena's shield so that we, the spectators, may behold that which would otherwise turn us to stone and defiantly strike it down. Trenches and muddy no-man's-land; dictators saluting mass rallies; 'total war'; deportations; extermination camps; secret police; show-trials; barbed

wire and watchtowers – these are the images which play before the Perseus of modern times, and which Kracauer confronts directly in his writings on his own military conscription, on fascist propaganda and Nazi newsreels, and on Soviet ‘satellite mentalities’.

Indeed, film is not only our wise protector, Athena, but also our quick-witted guide, Ariadne. Kracauer writes: ‘Guided by film, then, we approach, if at all, ideas no longer on highways leading through the void but on paths that wind through the thicket of things’ (TOF: 309). With dogged determination, and with hope, Kracauer accompanies us on this risky journey across inhospitable terrain to an unpromised land. Loyal to the creaturely world of things, loyal to us, yet indulgent of those more haughty and high flown than himself, a ‘plain man’ blessed with resilience and unerring common sense: Kracauer is our very own Sancho Panza.¹⁰ Eclectic in his interests, accessible in style, as well versed in popular culture as in philosophy, a scholar without pomposity and a wit without cruelty, he will prove the most agreeable of companions amid all our misfortunes.

2 A Sketch of Our Companion

Kracauer was fascinated by the various conceptions and possibilities of the biographical, understood here in its literal sense of how ‘to write’ (*graphikos, graphein*, Greek) a ‘life’ (*bios*, Greek). Initially grounded, as we will see, in the principles of *Lebensphilosophie*, Kracauer’s concern is twofold: how the ‘inner life’ of an individual can come to find expression in the work of art, or on screen; and, at the same time, how the life of an individual may contain within it, in miniature, the tendencies and tensions of the wider society of which they are a member. In reconstructing the life of the individual, of certain *exemplary* individuals in

particular although in principle *anyone* would do, one might discern his/her society in monadological form. Such ideas inform a number of Kracauer's writings: an essay on the popularity of the biography as part of the prevailing literary landscape; his own two semi-autobiographical novels, *Ginster* and *Georg*; and, perhaps most importantly, his reconfiguration of the biographical mode as 'societal biography' (*Gesellschaftsbiographie*), as a symptomatic reading of prevailing social conditions in his analyses of Simmel and Offenbach. Of course, Kracauer's own life story might lend itself to such a reading, but that is not my intention here. What follows in this study is a series of interconnected essays on a selection of Kracauer's key writings and preoccupations. It is *not* an 'intellectual biography' – whatever that might mean, however that might be different from the biography of an intellectual, or simply a biography. Accordingly, the conventional biographical details that follow here are intended as a contextual frame.¹¹

Siegfried Kracauer was born on 8 February 1889, the only child of a middle-class Jewish couple of modest means resident on Elkenbachstrasse in the Nordend-Ost district of Frankfurt am Main. His father, Adolf (1849–1918), a dealer in fabrics, and his mother, Rosette (1867–1942, *née* Oppenheim), had married the previous year. His uncle Isidor Kracauer (1852–1923) was a noted historian of the city's Jewish community¹² and taught at the widely respected Jewish middle school (*Reformrealgymnasium*), the Philanthropin, where Siegfried started as a pupil in 1898, before moving to the Klinger senior high school (*Oberrealschule*) in 1904. With his father often travelling on business, Kracauer spent much of his time with his Uncle Isidor and Aunt Hedwig (1862–1942), and they feature large in the pages of *Ginster*.

