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## The Psychoanalytic Kracauer: Film, Narrativity and Imaginary Totality

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As most of us know the German-born emigrant theorist Siegfried Kracauer is generally regarded – together with André Bazin – as the leading representative of the so called realist film theory. His two books, *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947) and *Theory of Film* (1960) have been most influential especially in modern American writing on film. Kracauer's magnum opus, *Theory of Film*, introduces his realist views which in many ways resemble Bazin's more essayistic considerations. The discussion of the ontology of cinema covers the most part of the book but there is also a short survey on the spectator's role which, however, has often been neglected in the many analyses of Kracauer's views. Practically nobody ever refers to them. What interests me is the contradictory nature of these two approaches and especially the prominent psychoanalytic emphasis in his spectator analysis, which in many ways foreshadows Lacanian writing on cinema, although Kracauer, as I said, is hardly ever mentioned in these contexts. I shall discuss Kracauer's theory of the spectating subject and pay attention to some striking parallels between that and modern Lacanian hypotheses.

But let us start from some important aspects in the Kracauerian realist model. The spectator's functional importance is revealed already in the subtitle of *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. The ethical legitimation of cinema, says Kracauer, lies in its capacity to redeem physical reality and the spectator subject and to restore his/her lost contact with the

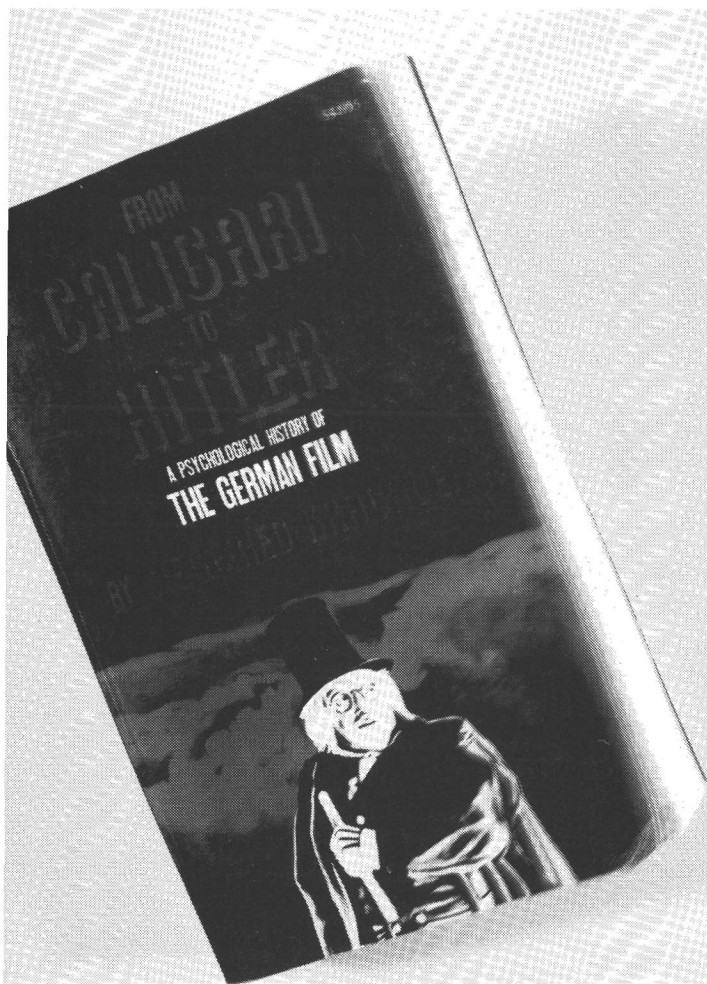
material flow of life, its objects and events.

We must not forget, Kracauer assumes, the most efficient property of the cinematic medium, its ability to "record and reveal physical reality"<sup>1</sup> which should naturally be considered the aesthetic basis of the medium. A realistic photograph, the starting point of Kracauer's film aesthetics, is in fact a part of nature. Just like Bazin Kracauer does not pay much attention to the rhetorics or expressivity of a mimetic photograph.

And because the traditional plastic arts aim at transforming reality, "photography proper" (in Kracauer's terms) and "truly cinematic films" do not need the label 'art'. Their ontological aspects are quite different from traditional arts.

It is the realistic function of cinema that enables film to restore the individual's contact with reality, the contact which was perished along with the destruction of ideologies and myths. In Kracauer's opinion modern man "touches reality only with his fingertips". When the mythico-ideological structure is lacking in human psyche, "Fragmentized individuals act out their parts in fragmentized reality".<sup>2</sup> It is cinema that gives reality a Gestalt, a structure, and through this the spectator's psyche is made whole.

