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The Remnants of Grandmother, or In Search of a Materialist Theology of Photography and Film

Let me begin with some terminological clarifications. In what follows, I use the term “theology” as synonymous with the phrase “theory of redemption.” In other words, when talking about theology I limit myself to redemptive theoretical frameworks and narratives. Their common feature is that (1) they define certain states of affairs as unredeemed; (2) they identify certain types of actions as promoting the process of redemption; and, finally, (3) they point to a certain state of affairs as the ultimate utopia, even if such a state, in the final analysis, proves to be unachievable. Surely, such an understanding of theology is neither peculiarly Jewish, nor does it encompass the entirety of Jewish theological tradition. Nevertheless, it is this understanding of theology that seems to have been most prominent in the work of a group of German-Jewish intellectuals such as Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, and Theodor W. Adorno. It is also worth noting that, for all the differences between them, these thinkers tended to conceptualize the utopian state less in terms of the coming restored unity and more in terms of the coming consumed singularity of all things: the coming multitude of singular “names.” Again, the question as to whether this way of thinking is peculiarly Jewish is highly debatable, but it seems one can speak of such a “Jewish nominalism” and when talking about theology or redemption I shall situate my discussion in this very tradition.¹ Now, it is a well-known fact that at least some of the German-Jewish thinkers tended to combine theological/redemptive thinking with a version of materialist metaphysics, sometimes even trying to present the fulfillment of the redemptive process as the ultimate actualization of materiality. It is equally well-known that some of these very thinkers are also responsible for initiating serious philosophical reflection on new means of artistic expression such as photography and film, only a natural move given their materialist bent. If this is so, one is also tempted to ask how their interest in photography and film interacts with redemptive theology.

It is the answer to this question that I will be searching for in a few texts by Siegfried Kracauer. His bold reflections on photography and film and their relation to the material world, when set against the theological

background, produce highly paradoxical effects that can teach us quite a lot about the very anatomy of (Jewish-nominalist) theology as such. I am focusing mainly on two texts of clearly uneven weight: the early essay entitled *Die Photographie* (*Photography*; 1927) and the canonical *Theory of Film* (1960), the author's *magnum opus*. However, before I analyze these works, I would like to take a look at two other essays by Kracauer. They will help us grasp the broader context and the very high stakes of his writings devoted to photography and film.

The first of the two essays is the famous *Das Ornament der Masse* (*The Mass Ornament*), published in the same year as the essay on photography. Kracauer himself stressed the importance of *The Mass Ornament*, for when in 1963 he published a selection of his Weimar texts, he used the title of this particular piece as the title of the whole volume.² And rightly so, because in this brilliant essay Kracauer sketches his innovative methodological strategy, through which he formulates a historico-philosophical diagnosis of the state of the contemporary society. The strategy is effectively defined by the following idea: in order to identify "the position that an epoch occupies in the historical process" (MO, 75), it is better to look at phenomena that constitute its surface expressions rather than its intellectually sophisticated self-descriptions, for such phenomena – having been generated unconsciously – offer an immediate insight into the nature of the epoch. On the other hand, the analysis of the surface expressions of the epoch must situate them in the broader context of the historical process. Hence, Kracauer's strategy is constructed in a consciously circular or rather dialectical fashion: surface phenomena enable us to grasp historical tendencies, but the tendencies throw light on the meaning of the phenomena.

The phenomenon that Kracauer focuses on in his essay is the then-popular gymnastic show invented by a certain John Tiller. By referring to a version of the commonplace distinction between community and society, Kracauer distinguishes between organic forms of ritual ornament composed of people living in a traditional community and the modern, geometrical patterns of female bodies in Tiller's shows. The mass ornament is that which is precisely measured and perfectly autotelic. The bodies that form it undergo full desexualisation as well as fragmentation, for they count first and foremost as collections of limbs to be used in the geometrical mass construction rather than as bodies of particular individuals. According to Kracauer, this seemingly marginal phenomenon is, in fact, analogous to the capitalist system of production, which is equally mechanized and auto-

telic. The fate of the worker involved in the process of production mirrors the fate of the girl in Tiller's patterns: the worker, too, does not grasp the whole process, but neither is he a part of an organic whole; rather, he is just a fragmentary element of a mechanical construction. Kracauer writes: "The hands in the factory correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girls. [...] The mass ornament is the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires" (MO, 79).