Siegfried began his training in architecture at the Grossherzogliche Technische Hochschule in Darmstadt in the summer semester of 1907 before relocating in the October to the Königliche Technische Hochschule zu Berlin, where he would attend lectures in philosophy and aesthetics by, among others, the sociologist Georg Simmel (1858–1918), a figure who was to exert a lifelong influence. In 1909, Kracauer relocated to the Königliche Bayerische Technische Hochschule in Munich for the summer semester and stayed there to complete his final studies with a dissertation on the theme of decorative ironwork in Berlin and the Brandenburg area (eventually published in 1915). Newly qualified as an architect, he began work for an architectural practice in a studio in Munich in January 1912. Kracauer's fascination with both philosophy and writing intensified as his interest in architecture waned. It was in Munich towards the end of 1912 that he met the young student Otto Hainebach (1892–1916), and a close friendship developed, one cut short by Hainebach's death at Verdun but whose echoes reverberate through many of Kracauer's later texts.

The year 1913 saw the composition of his unpublished novella 'The Mercy' ('Die Gnade'), our point of departure in [chapter 1](#). The months preceding the outbreak of war saw an unsettled Kracauer moving back and forth between Munich and Frankfurt working for different architecture practices. If the account in *Ginster* of this moment is accurate, Kracauer was among the many thousands who, caught up in the initial enthusiasm occasioned by the declaration of war in August 1914, immediately volunteered for military service before being stood down for medical reasons. From 1915 Kracauer worked in Frankfurt at the offices of the architect Max Seckbach until the inevitable call-up as the increasing casualties of war required even the physically unfit to be pressed into service

for Kaiser and country. Kracauer joined the Mainz Foot Artillery and had the double good fortune to avoid all active service (peeling potatoes seems to have been his main contribution to the war effort) and to be stood down again in early 1918, redeployed to a post in the town planning department (Stadtbauamt) in Osnabrück. During the war years, Simmel's own gravitation towards *Lebensphilosophie* proved influential for a number of Kracauer's substantial, though unpublished works exploring the prevailing state of the inner life of the subject and, in particular, the paralysis of the human soul in the disenchanted modern world of abstractness and rationalism. For Kracauer, such conditions lay behind a longing for both decisive action – one co-opted by the warmongers and propagandists – and unbridled self-expression, as manifest in the ecstatic works of the Expressionist movement (see [chapter 2](#)).

Two deaths in 1918, neither connected with the dog days of the war, impacted upon Kracauer. After his father died in July 1918, Kracauer returned to Frankfurt, where his mother, Rosette, Uncle Isidor and Aunt Hedwig then decided, partially as an economy measure, to share an apartment together on Sternstrasse, Frankfurt-Nord. And in September 1918 Georg Simmel died, prompting Kracauer's monograph to his former tutor a year later, a study which, as we will see in [chapters 1](#) and [2](#), turns Simmel's own approach, as demonstrated in his 1916 study of Rembrandt, back upon the life and work of the sociologist to produce what Kracauer terms a 'topography of being' (*Wesenstopographie*).¹³

Back in Frankfurt, Kracauer was soon to make the acquaintance of two young men who would become his lifelong friends, although these cordial relations were repeatedly strained almost to breaking point: a teenage Theodor W. Adorno (1903–69), with whom Kracauer spent numerous afternoons reading Kant's *Critique of Pure*

Reason, and Leo Löwenthal (1900–90), who, in the years to come, was to prove without doubt Kracauer's closest friend at the Frankfurt Institut für Sozialforschung and whose role as the editor of its house journal¹⁴ was to involve some severely divided loyalties. And these contacts led to yet more: Löwenthal was closely associated with the Freie Jüdische Lehrhaus in Frankfurt and the circle around the charismatic teacher Rabbi Nehemia Anton Nobel, among whom two – Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber – would become key scholars exploring Judaic mystical traditions and folkways. But, unlike Löwenthal, Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin, Kracauer was to remain sceptical of, and always at a distance from, those two alluring chimera: theological speculations of the messianic variety and revolutionary politics of the communistic kind.

