The Kracauer Connection: The Conflation of Art and the Messianic-Political in the Works of Kracauer, Benjamin and Adorno

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Abstract

There is a peculiar figure of thought (and speech) that Kracauer, Adorno and Benjamin seemed to like and share. Working on related topics concerning the status of the arts, they all toyed with the idea of a “go-for-broke” game, a “va-banque Spiel”. The first occurrence of the expression can arguably be found in Kracauer’s photography essay from 1927, and, given the fact that the three men were in constant exchange of ideas, one would not be surprised to see it crop up in Adorno’s work and correspondence and then taken up, even if not literally, by Benjamin. What is the meaning of this rather unusual expression in the highly intellectual debates on the new social function of the arts that came, as Benjamin put it, with the development of new technological means of (re)production?

In what follows we intend to reconstruct the body of thought that the three thinkers have in common on this topic and thus clarify the meaning of the strange va-banque game. As we shall see, with it they are brothers in a “confrérie du risque” as it were, that banks all their hopes for a new society on the new human experience that will be brought about by the “new arts”, as photography and film. What is in play is a new, “higher” concept of experience that emerges from the dialectics of man and nature at work in the creation and reception of the new works of art that has a distinct (and specific) political meaning. We intend to reconstruct this risky intellectual game, and to follow it with a few “post-game” Adornian considerations on the viability of such an approach.

Keywords: art, politics, messianism, Kracauer, Benjamin, Adorno.

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“Une confrérie du risque”

The close personal ties between Adorno, Benjamin and Kracauer are well known and documented, especially after the publication of the extensive correspondence between them (Benjamin 1995; Adorno 1991). The slightly older Kracauer was a mentor for the entire generation of Frankfurters (Adorno 1991, 159, passim; Lowenthal 1991), a friend and confidant for Benjamin and Adorno, and, let’s not forget it, a provider of work for the impoverished Benjamin, whom he introduced in the German cultural journalism of the Weimar Republic. It is fair to say indeed that Kracauer, who knew virtually anyone worthwhile in the German intellectual and journalistic milieu, acted as a sort of catalyst for social connections in this environment for his younger friends.

The extent of the influence of Kracauer’s thought on the themes and approach of Adorno and Benjamin, however, is harder to assess, and has to this day received comparatively less scholarly attention. Apart from the well documented early years of the relationship between Kracauer and Adorno, at the beginning of the 1920’ by Wiggershaus (1997, 84–87), picked up in its general tone and characterization of Kracauer, and expanded with regard to his intellectual influence over young Wiesengrund by Müller-Doohm (2003, 61–81), there is little one can find on the matter. One could pin this on the posthumous intellectual stature of Benjamin and Adorno, as compared to the relatively little known “film man” (Koch and Gaines 2000, 3). Perhaps this is only fitting, since Kracauer was never that sort of a patronizing figure, and he always entertained with his friends and colleagues a free exchange of ideas, in which the paternity of this or that insight is not only hard to determine (Anderson 1991), but is rendered superfluous as such. It is nevertheless of interest, at least for the intellectual history, to challenge the view that Kracauer was at some point a sort of a mentor and older friend to young people like Adorno and Benjamin who will go on to develop into great thinkers, getting over and past their early influences. I will contend that there is enough ground to claim that Kracauer was more than a mentor in their early intellectual development, that, past this point, their intellectual relationships evolved further into a rich exchange, and, in some cases, well beyond a
general attitude towards philosophy, or the arts; they shared even the same conceptual vocabulary and approached their subject matter with strikingly similar insights and, perhaps, and more importantly, varieties of the same existential feeling (Cf. Ratcliffe 2008).

In the “va-banque Spiel” we encounter precisely this: one of these cases where one can determine the source of a seminal idea that was shared even if in contention, by others. It is a peculiar approach to the phenomenon of art production and reception as a special type of game, a “go-for-broke” game that encompasses a well determined attitude towards the object at hand. This expression is used twice, arguably for the first time, in Kracauer’s Photography essay from 1927 (English translation 1993).

