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Kracauer's Theory of History and Film

Gertrud Koch

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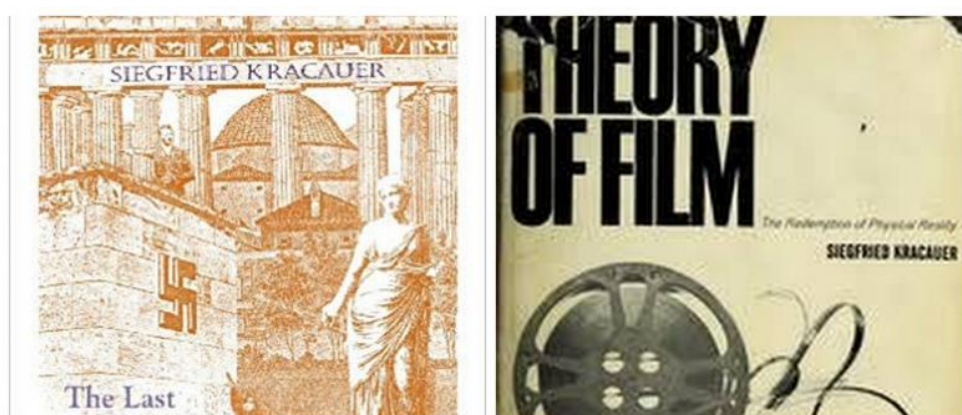


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Reading Siegfried Kracauer's letters and texts in which he discusses his own efforts it becomes clear that he has a consistent interest in philosophy and also considers himself a philosopher. Therefore, in the following, I would like to try to discuss Kracauer, using his own concepts.

Kracauer, the Realist

Usually, one uses the term “realism” either to describe a style or as an epistemological, philosophical position. When he uses the term, Kracauer surely must mean more than a style, because he pursues a concept of reality that has something to do with philosophical realism, but is not affiliated with it. I surmise that the strong concept of reality (“the physical reality”)—which, after all, was primarily developed in his book *Theory of Film*¹—has a very broad kind of “background feed” derived from highly diverse sources. It is also about the relationship of science, sociology, philosophy, and aesthetics, something that always interested Kracauer and linked him to the basic approach taken by critical theorists of the Frankfurt School. As early as the nineteen-twenties he wrote a wide variety of reviews that had much to do with the scientific theory emerging at the time. Interestingly enough, however, in *Theory of Film* he occasionally refers quite positively to a very specific author without ever quo-

1. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* [1960] (Princeton 1997).

ting him more extensively or describing his work. That author is Alfred Whitehead. Most readers overlook this because Whitehead's field is completely different. In film studies or film theory one would not necessarily begin by reading Whitehead just because Kracauer mentioned him once or twice.² Yet, when one reads further, one notices that there are certain analogies. The separation between the sciences and the humanities opens up a kind of opposition in which philosophical realism would refer to the world as fact, while Kracauer's playful language famously does not speak of the "facts," but of the "things." How does he get this idea? There is, after all, no one on the other side with a relativizing argument. I conjecture that he is more influenced by Whitehead than he himself inscribed in his references. Whitehead developed a pioneering, quasi-scientific theory, which he called "cosmology." What is essential to Kracauer is, however, that Whitehead gives up on the separation between the two cultures and thus has a concept of reality and the objects with which we live "in space," as it were. The previously blatant oppositions are dissolved by flowing constellations, so to speak, that produce relationships between things, facts, and people. In this kind of concept of reality, therefore, it is no longer about separating out individual elements so as to enlarge and observe them, because then that would result in exactly the same problem that Kracauer described in his essay on photography: the closer I get to something, the less I see. Today we would talk about pixilization, which only allows us to recognize an abstract pattern. We are familiar with this experience of perception from thought experiments conducted by scientific theorists. For instance, when I, with the knowledge of the scientist, ask myself what solid objects actually are, I can no longer say that they are a self-contained entity. Rather, it is about a complex object made up of thousands and thousands of molecules—which, in turn, have various structures of their own, etc. Yet, when one opens up to it, one is suddenly confronted with the problem of shifting the world into a fluctuating context. Tellingly, Kracauer refers to Whitehead in order to clear up the concept of life when he writes:

*Whitehead, for one, was deeply aware that scientific knowledge is much less inclusive than aesthetic insight, and that the world we master technologically is only part of the reality accessible to the senses, the heart. The concept of life may also designate this reality which transcends the anemic space-time of science.*³

This seems to be a central figure for Kracauer: the river of life and physical reality, two major concepts that are related to each other in *Theory of Film*.⁴

With this in mind, another question now arises: what sort of function does film fulfill for Kracauer? In my opinion the error in the reception of Kracauer lies in the fact that one wanted to characterize him simply as a realist. Yet, by no means is he concerned with a simple, reflective relationship; rather, he is interested in a very complicated epistemology of the camera as a device that records, and thus is always capturing the flow of reality, is capable of recording it in the process of becoming, as it were. One might also say that Kracauer predetermines something that Bill Viola ascribes to video technology many years later, in *The Porcupine and the Car* (1981). Viola writes,

2. Kracauer refers to Alfred Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* [1925] (New York 1948), and *Adventures of Ideas* [1933] (New York 1955).

3. Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 170. Alfred Whitehead's most famous book was *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (1929), which revolves around the processual and the evolutionary basis of organic nature. One can say that this embeds the isolated objects of science in the eventfulness of historical time.