The notion of rationality is the key category of Kracauer's historico-philosophical schema. It has been noted that the schema is one of the sources of the "dialectic of enlightenment" developed later by Adorno and Horkheimer in their famous book.³ There is no reason to question this observation, although it is worth noting that Kracauer himself is not starting from scratch: the influence of Walter Benjamin and György Lukács as a commentator of Marx is clearly visible in the essay on ornament.⁴ According to Kracauer's schema, the historical process is the history of the struggle of reason against the powers of nature, as well as the history of the process of disenchantment and demythologization of the world. Myth being the historico-philosophical formation which affirms the domination of nature over man in the shape of immutable fate, reason becomes the name for that which brings man out of nature and myth, that which orients itself with respect to truth and justice, heading toward the just order of a true, perfectly individualized, future humanity. The anticipation of this order can be found in fairy-tales, which form the model of true rationality (MO, 79f.).⁵

The capitalist epoch occupies an ambivalent position in this schema. Kracauer makes a distinction between the full, undistorted "fairy-tale reason" and its purely instrumental, capitalist counterpart: *ratio*. Referred to as "a murky reason" (MO, 81), *ratio* is a double-edged sword. On the one hand it is, indeed, a powerful instrument of demythologization and disenchantment in the struggle against the organic; Kracauer claims allegiance to the enlightenment tradition and he feels no nostalgia whatsoever for the community broken by *ratio*. According to his position – which any Marxist would subscribe to – capitalism "rationalizes not too much but rather *too little*" (MO, 81). For, on the other hand, *ratio* becomes now an obstacle on the path leading to the true realization of reason and "the advent of man" (MO, 83). *Ratio* short-circuits because, being fully instrumental, it is also perfectly abstract. As a result – and it is here that the fatal, dialectical turn takes place – from being the instrument of demythologization and the most effective weapon in the hands of man, *ratio* turns into the most dangerous

enemy of human individuality, an unexpected ally of remythologization ensuring the return of a dark and mute nature (MO, 83f., 86). Mass ornament is the clearest visualisation of this bleak process. All the same, the path toward true rationality and a new ornament into which true human life weaves itself in fairy-tales leads “through” the mass ornament rather than regressing through the ornaments of myth. Kracauer, for whom the Marxist tradition is a source of historico-philosophical patterns and diagnoses, but not necessarily of recipes and prescriptions, does not himself tell us how this utopian passage might occur.

The idea of society based on the instrumental *ratio* appears already in an earlier work by Kracauer, namely in his “philosophical treatise” devoted to the “detective novel.” The book was written in 1922–1925, but in the author’s lifetime only one chapter, entitled *Die Hotelhalle (Hotel Lobby)*, was published: Kracauer included it, together with a methodological passage taken from the preceding chapter, in the *Mass Ornament* volume.⁶ The main sources of inspiration for this extraordinary work are the writings of Søren Kierkegaard and the writings of the early, Kierkegaard-intoxicated Lukács,⁷ rather than Karl Marx. This seems to be the reason that we do not find here the distinction between a hostile *ratio* and a brave reason. Kracauer does not seem yet to be a friend of the enlightenment, and the category of *ratio*, used as a clearly negative term here, seems to refer to rationality as such. Thus, Kracauer is not opting for the dialectical solution advocated in the essay on ornament, according to which an intensification of the properly understood rationalization might rescue the *ratio*-based society from its impasse. Rather, in the treatise on the detective novel it seems that we, the moderns, have been exiled from the religious sphere of “names” that is absent from our base, rationalized, disenchanted world: now we can only wait for the Messiah to save us with a sudden blow.⁸ These issues are of crucial importance to the main line of the argument in the book which is certainly worthy of a separate analysis as a treatise on the nature of modernity and the ambivalent relationship between the aesthetic and the religious in the contemporary world. In the present context, however, I am only interested in the portrait of the *ratio*-based society and so I will focus only on the chapter on the hotel lobby where the portrait is sketched in a particularly lucid way.