Perhaps it is no wonder that, given the impetus of all these new acquaintances, Kracauer's increasing enthusiasm for philosophy and writing would lead him finally to renounce his incipient architectural career and to immerse himself instead in scholarship. His epistemological reflections distinguishing sociology as a phenomenological enterprise (*Soziologie als Wissenschaft*) was published in 1922 and his *Der Detektiv-Roman: Ein philosophischer Traktat* was composed between 1922 and 1925. However, it was not the production of such weighty tomes for the academy that was to be his new profession – as one who suffered from a chronic nervous stammer, Kracauer always felt debarred from giving university lectures – but another form and practice of writing altogether and one much more in keeping with his metropolitan sensibility and milieu: journalism.¹⁵

Kracauer began writing for the politically liberal *Frankfurter Zeitung* in early 1921, initially as a local reporter and then as a salaried member of the journalist staff before finally becoming a full editor in 1924, when

Benno Reifenberg took over the feuilleton section.

Kracauer was a prolific writer,¹⁶ producing nearly two thousand pieces¹⁷ for the paper dealing with the widest possible array of subject matter: observations on the everyday street life of both Frankfurt and Berlin; tales recounting particular occurrences and memorable encounters; pen portraits of eccentric and otherwise remarkable street figures; discussions of urban architecture, planning and design; film and literary reviews; reports from exhibitions, shows and premieres; and occasional dispatches from abroad providing for reflections on conditions 'elsewhere'. Kracauer was not afraid to upset his close associates and new friends: his 1922 review 'Prophetentum' of Bloch's study of the revolutionary theologian Thomas Münzer led to a prolonged break in relations;¹⁸ and his biting 1926 review of the first volume of Buber and Rosenzweig's new German translation of the Bible put a peremptory end to their acquaintances.¹⁹ As the two subsequent collections of his feuilleton pieces amply demonstrate, the newspaper was the publication site of many of Kracauer's seminal essays, 'The Mass Ornament' piece of 1927 being perhaps his most famous single contribution. And one should not forget that two of his most critically acclaimed writings - his satirical novel *Ginster* (1928) and his study of white-collar workers, *Die Angestellten: Aus dem neuesten Deutschland* (1929-30) - both first appeared in the newspaper's pages in serialized form.²⁰

The mid-1920s saw two other important developments in Kracauer's life: firstly, an increasing interest in historical materialism fuelled by intensive reading of Karl Marx and by the 1926 publication of Georg Lukács's seminal *History and Class Consciousness*;²¹ secondly, in late 1925 or early 1926, Kracauer met Elisabeth (Lili) Ehrenreich (1893-1971), who had been working as a librarian at the

Frankfurt Institut since its opening in 1924. Their relationship developed, and *Ginster* bears a dedication to her and their time in Marseilles together in 1926. They married on 5 March 1930. By this time, and following a ten-week initial visit to the city in the late spring and early summer of 1929 to collect the materials for the *Angestellten* study, Kracauer had moved to Berlin permanently to assume the editorship of the feuilleton section and the various film reviews and literary features forming the paper's city pages.²² The Kracauers were to spend the next three years in the German capital before wisely fleeing to France on 28 February 1933, just one day after the Reichstag Fire.²³

Kracauer left Germany for Paris at the behest of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* with the understanding that he was to become their correspondent there, following in the footsteps of Joseph Roth and Benno Reifenberg. But his position with the paper was terminated four weeks later, leaving the couple to eke out an impecunious existence in the French capital funded by whatever freelance writing Kracauer could manage. This first period of exile was most notable for two studies sparking acrimonious exchanges with Adorno. In 1937, Kracauer published his delightful 'societal biography' *Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of his Time*, a study of the life and works of another, earlier German émigré in the French capital and one whose music became the very signature of the Second Empire. Even though it was laced with ample analogies with the Third Reich, this wittily subversive account of the facile, superficial 'joy and glamour' of Napoleon III's farcical regime was castigated by Adorno and by Benjamin, himself an exile in Paris and in the throes of archival work as part of his famous, unfinished *Arcades Project*. If this were not bad enough, Kracauer's study of totalitarian propaganda, written the following year at Max Horkheimer's suggestion