At that particular time, Benjamin was striving to get recognition as a free writer and critic after having his Habilitation hopes shattered. He was caught up in murky personal and redactional relationships: a tedious struggle with Rowohlt for the publication of his Barockbuch and the One-way street, and a visit to Asja Lacis’ Moscow, where he could find nothing but new impulses for his projected book on the arcades. The younger Adorno was contemplating his choices for a similar attempt at an academic career while still pursuing his interests in the field of music, and was just about to finish his piece on Schubert before getting to work on his Kierkegaard. The friendship between the two was just beginning to take shape after a period Adorno spent in Berlin, during which they met regularly (Adorno & Kracauer 2008, 7:161-62). As for Kracauer himself, he is about to begin work on his exquisite (autobiographical) work, Ginster, which went to be considered by Adorno (among others) one of his best literary achievements. It is years later, in 1931, that Benjamin, following, as we shall see, the path opened by Kracauer, will write his “Short history of photography” (Benjamin 1991 for the Gesammelte Schriften – hereafter GS – II.1 389 sqq) that will be then followed by the Kunstwerkessay, while Adorno’s work on similar topics begins almost in the same period, in the late 1920’ and finds impulses from the critical reading of the works of his fellows. It is perhaps fair to say that at this point Kracauer was the source of information and opinion in things concerning mass entertainment and new art forms like photography and cinema, on which he wrote.
extensively in the columns he held in the media outlets. Worth mentioning here is the mutual reception of Adorno and Benjamin of the *Salaried Masses* (1929/1930, reprinted in the German edition of his Complete Works in 2006), that confirmed his position within the group as a first rate critic of, and authority on “low culture”. Benjamin writes not one, but two reviews of the book, Wiesengrund too acknowledging the importance of Kracauer insights. The book acquired the status of a reference point for the Frankfurters, with the “Lenin and Trotzki pair” (i.e. Horkheimer and Pollock, so Adorno’s humorous rebranding) reportedly unhappy for not receiving a copy of the book from the author. The relatively broad and contentious reception of the *Angestellten* definitely helped here, as it reached a wider audience a stirred debates in wider circles that, of course, the youngsters would have loved to reach with their own works sometime. Benjamin was ready to defend it like his own against even a shadow of doubt, and this kind of attitude was something usual, in spite of, or even because of all the men asking from their peers nothing but the toughest critique (Adorno and Kracauer 2008, 201 sqq.). In 1936, we see Wiesengrund taking the same attitude, this time for the sake of ‘Friedel of old’ against Kracauer – the author of the Offenbach book, and preparing a critical “intervention” together with Benjamin (and Bloch) to try and make sense of the situation. But let’s return to the initial moment of their friendship and the important, 1927 photography essay.

**Kracauer: the go-for-broke game of history**

Let us take a look ourselves at the loci in the Photography essay that linked in such a compelling fashion the historical, political and artistic aspects of human experience.

“One can well imagine”, Kracauer writes,

“a society that has succumbed to mute nature that has no meaning no matter how abstract its silence. (...) Were it to last, the consequence of the emancipation of consciousness would be its own eradication; nature that consciousness failed to penetrate would sit down at the very table that consciousness had abandoned. Were this society not to prevail, however, then liberated consciousness would be
given an incomparable opportunity. Less enmeshed in the natural bonds than ever before, it can prove its power in dealing with them. The turn to photography is the go-for-broke game of history.” (1993, 434 sq)

And then, a bit further:

“The photographic archive assembles in effigy the last elements of a nature alienated from meaning. This warehousing of nature promotes the confrontation of consciousness with nature. Just as consciousness finds itself confronting the unabashedly displayed mechanics of industrial society, it also faces, thanks to photographic technology, the reflection of the reality that has slipped away from it. To have provoked the decisive confrontation in every field – this is precisely the go-for-broke game of historical process.” (1993, 435)

This is, then, the first formulation of the risky game of interpreting the arts as a highly significant element of the historical dialectics. Photography, here, is not at all a new art form that would need a set of aesthetic criteria for its praxis or reception, but rather a phenomenon of ultimate importance for tipping the scale of the world history. Photography (and film) are, for Kracauer, “the episteme of a postmetaphysical politics of immanence” (M. Hansen 1993, 446). This entails the distinct attitude towards the arts as a marker, if not specific element of an all-encompassing dialectical process that really takes seriously the claims of the avant-garde and surrealism and assesses the artistic production in historical-political terms. It is a relatively straightforward marxist position that works with a highly complex critical instrumentary only to come to a simple assessment: the revolutionary or reactionary potential and effect of a said work of art or type of artistic production. The game is the world history, the aim a form of profane salvation (political revolution or an epistemological progress of the human knowledge beyond the current historical status quo), and the arts the means to provoke the mankind into a radical decision that would either bring about the realization of the potentialities of art at a much broader level (that of the nature and society as a whole) or their complete surrender to the “dark forces” that keeps the humanity enslaved in a now meaningless order.

Kracauer’s dialectics of man and nature in the Photography-essay is simple enough to fit in such a small text but still enough to outline his
critical stance. It is worthwhile to start with its reconstruction in order to be able to observe the ways it is later developed in his works and the approval and resistance it is met with by his kindred spirits, Benjamin and Adorno.

Kracauer follows at first glance a well-trodden path: he analyses photography as image, contrasting it, as spatial continuum, with the temporal continuum of the historicism (1993, 425), and then opposing it to the memory-image, the symbol and the allegory. But then his dialectical approach comes to the fore. What is meant is to give photography a historical-philosophical importance as a specific stadium in the liberation of consciousness from nature.