It is a portrait of a society “bereft of reality,” which is “thought through to the end” in the hyper-rationalist universe of the detective novel. Kracauer writes: “Just as the detective discovers the secret that people have concealed, the detective novel discloses in the aesthetic medium the secret

of a society bereft of reality, as well as the secret of its insubstantial marionettes” (MO, 175). The proper space of this demonstration is the hotel lobby, which Kracauer presents as “the inverted image of the house of God,” as “a negative church” (Ibid.). For, according to Kracauer, the church is the space where the silenced community gathers in order to encounter the mystery of transcendence which (in the Kierkegaardian fashion) goes beyond the Law, whereas the hotel lobby is the place in which the unreal marionettes, the atomized citizens of the society based on instrumental *ratio*, gather in order to encounter – in dead, dumb silence – the truth of their empty lives, while the only mystery that remains is the criminal puzzle to be solved by the detective. In the hotel lobby we literally find ourselves “*vis à vis de rien*,” in the space of “a mere gap” (MO, 176), where the equality between people is established not by reference to God (as in the church), but rather by “a relation to the nothing” (MO, 179). The contemporary society, thought through to the very end in the detective novel, is thus a collection of marionettes gathered around Nothingness, the negative counterpart of the transcendent God.

It is these analyses of the contemporary world recorded in the essay on ornament and in the treatise on the detective novel that define the proper background of the essay devoted to photography. As far as the general historico-philosophical schema is concerned this essay is closer to the discussion of ornament – as mentioned before, the piece on photography and the one on ornament were published in the same year – but it is also hard not to sense here the spooky atmosphere of the treatise on the detective novel. Not unlike the mass ornament, photography – sharply distinguished from the work of art – is presented here as a form of expression characteristic of the contemporary society: a form which offers a privileged insight into its nature and its position in the historical process. The essay on ornament has defined Kracauer’s own times as a critical moment; now we learn something that remained unsaid there: that it is the moment of the highest risk, the moment of a mad game with the highest stakes possible, when humanity can win or lose everything.

In the third section of the essay, beginning with reasonable commonplaces and ending in metaphysical extravagance, Kracauer sketches a vision of memory which he then uses as the conceptual apparatus of his analysis (MO, 50f.). According to this conception, memory does not register everything that happens, but rather it selects and condenses its data. This process gives rise to the memory images that remain unclear, opaque,

“demonically ambiguous” as long as the work of memory is intertwined with the life of our drives. However, when X-rayed by our consciousness, the various images of a man, a thing or an event, ultimately get reduced to “the last image” which Kracauer identifies with the “truth content” of this sequence of images, with “the unforgettable” of the given object, with its “actual history.”⁹ The last image does not record the surface of the remembered thing but rather captures its truth. A process of distillation allows for the extraction of truth from the opaque intermediary sphere where images, intertwined with drives, wander between the surface of things and their truth, ambiguously combining the moment of the falsification of mimetic recording and the moment of the approximation of truth proper. One more name for this mnemonic extract of truth is the “monogram” whereby the series of the increasingly reduced memory images reaches its *limes* in the shape of the name and the name itself takes the form of an image in order to ensure its preservation in memory. Finally, such a monogram – the-name-as-an-image, the-image-as-a-name – is identified with the “fairy-tale ornament” which we have already encountered in the essay on ornament where it functioned as the utopian figure of Kracauer’s world.

This notion of memory enables Kracauer to draw a sharp line between the work of art and photography. It is worth noting that when Kracauer refers to the category of the work of art for the first time in his argument, he puts it in inverted commas and adds the reservation that what he means is the work of art of a certain epoch which started in the Renaissance and which might be just coming to its end (MO, 52). Be that as it may, the classical work of art strives to grasp the monogram of people and things, and capture the unforgettable in them: their truth and history. In time, the work itself suffers from erosion, but this decomposition often turns out to be quite fortunate as it facilitates the process of the distillation of the monogram. Photography is the clear-cut opposite of art conceived in such a way. It is related not to the selective and modifying work of memory, but rather to the historicist practice in the study of the past, which desperately tries to complete the full register of events. Thus, instead of extracting the unforgettable, the monogram of things, photography seizes the surface of objects and the fleeting moment. Kracauer puts it in an elegant formula: “For in the artwork the meaning of the object takes on spatial appearance, whereas in photography the spatial appearance of an object is its meaning” (MO, 52).