As such Kracauer's idealistic view on the true nature of film may seem very mechanistic from the spectator's point of view. Here is the cinematic text, there is the spectator, who takes what is given and feels automatically whole. Although film appeals to emotions the spectator remains a conscious observer. But when the theorist sets out to consider the specta-



tor's role in cinematic signification, his conclusions actually seem quite opposite to the realistic model. Compare the following two quotations from the same book: "The cinema, then, aims at transforming the agitated witness into a conscious observer."<sup>3</sup> The second: "Films then, tend to weaken the spectator's consciousness. Its withdrawal from the scene may be furthered by the darkness in moviehouses. Darkness automatically reduces our contacts with actuality, depriving us of many environmental data needed for adequate judgements and other mental activities. *It lulls the mind.*"<sup>4</sup> (Emphasis added).

So the new model presupposes a weakening of consciousness in spectator. This hypothesis, which is the main core also in modern psychoanalytic film theory, serves in Kracauer's argumentation as the overall structure from which all his speculations of the spectator are derived. Just like Christian Metz<sup>5</sup> and Jean-Louis Baudry some ten years later Kracauer assumes that lowered consciousness results from the darkness of the theatre and, above all, the movement of the image. Movement, Kracauer thinks, does not only capture our attention: it also causes an apparent physical response, for instance muscle reflexes. This helps the spectator in identifying with fiction and the rational processes to weaken at the expense of emotions. When supposing that the spectator's consciousness changes Kracauer wants to find parallels between the filmic experience and altered states of consciousness outside cinema.

First he finds *hypnosis*.<sup>6</sup> To Kracauer the spectating

situation resembles hypnosis, which only shows how far he has wandered from the previous model of the conscious observer. Now the screen is just like the glittering object used by hypnotists to control the subject's gaze. The spectator gazes at the luminous object and cannot help submitting himself to the suggestions given from there.

But far clearer connection with modern psychoanalytic theory is *the analogy of dream*. The commercial Hollywood is often called a dream factory, but Kracauer is not interested in that kind of dreaming, the dream-like quality of film plots. What interests him is the dream nature of the actual image: "There is something in the abrupt immediacy and shocking veracity of the pictures that justifies their identification as dream images."<sup>7</sup> We notice that the realistic features of the cinematic image that he earlier praised for redeeming reality and spectator, are now dream-like *par excellence*. Is it dream that is the final redeemer?

You may recall that Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz, the two leading pioneers of modern psychoanalytic film theory,<sup>8</sup> also compare the watching situation to dreaming. Metz' hypothesis of "filmic state", the special state of consciousness of film spectator, resembles dream in many respects. The subject sits still, his/her reality testing is often practically nil and (s)he may forget that (s)he is at the cinema. A spectator absorbed in fiction may well "dream" a part of the picture, which is manifested as a kind of waking up feeling at the end of the film. According to Metz the filmic state differs from actual dreaming only in

that now the subject has dreamt something that (s)he has really seen, something that was in fact in his/her field of perception in the outside world. Metz speaks of a paradoxical hallucination: hallucination, because the levels of reality are mixed up and reality testing is unstable, paradoxical because the final psychic production or experience is not endogenic – it does not come as a whole from the spectator's head like a real hallucination.

Kracauer draws nicely the same conclusions but in slightly different terms. He defines two categories in filmic dreaming which are based both on the properties of the film text and the psychic processes of the spectator.<sup>9</sup> On one hand the subject may dream a) towards the object, which means that the pictured object tempts the spectator to analyse the image, the secrets of the object in a dream-like manner, "through the maze of multiple meanings and psychological correspondences". In other words, there is a perceptual stimulus which the spectator analyzes – from which he draws conclusions. On the other hand b) the image may also evoke a chain of personal associations and connotations which is of course due to the afore-mentioned lowering of consciousness, or, one may say, secondary processes fading, primary processes taking over. Now the associations break free from the original stimulus – the actual image – and flow mainly from the spectator's subconsciousness: "the image itself recedes after it has mobilized his previously repressed fears or induced him to revel in a prospective wish-fulfillment."<sup>10</sup> So the pleasure principle and Lacanian desire step literally into the picture. In this context one might perhaps point out that this kind of signification is not typical only of dream or cinema, but – if we believe poststructuralist theorists – everyday communication follows the same principles. When somebody talks to us we add connotations and associations both from the general cultural reservoir and also from our own personal psychohistory. Only this time the process is perhaps more preconscious or subconscious, that is, we do not recognize our associative procedure. However, the constant sliding of signifieds which, for instance, the Lacanian theory preaches is based just on this.