If for a liberated consciousness the memory-image of a person, for instance, boils down to a “last image”, the unforgettable, the history of that person, linked inextricably with the truth content, “in a photograph a person’s history is buried as if under a layer of snow”, because photography does not encompass the meaning to which they refer and in relation to which they cease to be fragments”, and thus “appear as a jumble that consists partly of garbage” (Photography, 426). The photographic image is at odds with the memory image and cannot function in this model of recuperating or preserving the world for the consciousness.

In a similar fashion, photography is not a part of the symbolic mechanism that keeps the structures of the “natural community”, that is the “identity of nature and man”. As this unity becomes fragmented in the process of the liberation of consciousness, the meaning of symbol becomes increasingly abstract and immaterial, separating itself from image. “The more decisively consciousness frees itself from [its own natural] contingency in the course of the historical process, the more purely does its natural foundation present itself to consciousness”. “Since nature changes in exact correspondence with the respective state of consciousness, the foundation of nature devoid of meaning arises with modern photography” (P., 434).

Hence, meaning is a representational function of the human contingency dependent on the dialectical stage of the liberation of the consciousness. The image, as representational support for meaning, becomes obsolete once the consciousness has asserted itself against and above nature, while on the same time has transformed it accordingly.
Man and nature, while still dialectically linked, cannot be represented by means of image, but rather “this meaning goes toward and through nature” (P., 434). The photographic “image” has no meaning as such, it does not function in this form of representation. What it does, then, is to signal a new stage of the man-nature dialectic:

“No different from earlier modes of representation, photography too is assigned to a particular developmental stage of practical and material life. It is a secretion of the capitalistic mode of production.” (P., 434)

The photograph is then a “barren self-presentation of spatial elements” typical for a social order “that regulates itself according to economic laws of nature” (P., 435), and find its pair in the similar self-presentation of temporal element that forms out the historicist inventory.

With this last oblique assertion we get a glimpse in the depth of Kracauers dialectics. For starters, photography represents purely the “death of meaning”, an observation that was already starting to get traction in the philosophical debates that would continue for decades. The obsolescence of meaning has everything to do with the historical process that makes from capitalist mode of production something that is self-evident. What is self-evident can only be the nature itself, the second nature, and, as such, requires meaning only as far as it can still be negated and transformed in the historical dialectical process by a different instance. But the older modes of access to meaning fall short not only because this instance, the consciousness, has grown out of this shell (that is the epistemological layer that sets up the subject-object relation as the historical specificity of modernity), but also because the structures of nature itself don’t present anything other than pure contingency. In its victory against meaning, the world as a whole has become, for the first time, the contingent at the disposal of infinite manipulation. This is a full inversion of the first dialectical step, where the man was victim of his contingency and was looking for a defence against it (meaning). And this is the historical moment in which the consciousness is able to understand i.e. to manipulate the world in its entirety.

The only precondition is for this consciousness (here still a theoretical fiction) to confront the last remnants of its dependence on
nature, and it must do it all the more because the nature as such no longer has any dependence on man. In Kracauer’s words:

“A consciousness still caught up in nature is unable to see its own material base. It is the task of photography to disclose this previously unexamined foundation of nature. For the first time in history, photography brings to the fore the entire natural shell; [f]or the first time the inert world presents itself in its independence from human beings.” (P., 435)

It is a dialectical tipping point, not only nature is completely exposed to a transformation, but also the human agent is just about to lose the chance forever and to fall prey again to the dark forces of contingency and death: this time with no recourse to meaning. And this is the moment for the all-out bet, the go-for-broke game of history. As we shall see, this sense of historic urgency stems from a messianic-political ethos (Rabinbach 1985) that was shared, in varied degrees or forms, by Kracauer’s peers; without this shared mindset and sensibility, the whole text becomes simply meaningless.

The contingency of all natural or human configuration, that Kracauer sees exposed by means of the photography empowers the consciousness to dissolve the old meaning altogether and to rearrange the elements freely: the artistic construction principle of collage is conjoined to give the photographic archive (that contains the material base in its entirety) the power to blast open the history. This free manipulation of elements is no longer an isolated artistic praxis, but the true task of the consciousness. The parallel with the most radical ambitions of the avant-garde come clearly to the fore. In other term, Kracauer approach is to set the Kantian analytics into motion, to historicize the categories and to state that the specific modern consciousness finds an experience that matches it in the photographic, much as the sublime was the specific modern one. The development of the technology of reproduction and capturing images were needed to sublate the contradictions of the modern subject.

What remains highly questionable is the structure of this consciousness: it lacks all positive determination in Kracauer’s essay,
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except the ontical definition, à la Heidegger, through its being ontological. It is the merit of Miriam Hansen\(^2\) (1993) to have shed a light on this matter by following Kracauer’s notes of photography and film from the 1940’s till the *Theory of film*.