In Kracauer’s terms we might thus say that photography is devoid of the moment of name, which is identical with the moment of truth. It cap-

tures precisely those elements of things which cannot enter the ultimate memory image, the moments that get eliminated in the alchemical process of extraction of the monogram. Photography preserves exactly what the distillatory memory rejects, it collects material scraps and remnants. This rule has particularly vivid consequences when photography tries to record the shape of the human being. In such cases photography betrays something spectral and uncanny. A photographic portrait of the grandmother as a young girl – this is Kracauer’s key example – does not present the grandmother, does not show her name and her truth, but rather “all the rest”: her clothes and haircut conforming to the fashion of the times and nothing else. Thus, what we see when looking at her photograph is a kind of a tailor’s dummy or, even more precisely, emptiness dressed up in old rags. And if, in theological language, the process of extraction of the monogram and truth is also the process of redemption, then photography preserves the material husk, the leftover of this very process. In the most moving and truly uncanny passage of the essay Kracauer writes:

This ghost-like reality is *unredeemed*. It consists of elements in space whose configuration is so far from necessary that one could just as well imagine a different organization of these elements. Those things once clung to us like our skin, and this is how our property still clings to us today. Nothing of these contains us, and *the photograph gathers fragments around a nothing*. When the grandmother stood in front of the lens, she was present for one second in the spatial continuum that presented itself to the lens. But it was this aspect and not the grandmother that was eternalized. A shudder runs through the viewer of old photographs. For they make visible not the knowledge of the original but the spatial configuration of a moment; what appears in the photograph is not the person but the sum of what can be subtracted from him or her. The photograph annihilates the person by portraying him or her, and were the person and portrayal to converge, the person would cease to exist (MO, 56f.; first emphasis is Kracauer’s, the second one is mine).

The sharp distinction between the work of art and photography, between the work of memory aiming at redemptive truth and the surface registration preserving unredeemed scraps, certainly may raise serious doubts. To pose just one of the possible questions, we might ask whether photography, precisely by recording the surface and the fleeting moment, is really unable to capture the “monogram,” the truth which, after all, presents itself only in the stream of time and crystallizes on the surface of things as their “history”? And yet it seems that instead of questioning Kracauer’s distinction it is more fruitful to keep it tentatively in its sharpest form and pose the apparently naïve question: how does Kracauer evaluate the invention of photography?

This issue appears to be quite simple. Large portions of Kracauer's argument read as an unambiguous criticism of photography: especially the comparison with the crude historicist methodology suggests that Kracauer takes sides with memory against photography. It is presumably in this spirit that one should read the sixth section of the essay where Kracauer considers not just the old photographs, but rather the rising tide of new photographic images which fill illustrated magazines – the growing urge to photograph everything – as the destructive attack of “the blizzard of photographs” (MO, 58) on human perception, consciousness and memory, as well as on the traditional work of art.¹⁰ The danger is the fading away of the actual knowledge of things caused by the superabundance of photographic images, and ultimately the metaphysical metamorphosis of the world into the collection of things capable of being photographed. The critical tone of these analyses is rather evident. Moreover, the affinity between the metaphors that Kracauer uses in his descriptions of photography and the hotel lobby – i.e. the analogy between the vision of photography as an image of remnants gathered around nothingness and the vision of the lobby as the place where we gather around the emptiness of our lives – seems to suggest that, just like the detective novel, photography thinks the logic of our *ratio*-based world through to its very end and, while actively participating in its uncanny metamorphosis, reveals its truth: the truth about a place devoid of truth, about material constructions built around emptiness, about a world with no names.

And yet Kracauer's attitude toward photography is far from being so unequivocally critical. This can be seen not only from his evident, if dark, fascination with photography, but also from the way he determines the position of photography in the historical process. Not surprisingly, photography marks the same historical moment as the one described in the essay on ornament. It is the moment of the apparent fulfillment of the process of rational demythologization and the perfect separation of man from nature. However, in conformity with the dialectic of demythologization, it is also the moment when, by means of the perverse mechanisms of capitalist society, the naked, mute nature takes the upper hand. The photographs in the illustrated magazines show the silhouette of a society fully subject to nature. Should this society consolidate and become lasting, the nature not penetrated by consciousness “would sit down at the very table that consciousness has abandoned” (MO, 61). And yet Kracauer claims that the critical and highly dangerous moment of separation between consciousness and nature, which photography documents and fulfills, is also the moment

of a unique chance. This is why “the turn to photography” is defined here as “the *go-for-broke game* of history” (Ibid., Kracauer’s emphasis).