Reasonably enough, Kracauer emphasizes that the two kinds of cinematic dreaming cannot be very strictly separated. They are mixing together all the time, so we may conclude that the filmic experience for Kracauer is a mixture of the text-based connotations and the subject's personal associations. Whether there is, after all, anything specifically dream-like in this kind of signification remains open to argument.

Kracauer bases his dream hypothesis on artificial regression which the cinematic situation supposedly causes. The spectator, according to Kracauer, regresses into childhood, its magical world, where reality was controlled by means of fantasy (or dreams, as Kracauer puts it). Now consider the following quotation from Baudry: " – the cinematographic apparatus brings about a state of artificial regression. It artificially leads back to an anterior phase of the subject's development. It is the desire to return to this phase, an early state of development with its own forms of satisfaction which may play a determining role in his desire for cinema and the pleasure he finds in it."<sup>11</sup> Also Christian Metz describes the filmic pleasure in quite the same terms. So it seems that cinema as an institution serves some basic, profound needs of the individual.

Kracauer shares this opinion. Real cinephils, he claims, are not eventually interested in particular films as such or their stories, rather "what they really crave is for once to be released from the grip of consciousness, lose their identity in the dark, and let sink in – the images as they happen to follow each other on the screen."<sup>12</sup> In Lacanian terms: there is a basic need in the individual to free himself/herself from the sym-

bolic order and dive into the imaginary. The Kracauerian plenitude of cinematic reality turns out to be, in the end, imaginary plenitude, his often stated "flow of life" is finally addressed as "the glistening wheel of life". The story or plot (or we may say the symbolic) is often secondary, subjected to images (imaginary), or as Kracauer says, "images of life as such – glittering, allusive, infinite life".<sup>13</sup>

There is something very Lacanian in the overall argument of Kracauer. For, if there is satisfaction there must also be lack. In Kracauer's opinion cinema compensates the basic lack in modern man, the fragmentariness of reality which I mentioned earlier. Again in Lacanian terms, Kracauer's reality is threatening, castrating; the individual feels helpless in the world and in the complex net of social forces. There is no possibility to a coherent world view, simple cause-effect relations cannot be traced.

Now we see that cinema makes reality whole, turns it into magnificent totality, leaves the subject temporarily lacking nothing. And when the spectator identifies with the world of fiction, he is transformed into an omnipotent, all-perceiving subject. Notice that Metz uses almost exactly these words when defining the spectator finally as a transcendental subject. Anyway, the state thus achieved no doubt compensates the castrating features of Kracauerian reality, of the symbolic order.

However, in Kracauer's theory the cinematic situation is not a continuous imaginary identification; from time to time the symbolic takes over. "Every moviegoer will have observed that spells of trance – like absorption alternate with moments in which the drugging effect of the medium seems to wear off. Here the momentous issue of the significance of film experience arises."<sup>14</sup> Return to the symbolic also restores the rational thinking of the spectator which is of course necessary in order to understand the events on the screen. So the spectating process seems to be a continuous switching between symbolic and imaginary – a description that may better explain the cinematic situation than the analogy of dream.

I have here briefly pointed out the most striking similarities between Kracauer and the Lacanian film theory. I hope that further discussion will clarify these points.

## Notes

1. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film. The Redemption of Physical Reality*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press 1979 (1960), p. 28
2. *Ibid.*, 294, 298.
3. *Ibid.*, 58.
4. *Ibid.*, 159.
5. See e.g. Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema. The Imaginary Signifier*. Trans. Celia Britton et al. London: Macmillan 1983 (1982). Orig. 1973-1976, p. 103 et seq. Similar views may, in part, result from common sources, e.g. Edgar Morin and Henri Wallon, although Metz does not mention Kracauer.
6. Kracauer, op. cit., 160.
7. *Ibid.*, 164.
8. See Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in Cinema". Trans Jean Andrews and Bertrand Augst. (Orig. 1975) In Philip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology. A Film Theory Reader*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press 1986. Christian Metz, op. cit., esp. 101 et seq.
9. Kracauer, op. cit., 164-165.
10. *Ibid.*, 165.
11. Baudry, op. cit., 313.
12. Kracauer, op. cit., 159-160.
13. *Ibid.*, 170.
14. *Ibid.*, 171-172. Cf. Metz, op. cit., 106-108.