Let us firstly state clearly that Kracauer was mefi ent in identifying this consciousness, in an orthodox Marxist fashion, with the proletariat. Moreover, his analysis of the mass media, especially his “political sociology” in the *Salaried Masses* leaves no doubt that he could find little reason to connect it, as Benjamin did, with the collective agency of the masses, the fuzzy definition of the concept notwithstanding. While this might be the logical place to find this “consciousness” as a historical force in the 20th century, he was never swayed to put any hope in it:

> “From the midtwenties on, Kracauer had analyzed the political struggle surrounding the media of consumer culture as a question of fear, denial, and confrontation of death … he increasingly read the proliferation of illustrated magazines, newsreels, ‘society film’, the whole industry of ‘distraction’, as symptoms of a society trying to evade its material foundations.” (M. Hansen 1993, 465)

What is left, then, is the old figure of the subject, and a return to autonomous art as a social and political praxis that could still resist the debacle. We shall see this option in discussing Adorno’s position.

**Benjamin’s political-messianic gamble with the new reproduction techniques**

Benjamin envisages a similar go-for-broke game in the broad and profound reorganization of the human experience that (he sees) taking place in the wake of the new technologies of reproduction. And here we find not only the reproduction technologies that are typically discussed in the realm of the arts, *i.e.* those of photography and cinema, but also the technologies more overtly reproducing and enforcing a world order.

\(^2\) See also M. Hansen’s book analyzing the three positions of Kracauer, Benjamin and Adorno on cinema (M. Hansen 2012). Not contesting by any means the work she has done on the same topic, the present essay takes a different path to analyze the same connection.
The Great War with its infernal machinery turning the world into rubble and humans into a senseless puzzle of pieces, and the spiral of hyperinflation that produces absurd amounts of worthless currency, they are, for Benjamin, the historical event that translate into a general poverty of the narrative and cultural experience that was characteristic for a (now obsolete) pace and organization of the relations of production and reproduction of the structures of domination in the earlier stage of the nineteen century capitalism. One-way street (written in the midst of the German depression), and Berlin Childhood around 1900 (first draft in 1932) both bear witness for this emptying up of the human experience not only in the literary material, but also in its stylistic treatment (Jeffries 2016, passim.). This withering of experience points the reader of the 1933 essay “Erfahrung und Armut” (GS II.1, 213 sqq) to a clear choice between a completely inefficient historical type of human experience and the “neue Barbarentum”, that could ensure the survival of mankind without or even against culture. It seems as Benjamin shares with Kracauer the opinion that they were witnessing a historical moment in which mankind could only chose between loosing outright or relinquishing all that was deemed human, letting it go as a dead weight in hope of a new experience that is more capable of grasping the reality and reacting to it. Indeed, the old model of experience, the “auratic” experience, and the new one have nothing in common but the name (Van Reijen & van Doorn 2001, 195). This new experience is essentially the articulation at a new level of technology and cognition in the dialectics of man and nature, that is possible, but by no means a historical necessity. Assuming a typical messianic stance, Benjamin sees in it the only chance of salvation, as Wiggershaus puts it:

“Either technology becomes a means of salvation, or there is no salvation. Either it can be put to work for the destruction of the mythical powers, or there is no freeing up from these powers.” (Wiggershaus 1997, 227-28)

And this experience that draws nearer to salvation is the object or argument of Benjamin’s hope. This form of “political messianism” (Talmon 1961) that asserts a central (median) dialectical position to the technology does, of course, bear a certain resemblance to that of the
saintsimonists (minus the belief in progress) and maintains a link with the underground current of utopianism. But being a dialectical materialist as he is, and looking for concrete phenomena that would substantiate such an assumption – just as Kracauer would in his “secular mode of sacred thought” (Lowenthal 1991, 9 sqq) –, Benjamin looks in the realm of arts and literature for concrete signs of this transformation. His early fascination with the German author of sci-fi novels Scheerbart (Steiner 2004, 75 sqq) is quite consistent with his interest in, and evaluation of the political potentialities of the French surrealist groups.

The question of method and style too seems to bring Benjamin and Kracauer closer in the second part of the 1920’. Kracauer’s micrologies became an important model for Benjamin in his programmatical turn to the analysis of most common and popular objects and practices as a way to descend into the hell of their present, and he repeatedly notes a “convergence” of their ways of seeing the popular culture (Eiland and Jennings 2014, 256 sq). But our point here is to analyse his gamble with photography and film, where the influence of Kracauer is, once again, significant.

Benjamin has written quite a few about photography (Puppe 1979) and film. But this interest only appears in the midtwenties, thus probably under the influence of Kracauer and Asja Lacs. In his busy schedule in Moscow, for instance, he not only tries to follow cinematic productions, but he even finds time to enter a polemical discussion about the soviet cinema (GS II.2., 743-746; 747-51; GS VI 292-409). But this interest in the “new art forms” is explicitly to show them as not complying with the traditional aesthetics (Puppe 1979; Hansen 2004) or even as not being ‘art’ at all. Moreover, photography and cinema are the domain for which is fought the last ideological battle against the traditional understanding of art and for the liberation from the old elements that make out of the arts a tool for the fascist propaganda.