But what would the victory in this game look like? How can photography contribute to it? Can it help us rationalize “more rather than less”? In the final passages of his essay, Kracauer attempts to formulate some answers to these questions, but they are neither clear, nor convincing. According to him, what photography reveals for the first time in human history is the natural basis of consciousness, the pure materiality, “the husk” of things. The task of photography is to complete “the central archive” of this world and pass it on to consciousness so that it can “confront” this immense inventory. If the world is given now in the form of scraps and remnants with no names, then we can grasp “the provisional status” of the natural construction of the world and the very possibility of changing it and managing it freely. What might be particularly instrumental in this process is film whose play with the things of this world shows, according to Kracauer, “that the valid organization of things remains unknown – an organization which would designate the position that the remains of the grandmother and the [film] diva stored in the general inventory will some day occupy” (MO, 62).

It is hard to resist the sense that what we are facing here is a deep intellectual confusion. The arbitrary management of nature is the speciality of the emancipated *ratio* whose activity dialectically turns the human world into pure nature and subdues man to its powers. Thus, it is rather strange that Kracauer should recommend or even praise such arbitrary management. More importantly, it is difficult to see how the general inventory completed by means of photography can help us disentangle our world from the dialectic of de- and re-mythologization. Or, maybe, contrary to his declarations, Kracauer is not so much interested in such disentanglement? For, indeed, sometimes it is as if he could not choose between his disgust for the world with no names, the world of marionettes made of rags surrounding the void, and his deep fascination with this universe lacking any substance. This fascination might spring from the conviction which may be implicitly present in Kracauer’s argument, even if it remains unexpressed: the conviction that the naked, nameless matter, the husks and scraps which constitute the by-product of the process of the redemptive emancipation, that these remnants themselves demand preservation – that they demand to be saved in their very unredeemability. In his essay, however, Kracauer does not follow this path. The ending of the essay is, rather, defined by the quasi-Marxist thought that the advance of technology and industry can

erase humankind as such, just as they can become allies of an emancipated humanity if they are used as weapons in the struggle against nature. Apparently, it is in this spirit that photography is discussed in the final lines of the essay. At the same time, just like in the essay on ornament, Kracauer is not willing to take sides with revolution, however the revolution might be conceived. As a result, it remains unclear how photography is to help in the struggle for emancipation and how its poisonous potential for destruction can be turned into a cure. It remains unclear why the confrontation with the natural world, which is made possible by the positivist-historicist archive of photography, should prove to be helpful to human consciousness, and it is equally hard to see why it should make us aware of the contingency of the natural organization of things: as if positivism were not the shortest way to locking our consciousness in the unchanging world of naked facts. The rather desperate remark on film as the medium of the free recombination of things does not seem to be very helpful. However, perhaps we should follow this suggestion, after all, and turn toward what is considered as Kracauer's *Hauptwerk*, i.e. his treatise on film.

In the essay on photography Kracauer criticizes “artistic photography” which tries to practice traditional art in the photographic medium. In his opinion, such a project is reactionary and supports the remythologization of the world. The counterpart of “artistic photography” in Kracauer’s analysis of the mass ornament is “rhythmic gymnastics” which tries to escape the ruthless, meaningless geometric character of the new ornament and aims at a return to the organic bond with nature (MO, 53 and 85f.). In his book on film a similar role is played by a heterogeneous cluster of attempts which aim at turning film into “the tenth Muse,” one more daughter of Mnemosyne¹¹. Thus, Kracauer is worried by the domination of what he calls “the formative tendency.” One common expression of this tendency is the stress put solely on the plot of movies, on “the story”, i.e. the attempt to use the film medium as the vehicle for traditional narrative patterns, the most important of them being the scheme of the classical tragedy. Kracauer claims that “the finite and ordered cosmos set by tragedy” is incompatible with the nature of film (TF, x; 265–270) and that – more generally – the sole stress put on the story as such abuses the medium. Thus, incidentally, he is deeply mistrustful of practices of montage which aim only at the construction of the story. Moreover, he is even more critical of dialogue in film, for it has the tendency to further push the film into the narrative element. Consistently, he welcomes the disruptive tricks and

solutions – such as the playfulness of Groucho Marx – which effectively undermine the whole order of discourse from within (TF, 108). The second main expression of “the formative tendency” is “the experimental film” by which Kracauer means “rhythmic abstractions or surrealistic projections of inner reality.” Such attempts are perhaps even worse than putting too much stress on the storyline. Kracauer writes: “Liberating film from the tyranny of the story, they subject it to that of traditional art. In fact, they extend art into the cinema. «Help the development of film as a fine art form ...» reads a 1957 leaflet of the New York Creative Film Foundation. But the artist’s freedom is the film maker’s constraint” (TF 192).

Opposing these reactionary attempts, Kracauer insists on the principle according to which a truly “cinematic film” should not mimic the works of other media, but rather realize the specific potential of the film medium as such. The medium springs from photography and should not be cut off from its roots. For Kracauer, film equals photography plus movement. The film medium thus conceived is truly something unique: it is the only medium that does not transform its material, but shows it; it sticks to the surface of things and reveals their materiality in motion. It enables us – to use Osip Mandelstam’s great formula – to raise a monument not of a horse-rider, but rather of the marble itself. This is film’s main competence and this is what films should do. Thus, Kracauer insistently opts for something he calls “realism.” However, it is not hard to see that it is – to use Adorno’s phrase – a very curious realism which is very far from being reducible to simple mimesis.¹² Both photography, which Kracauer characterizes again in the introduction to his book (TF, 3–23), and film which adds to photography the possibility of the registration of movement, focus on the material, on something that is only fleetingly present in the world of our perception, on things that appear on its margins or things we simply miss. Film preserves things too small or too big to be perceived, things passing and marginal; it shows the material world in its contingency, indeterminacy and indefiniteness; it reveals the very “flow of life” identified by Kracauer as “the street” as experienced by the Baudelairian/Benjaminian *flâneur* (TF, 71–73). Moreover, even though the street is full of people – the moving crowd is the theme which is particularly fit for the film medium and which only this medium can really grasp (TF, 50f.) – film is also the only medium which can truly open itself to the multitude of inanimate objects. The domination of human relations over the world of objects, the closure of the human in the cocoon of a meaningful story, is, for Kracauer, one

more phenomenon alien to the true nature of film (TF, 45f.). All in all, Kracauer's realism does not care much about the story and it questions the primacy of the semantic order, aiming rather at the extra-semantic, purely material surface of things. The realist film avoids both the classically conceived beauty of meaningful forms and the sublime tragedy of forms torn with pathos. Rather, it pursues the new beauty of the horizontal drift, of the shimmering of the material surface of things and the flow of the crowds in the streets.

In the essay of 1927 Kracauer presented photography as the proper (post-)art of his times; it is in the same way he presents film in 1960. Back then his attitude toward photography was rather ambivalent, with the critical moment being very vivid and the affirmative one being rather vague. Now, his attitude toward film is unequivocally enthusiastic. Certainly, the reason behind this shift is a modification of Kracauer's political and historico-philosophical perspective. In the treatise on the detective novel he presented a dark vision of the fallen modernity, incapable of any internal metamorphosis. In the essays from 1927 he flirted with the Marxist tenet according to which we should rationalize "more rather than less" and so he did believe in some progressive movement which would use alienating phenomena such as photography for the sake of emancipation. And although this movement was not to be revolutionary in any sense, Kracauer did play with a vision of utopia, which focused on the idea of the realization of an undistorted reason and "the fairy-tale ornament." In the treatise on film, however, Kracauer finally seems to moor in the safe harbor of the anti-utopian liberalism, even if he never fails to declare his socialist sensibility.

In the epilogue of the book he attempts to sketch "the intellectual landscape" of the contemporary world. According to this sketch, we live among the ruins of ancient beliefs and ideologies; any attempt at their revival is, for Kracauer, reactionary (this is what remains of his flirtation with Marxism). It is science and technology that are responsible for the destruction of the old beliefs, grand narratives and systems of meaning – in Kracauer's earlier terminology: for the process of demythologization and disenchantment. At the same time science and technology do not encourage contact with material concreteness, for they promote abstract thinking. We know this idea from Kracauer's Weimar essays – the abstract nature of modern thinking has always been his true obsession – even if it was the capitalist economy that was identified there as the main villain. Thus, we can also speak of something like a dialectic of the scientific enlightenment: according to its