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³ More research is needed to substantiate this claim, but if one tries to find a link between Benjamin’s interest and his personal and intellectual connections could only come to this conclusion. Nevertheless, the dialogue and the constant import of themes and concepts from Kracauer’s repertoire into his own is noticeable.
In the “Short history of photography” he takes up the task Kraeauer left untouched in his essay: to include photography itself in the dialectics of man and nature, and to show how it enters in a determined conjunction with the arts. Thus a large part of the essay is concerned with the cultural resistance to photography and the lengthy “misguided and confuse” debates about the status of photography in the realm of arts. There can be no doubt about the polemical and programmatical stance of the author: While it took time to return to the initial assessment of photography as being something different, on the same period photography continuously corroded the traditional understanding of the arts. With the withdrawal of the “author” behind a technical tool (or, rather, the author becoming itself a technical tool), the cult of the artistic genius is liquidated; and by its capacity to take snapshots and only mediated by this technical means and not by a creative consciousness, it captures in an objective way something present, with no interest in the perennial value of the photograph itself, departing from the cliché of ‘eternal art’, while the reproducibility gradually subverts the uniqueness of the artwork. He cites Tzara:

“When everything that called itself art was stricken with palsy, the photographer switched on his thousand candle-power lamp and gradually the light-sensitive paper absorbed the darkness of a few everyday objects. He had discovered what could be done by a pure and sensitive flash of light that was more important than all the constellations arranged for the eye’s pleasure.” (Benjamin 1977, 254)

But this process is tinged with the same dialectic at work in Kraeauer’s essay. While the chance lies in the liberation of consciousness from nature that photography is able to enact, the nature (i.e. the second nature, the capitalist society) is trying to “occupy the place at the table”. The greatest danger lies in the counter current that drags photography back in the realm of conventional arts.

Benjamin clearly follows a key idea of Kraeauer’s, that photography works outside the realm of meaning, when he describes the contemporary, perverted form of meaning, that affirms the economic laws of nature: the interest. In his discussion of the photographic portrait, he praises precisely this lack of interest in the representation of the subjects, and, conversely, the lack of meaning of the photograph itself, that has been
supplanted by a free association approach, and condemns the inverse, commercial approach that allies with the nullified bourgeois self-affirmation. In the fight for photography, the former is identified by Benjamin with a constructivist approach, the latter being typical for a “creative” attitude that is at work everywhere the true interest (the economic interest) is present. The illustrated magazine and a whole array of other cultural phenomena are cited here to show the danger of reification of all human relations (the dialectical concurrent of the liberation of consciousness) in a rant that begs to be cited:

“The more far-reaching the crisis of the present social order, the more rigidly its individual components are locked together in their death struggle, the more has the creative – in its deepest essence a sport by contradiction out of imitation – become a fetish, whose lineaments live only in the fitful illumination of changing fashion. The creative in photography is its capitulation to fashion. The world is beautiful = that is its watchword. Therein is unmasked the posture of a photography that can endow any soup can with cosmic significance but cannot grasp a single one of the human connexions in which it exist, even where most far-fetched subjects are more concerned with saleability than with insight. But because the true face of this kind of photographic creativity is the advertisement or association, its logical counterpart is the act of unmasking or construction.” (Benjamin 1977, 254 sq)

Benjamin will return at length to these arguments in the artwork essay, to develop the same radical attitude in two separate directions. Firstly, he strives to give shape to the consciousness, thus developing the materialist anthropology at core in his theory of experience. This is required by the coherence of the theory itself. One cannot in truth bank the hope for radical transformation of society in an obscure “photographic archive” of the whole world: this is too messianic a concept. One would look for a more concrete historical form of it. Benjamin pretends to have found it in the rise of a collective historical and political agent: the masses and their collective experience. In a twist that places him not so much in the proximity of Brecht – as Adorno bitterly claims in the correspondence (Adorno and Benjamin 1994, 1:168-175 passim) – but maybe even more in that of Kracauer, Benjamin sees as passé even the Dadaist movement and posits as the new avant-garde the phenomenon of mass entertainment in which he sees as well the risks and the benefits for a liberated perception and apperception of the masses.
Secondly, with the developments on the political stage in Weimar Germany in the early thirties of the last century, the sense of political urgency (that can be felt in Kracauer’s earlier piece in a more abstract – messianic – form) becomes all the more adamant. This is obviously the reason why Benjamin concretely names the two sides of the wager. The aestheticisation of politics, fascism, is the false escape from the lack of meaning of the nature, man, and world, the “galvanisation” of the older mythical categories to foster a narrow sighted politics based on the mystics of the leader as artist, and society as unified body striving to achieve a long lost unity. The politicisation of art, on the other hand, spells out the acceptance of the fact that the old ties that kept art in the realm of myth (symbolic order, for Kracauer) are now broken, and the entrance of the art in the political struggle for the transformation of mankind and the world is not only philosophically necessary, but inherently directed against the fascistic return of the negativity.