logic, science leads us out of the mythical totality and then into the totality of abstractions. But in the 1927 essay Kracauer perceived photography as the alienating factor while pointing to its emancipatory potential in a rather unclear way, whereas in the 1960 book he cuts the link between the new media and the forces of alienation. Hence, with no hesitation he can present film as the magic cure for our maladies, the properly “cinematic” film of course. A revival of old beliefs may be a reactionary gesture, but our life in the element of the post-ideological abstract totality is marked by deepest existential confusion. Film, the true ally of humanity, does not offer any new totalities. Rather, it breaks the cocoon of abstractions, it liberates material reality and discovers “the purloined letter” that has been always there, on the surface of things (TF, 299). Thanks to film, we can find “something we did not look for” – the concrete “world that is ours” (TF, 296). Thus, finally, Kracauer can allow himself a truly celebratory formulation: “The cinema can be defined as a medium particularly equipped to promote the redemption of physical reality. Its imagery permits us, for the first time, to take away with us the objects and occurrences that comprise the flow of material life” (TF, 300).

It seems, then, that Kracauer has truly gone beyond the ambivalent assessment of the new media and decided for the unconditional praise of the recording of the world in the film medium. Does his position imply the positivist acceptance of what there is also in the political and economic dimensions? Well, such a suggestion would not be completely fair, for Kracauer does stress the potentially critical role of cinematic realism, capable of unmasking social injustice and ideological lies (TF, 306–308). Nevertheless, his position gets entangled in a fundamental difficulty which is not solved so easily. Kracauer presents the realist film as the medium which emancipates things, but also emancipates humans “to” things; as the medium which liberates physical materiality, but also as a humanist medium, as a useful instrument in the hands of the liberal, post-ideological humanity which escaped the claws of the scientific-technological abstraction. I do not think that you can have both things at the same time: the liberation of physical reality *and* the humanism of the classical liberalism. If the film medium truly liberates the material reality, if any fantasy, interiority, story and any dialogue seem reactionary, if the liberation of the stream of life is equivalent to the emancipation of inanimate objects, then we can hardly save the autonomous, liberal individual separated from the world of nature. But if this is so, then although Kracauer’s book seems to

be so balanced in its political message – so humane and responsible – the consequences of his argument are truly disastrous.

Let me state clearly my main point. His declared intentions and the good-natured tone of his argument notwithstanding, in his book on film Kracauer finally realizes the possibility which – like a dark ornament – flickered in his early essay on photography. Namely, having ostensibly renounced any utopia and theological inspiration, he inadvertently preaches a radically paradoxical materialist theology of photography and film, which – at least in its original form – seems to me truly uncanny. In the essay on photography we were able to sense a trace of the idea that once the redemptive process of the extraction of the monogram – of the unforgettable – is completed, there remain the pathetic scraps and husks, things unredeemed and unredeemable, and yet deserving to be saved, kept or liberated, redeemed in their very unredeemability. This would be precisely the job of photography. It seems that in his treatise on film Kracauer finally follows this idea down to its most radical consequences. For if any traditional artistic activity is perceived as reactionary, if the proper medium of our times is the “cinematic” film, then what counts is only the moment of saving the material husk. The redemption of the physical reality is the liberation of the nameless – the true liberation from the appearance of name which has been long gone from our world where everything that presents itself as name can be only its reactionary, ideological prosthesis. But if Kracauer really opts for such a liberation of the nameless, material reality which would come about in the film medium, then, in fact, he does something he was so much afraid of before: namely, he invites the mute nature – perhaps in the form of the hollowed mannequin clothed in the grandmother’s rags – to sit down at the table abandoned by human consciousness. If this nature were endowed with a voice, it would roar with Satanic laughter.¹³

In this radical form the materialist theology emerging from Kracauer’s writings seems to be instructive only as a diabolical, inadvertent effect of the denial of utopian dreams. Reject utopia and you become a Satanist. And yet I do believe that Kracauer’s materialist theology deserves to be saved. How can this be done? Although the presentation of “the street,” “the flow of life,” is for Kracauer the ideal of the cinematic activity, he must accept the fact that even the most cinematic films must – alas! – follow at least to a minimal extent the “formative tendency,” either in the “story” mode, or in the experimental mode. If for the sake of simplicity we bracket the latter option, then we may say, in Kracauer’s terms, that

every film is defined by the duality of the story and the street. However, this is not just a duality. After all, it is not (only) so that in every film the street moment must make at least a little room for the story moment – if only for commercial reasons. More importantly, “the street” exists only as a dialectical disturbance, retardation and dispersion of the story. Film wants to tell a story and suddenly it strays into some side street, wanders there and shows a bit more than it should, more or less inadvertently recording the surface of things, initiating a local redemption of physical reality (in its very unredeemability, of course). Thus, instead of a duality perhaps one should rather speak of the dialectics of the story and the street. When telling a story, the film makes a promise: it promises to give justice to the people and objects represented, it promises that it will extract and pass on their truth, that it will grasp in the story their unforgettable names, the final memory image. However, it must break its promise for there are no names in the story, at least in our world which is dominated by *ratio* and permeated with nothingness. The true names are left in the nameless, in what is missed and rejected, in the husk of the matter as such. The true names are in the street. Thus, again and again pleading guilty of a lie, the film must suspend its story, tear apart the order of meaning and reach out for what cannot be remembered, but what deserves to be remembered more than anything else, reach out for what is devoid of truth, but what – as the other of the false story – unexpectedly becomes the proper site of truth as such. It seems that such a model of dialectical materialist theology might also be applied to photography. Thus, we may speak of an analogous dialectics of the “artistic” and the truly “photographic” moment in Kracauer’s rather crude terms. The former would stand for the attempt at grasping the truth, the final memory image, and the latter would stand for the attempt at the liberation of the material reality. Thus, we might say that also in the case of photography the truth is a refugee from the victorious party, that by means of a dialectical turn it suddenly takes sides with the purely material, and that the grandmother’s monogram should be, after all, searched for in what remains of her on the photograph.

Notes

- 1 The term “Jewish nominalism” has been introduced by Agata Bielik-Robson of the Franz Kafka University of Muri. See her *The Promise of the Name: “Jewish Nominalism” as the Critique of Idealist Tradition in Jewish Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity*:

- Philosophical Marranos* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 233–254. See also 2.1 (2012) issue of *Bamidbar* devoted to “Jewish nominalism.”
- 2 See Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament. Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (London & Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995). Further as MO.
 - 3 See Thomas Y. Levin, “Introduction” (MO, 19), and Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).
 - 4 See György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1999). For Benjamin see the next footnote.
 - 5 The notions of myth, fate and justice in such a configuration are clearly borrowed from Walter Benjamin. However, Kracauer frees them from the apocalyptic perspective which is characteristic of Benjamin’s thought, and so he prepares their more secular use in Adorno and Horkheimer. See Walter Benjamin, *On the Critique of Violence*, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).
 - 6 For the whole book see Siegfried Kracauer, *Werke*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2006), 103–204. It is worth noting that it is already here that Kracauer mentions fairy-tale as the proper model of human emancipation (115). Later, the motif will often appear in the writings of Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch.
 - 7 See György Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (New York: Columbia University Press).
 - 8 Siegfried Kracauer, *Werke*, vol. 1, 107, 201–204. The category of the name is of course one more term which links early Kracauer to Walter Benjamin, but although in this particular case Benjamin’s temporal precedence is certain (he has been developing his philosophy of language since 1916), I am not sure if the presence of this category in Kracauer is a sign of a direct influence.
 - 9 The categories of the “truth content”, “demonic ambiguity” and “the unforgettable” once again point to the influence that Walter Benjamin’s thought must have exerted on this argument. See especially Walter Benjamin, *Goethe’s Elective Affinities and The Task of Translator*, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1. On the other hand it seems that Kracauer’s analysis of the relations between memory, traditional work of art and photography must have influenced Benjamin’s later work on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction and the art of storytelling.
 - 10 Kracauer predicts the changes that the old works of art will undergo as a result of the possibility of their reproduction, thus anticipating Benjamin’s later analyses (MO, 58).
 - 11 See Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film* (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). Further as TF.
 - 12 See Theodor W. Adorno, *The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer*, in *New German Critique* 54 (Autumn, 1991), 159–177.
 - 13 See Walter Benjamin, *On Language as such and on the Language of Man*, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1 and *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London and New York: Verso 1977), 227.