And the influence of Kracauer in the Kunstwerkessay goes beyond what we have already indicated thus far. It is not just the same dialectics that compels them both to consider photography and film a major historical event with down-to-earth, political and social consequences. Kracauerian motifs appear at the heart of Benjamin’s own theory of experience. Perhaps the most striking evidence is the “theory of distraction”. Apart from Howard Eiland (2003), who notices that Benjamin might have gotten the impulse for a positive consideration of distraction (“Zerstreuung”) in his efforts to describe the collective aesthetics from Kracauer’s short essay from 1926, the “Cult of distraction” (Kracauer n.d., 325 sqq), there seems to be little awareness that this arguably central category in Benjamin’s thought in the mid-1930s clearly owes to Kracauers concept of distraction.

To sum up, from the mid-1920s onwards, Benjamin seems to share with Kracauer a certain critical attitude towards the phenomena in the cultural realm that entails a secular messianic expectation. The philosophical outlines and a series of critical concepts of this intense scrutiny of the contemporary arts do seem again to be akin (M. Hansen 1993, 444). While they might not always share the same conclusion, they see in the new technologies taken over in the arts a turning point in the dialectics of man and nature.
Let me point out that this form of critical messianism, that Kracauer himself called “realism” – has little to do with what we would now recognise as a proper (Marxist) leftist intellectual position. Kracauer remained until the end stubbornly sceptical towards it, to the point that even while struggling to make a living in his Parisian exile, he refused to write for journals that were bound to an ideology for his intellectual demeanour – so D. Halévy’s opinion (Kracauer 2005, 520). I would contend that, in more general terms, for the Frankfurters, Kracauer was the model for a profane-messianic critique of culture and society, and his influence would collide with the more “volcanic”, and “hot” (and more intransigent position) of the likes of Horkheimer and Pollock. For Benjamin, Adorno, and Loewenthal, his influence is clearly to see in their continuous interest in religious motifs, in their attempt to weave the religious into their own critical analyses of the present, without succumbing neither to a messianic communism, nor a linear, Hegelian / Marxist historical dialectics.

Adorno: gambit declined

Kracauer’s specific philosophical and existential Haltung appears to have impressed Adorno from early on. It entailed a clear evaluation of the political, philosophical and cultural realities of the day, and this seems to me to have made a stronger and longer lasting impact on the young Wiesengrund than even the critical attitude towards the philosophical texts that pertained to the initial pupil – mentor aspect of their friendship. As Wiggershaus (1997, 85–86) and Müller-Doohm have observed, Kracauer from the early 1920’s developed his robust skepsis towards the main currents and solutions in the Weimar politics and culture into a personal, existential and intellectual Warten, that was on the same time intensely concerned, attentive, critical and, yes, perhaps, hopeful towards the developments around him. The main reason for his

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4 See for instance the observations of Fischer in his review of Adorno – Scholem correspondence (Fischer 2017). For the more important and long-reaching concept of “inverse theology” see (Weidner 2014).
skepticism seems to be his distaste for what Löwenthal called “Unzucht mit Gott” that he saw in the metaphysical passion of Lukacs, the messianic communism of Bloch, the hypostasised form in the George-circle, the galvanization of the spiritual in Rudolf Steiner, or other, lesser forms, and even in the new Old Testament translation by Buber and Rosenzweig. He seems to have taken all these efforts as misconstrued attempts to forcefully instil meaning and order in the world – and proposed instead to accept this radical religious, metaphysical and political Obdachlosigkeit and find the starting point of a new critical attitude in the reorientation of the human towards the immanent realities, a “waiting as reluctant openness towards the world” (2003, 77):

“den Schwerpunkt von dem theoretischen Ich auf das gesammtmenschlichen Ich zu verlegen und aus der atomisierten unwirklichen Welt der gestaltlosen Kräfte und der des Sinnes baren Größen einzukehren in die Welt der Wirklichkeit und der von ihr umschlossenen Sphären“ (Kracauer, cited by Wiggershaus 1997, 86)

Only this attitude, so Wiggershaus, could now lead to the understanding of the whole reality, the breach of the absolute. The young Wiesengrund is quick to adopt the evaluation of the cultural and political state of affairs, that suited his own evaluations of the contemporary music, and to adapt the Kracauerian methodical scepticism and return to the profane reality from an individualist standpoint bereft of all external theoretical superstructure of subjectivity: “we have to build our own house” (Wiggershaus 1997, 91).

This radical modernism of the young Wiesengrund would sure enough dissipate and find a new form in the later aesthetic theory; but the scepticism he will continue to profess until the end. A remnant of this early individualism is still decisive in the way Adorno builds his own “house of words”, as it were: the personal reminiscence and experience is not to be uprooted from his later writings, a feature that perhaps still has to do with Kracauer’s attitude, as Adorno himself seems to admit when he writes, in his 1964 article on Kracauer, that:

“[w]ithout being able to account for it fully, through Kracauer I perceived for the first time the expressive moment in philosophy: putting into words the thoughts that come into one’s head. The opposite moment, the moment of rigor, of
compelling objectivity in thought, took second place to it. [...] But what pressed for philosophical expression in him was an almost boundless capacity for suffering; expression and suffering are intimately related. Kracauer relationship to truth was that suffering entered the idea in undistorted, unmitigated form, whereas the idea dissipates suffering” (Adorno 1991, 161)

It is not beside the point to observe how Adorno takes up Kracauer in his own terms, and annexes him to his own intellectual biography. One could easily read of it a smugness that doesn’t bode well with Adorno’s character. Alas, this is not the case. He presents Kracauer as a kindred spirit in the effort to think when thinking has become all but impossible, other than from the standpoint of salvation, as the famous quote from the *Minima moralia* puts it.

As for Kracauer, it seems that he knew very well what to expect from his friend, that is the most radical critique, and one that came from the man itself and his understanding of their mutual relationship, and not from the need to defend some philosophical positions. Moreover, he understood to defend his work and to respond sometimes in pretty strong terms to what he perceived as inappropriate, even if that meant running the risk of a communication breakdown. Adorno, on the other side, is impressively consistent throughout their relationship in dealing out the most intense, I would even say passionate, critique to his friend’s works and actions. And even if in enough instances the evaluation is caustic and too close to an execution for the polite people of today, it proves that the two were in a relationship so close and meaningful that the contemporary use of the term “friendship” sometimes simply doesn’t fit. That leads to the fact that Kracauer is still present in the above cited text in the differences, disputes and controversies between the two over more than four decades, and not as the object of a character assassination.5

One would not be surprised, then, that Adorno doesn’t mince words when he asserts that many of his oldest friend works are fundamentally flawed and judges his career, in layman’s terms, as a

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5 This is all the more clear when one compares, for instance, the image of Kracauer Adorno conveys to Scholem in their correspondence with the “Curious realist”: the acrimonious comments and tone aside, he makes the same point in both places. See (Adorno and Scholem 2015, 399).
failure. But we need not be bothered by this: the far more telling thing here is that Adorno really took issue with some of Kracauers work precisely because he felt that what he was doing was potentially of great importance. When one has hopes, one runs the risk of being disappointed, and when one sees another as a fellow and friend in this rather passionate way, the disappointment could easily lead to a split.

This is the case especially in 1937, when Adorno tries to drum up a group intervention to get the old Friedel back to his senses, after reading his newest work, the Offenbach book (Adorno and Benjamin 1994, 1:240 sqq). He writes to Benjamin about his consternation and disappointment in the work, and even hints at an imminent severance of their relationship.

Surprisingly, it is for once Benjamin who calms the waters to some degree. He starts by remembering Wiesengrund that he shares the same position with Kracauer, and that the latter resigning from it with a book they can’t even be certain really represents his current position, has rather all-to-worldly reasons, in a time when finding enough work to go by in exile trumps meaningful work. And then he proceeds to formulate a truly amazing defence of the book as a concept against the book itself, calling it a failed attempt at a *Rettung* that takes the lesser form of an *Apologie* of a historical period that, and this is the point, clearly is not worthy of one (Adorno and Benjamin 1994, 1:244). Thus he implies that Kracauer fails in an endeavour that is closely related to his own: to save another era, just as he attempts with his Arcades project; and perhaps that failure is part and parcel of such projects.

Wiesengrund nevertheless sends his critique of the book to Kracauer, and motivates its sharpness as follows:

“[E]s kommt darauf nicht an und nicht einmal darauf, daß ich Dich kritisiere, um Dir Dinge zu sagen, die Du etwa nicht wüßtest. Ich greife Dich an, um Dich gegen Dich zu verteidigen, gegen eine Resignation, für die Du zu schade bist, und um an Deinen eigentlichen Ehrgeiz zu appellieren, an dem meiner sich geschult hat. Ich könnte Dir nichts gegen das Buch sagen, was Du nicht ebensogut wissen mußt wie ich.” (Adorno and Kracauer 2008, 359)

Kracauer’s rebuttal (Adorno and Kracauer 2008, 362-64) follows the lines of the good old “*schlagend, aber nicht treffend*”. He rejects the critique by simply qualifying it as a misinterpretation of his key concepts
and aims, that stem from an unwillingness to leave his own position. This counter, that sees Wiesengrund’s critique as narrow sighted and flat-out stupid (“töricht” the German word), but seemingly misses his good intentions might have lead to a considerable cooling off of their relationship, and a certain degree of resentment.

But let us return to the main issue. What Adorno from 1964 reflects upon, is the ways in which their thinking, at first sharing the same impetus, ended up diverging. The text is characterised by an astonishing level of sincerity, which makes our task now much easier: it helps us to pinpoint the continuities and to speak of a genus proximus inspite of the differentia specifica.

In this last evaluation, there are two interconnected points of contention: the risky thinking Kracauers, and his dubious “realism”. In Adorno’s view,

“his [Kracauer’s] work is tinged with a kind of amateurish thinking on his feet, just as a slackness damped self-criticism […] Ideas that are too heavily defended against the danger of error are of course lost in any case, and the risks Kracauer ran are not without a certain sly cautiousness. […] -[T]he idea that is not dangerous is not worth thinking: it is only that the victim of this danger is more often the idea itself than its object.” (Adorno 1991, 162)

I would summarise Adorno’s critique in this piece as follows: Kracauer, ultimately lacking the proper philosophical demeanour and tools, and being inherently adverse to dialectics and systematic thinking, was bound to eventually fell prey to one or the other of the lesser forms of realism or, rather, materialism. Since Kracauer, in Adorno’s evaluation, was epistemologically speaking trying to save the reality from the perils of theory by grounding its description solely in his own humanity, he was all but surely to need eventually to relinquish the height and dignity of this position in favour of either a moderate stance that somehow tries to accommodate, against itself, at least some sort of a systematic description following the hegemonic structures, or the silly naivety of an aloof description of reality resisting it simply by looking very closely to only a few, discarded objects. Skewing the dialecticisation of reality and theory, Kracauer would be left with only his own subjective powers, and as they faded, so would his access to the reality.
One could now see that it is not at all fortuitous that Adorno’s account of the whole intellectual path of Kracauer bears the title “A curious realist”. It allows him to showcase (not to the public, but to Kracauer himself) his own path in philosophy and the radical decisions he made along the way just as he is presenting (for the public) the path taken by his friend. But this entire critique is still not true for the 1930’s. And perhaps it is not entirely true for the sixties either. As we remember, Adorno himself, when confronted with the accusation of resignation, resorts to a vocabulary strikingly similar to what he sees Kracauer attempting at the beginning of his “Curious realist”. In his article from 1968, “Resignation”, Adorno justifies his whole thinking with the effort to have the thought express the suffering and still not to let it dissipate (Adorno 2003, 1:799). By this, he makes a pledge for the same redemptive messianism he sees Kracauer professing, and by this point, the differences between the two are negligible.

And still, given our analysis of Kracauer’s photography essay from 1927, it seems that he was more ambitious than that. The redemptive messianism, that makes his way in the titles of his last works, was not his plan earlier, as Adorno would have us believe. Kracauer’s utopian moment was that reality could be changed. This is the riskier idea, not the redemptive criticism. By not even recognising it as such, Adorno signals his own almost unconscious dismissal of this idea, especially when the means were the lesser forms of art.

Even after he takes on the phenomena of low, popular culture, like jazz and radio programmes, he doesn’t seem to open to them, he never seems prepare to take any serious risks when it comes to the new physiognomy of art and experience. He is rather always reluctant to open a communication with this realm of reality; he even goes as far as to negate it the character of reality, and deems such phenomena as pseudo-realities.

Of course, Adorno, too, acknowledges the importance of this displacement of aesthetics. But he constantly refuses to play the game. He sees this kind of passionate gamble (with photography or cinema, or any other art form for that matter) as a sort of distasteful dialectical impatience. This crude forms of critique – stemming from a messianic investment –, he argues, lack the proper dialectisation of the elements.
Firstly, there is nothing more to be expected out of it. As Kracauer would agree later, the revolutionary potential of photography and film are lost forever in the experience of Auschwitz, and one must hang on to the hope that it is still conserved in the arts as an (in)determinate negation of the world as it is. What is even more important is that, as shown eminently in the Dialectic of Enlightenment, these phenomena are inherently trapped in the mechanisms of culture industry, with no real possibility of engaging a decisive confrontation between man and nature in this or any other stage of world history. The go-for-broke game of history, that we can admire for the force with which it pushed in the forefront of the revolution the artistic phenomena (seen nevertheless in the same time as a practical device for the liberation of consciousness) takes for him the form of a game played for not letting the arts go bankrupt and enter completely in the pocket of the culture industry. There is no hope, but this sober conclusion does not make hope vanish altogether. It is kept as a vantage point in his own inverted messianism. The specific form of the confrontation between consciousness and reality Kracauer and Benjamin saw playing out in photography and film, the constellation, becomes the epistemology of a critique that, in all hopelessness, refuses to give up hope.

REFERENCES