4. Cf. Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 170.

One of the most fascinating aspects of video's technical evolution, and the one that makes it most different from film, is that the video image existed for many years before a way was developed to record it. . . . Taping or recording is not an integral part of the system. Film is not film unless it is filming (recording). Video, however, is 'videoing' all the time, continually in motion, putting out 30 frames, or images, a second. . . . Video's roots in the live, not recorded, is the underlying characteristic of the medium. . . . When one makes a videotape, one is interfering with an ongoing process, the scanning of the camera. . . . In film. . . the basic illusion is of movement, produced by the succession of still images flashing on the screen. In video, stillness is the basic illusion: a still image does not exist because the video signal is in constant motion scanning across the screen.⁵

For Kracauer the camera becomes an “instrument” that can capture the motion, as it were, of material, physical reality. Around forty years later, Viola said that what was interesting about video technology is that it was originally intended to be broadcast. Hence, he used it for his video works as a way of transmitting something live. For him, film is, in turn, always a method of recording, meaning that film records something and can then show it later, while video only transmits at first. Even when video became a recording medium ten to twenty years later, he continued to think of it as a more “live” medium than film. However, one should not read these theories as fixed ontologies aiming at a reality that is quasi recognized and then embodies the truth. That is what Kracauer is accused of: establishing ontologically what film “is.” So, when one says that, for Kracauer, the camera records what is live and hence something that belongs to physical reality, one might object to that by saying that this is a construct of natural history. Yet, for him, reality is something like the “environment” in which we live. First of all, it is not about whether this reality can be reproduced or not, or whether we can recognize reality; rather, the camera is immersed in this river and hence transmits the living current, while at the same time it can store it, as it were, in a second medium. That is a very brief description of the concept of what the camera can do, in Kracauer’s eyes. It can penetrate reality, because it can capture the environment. Interpreting it in this way, it becomes apparent that the camera has a systemic function, because it becomes, to a certain extent, part of this reality, and at the same time, it is a medium that allows us to experience ourselves as part of this living reality. This embodied audience is the focus of Mason Allred’s essay.⁶

Kracauer and the Critique of Historicism

Continuing to think about the fundamental assumptions described above, one could derive from it the precise analogies that Kracauer discusses in his second long book, posthumously published: *History: The Last Things Before the Last*.⁷ The famous analogies involving film, photography, and the work of the historian are confronted with a similar problem: the impenetrability of reality, which cannot be objectified to the extent that we can see it in front of us, as an object, reflect upon it through our facilities of cognition, and then simply read it out of the mirror of our perception. The consequences Kracauer draws from this are part of a critique of scientific positivism. He implements a dimension of time theory when he says, “The opposite, no less powerful aspect of chronological time is that of an empty medium.”⁸ Chronological time is an empty medium that has no reality

5. Bill Viola, “The Porcupine and the Car,” in *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973–1994*, Bill Viola (London 1998), 62f.

6. See Mason Allred’s essay in this volume.

7. Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before the Last* (Princeton 1994). The first edition was published 1969, three years after Kracauer’s death, and edited by his friend and colleague from Columbia University, the art historian Paul Oskar Kristeller for Oxford University Press.

8. *Ibid.*, 167.

empty medium that has no reality, but counts time as if it were a measuring gauge. All possible experiences are carried along in this chronology of time, even though they basically have no context. Kracauer says that pure chronology cannot be a context; it is simply a measuring tool that does not produce any sort of context, but merely identifies individual points in time. Now, however, the problem is that many historians tend to view chronological time logically, from the fact that “a” comes before “b,” it follows that “b” is a result of “a.” Causal keys are drawn from narratives. In Kracauer’s concept of reality, time is something completely different. It is an internalized sense that we use to organize and orient ourselves in our world and our lives. Yet, this argument is not a denial of chronological, physical time; it simply points out that chronological time is not in and of itself a determining factor.

In his history book, Kracauer moves on to one of his major opponents, historicism.⁹ Ultimately, in his critique of historicism, Kracauer is disturbed by the narrative principle of causation. So, in his eyes, the problem of historicism is that it always has to invent pieces of history in order to make its chronological causes seem plausible. Especially in the famous chapter seven, “General History and the Aesthetic Approach,” he devotes himself to the problem that agents of historicism become authors at certain points, shifting to fiction in order to be able to present the unity of epochs derived from chronology. Kracauer thus accuses historicism of aestheticizing history.

“The Aesthetic Approach”—History and Its Relationship to Aesthetics

In his history book, Kracauer presents a whole chapter on the question of “General History and the Aesthetic Approach.” The main argument in this chapter is based on the assumption that “general history” (for example, the history of large entities, such as a big, geographical, temporal unit like Henri Pirenne’s History of Europe), internally driven by its own logic, must slide into fiction in order to be able to tell the story as it wants it to be told. The “general historian” has “to cope with a tremendous problem—the antinomy of chronological time.”¹⁰

“The antinomy of chronological time” stems from temporality itself: chronology doesn’t exclude simultaneity—but simultaneity cannot be the foundation for a causal connection, for instance, the fact that different things happen at the same time and/or in the same place cannot count as evidence of their interrelatedness; neither does a sequential order of events allow one to conclude that one event caused the next. The chronological time is “an empty medium,” Kracauer writes, “a flow carrying with it phantom units and insignificant aggregates of happenings.”¹¹

How then does the historian give meaning to loose facts and “insignificant aggregates”? When the unattainable goal of general history is to transform facts into a full picture of past “real life units” (an allusion to Leopold von Ranke’s notorious definition of the historian’s task to figure out, “how it actually was”), then the historian has to tell a story that is told from “the law of perspective”:

His efforts in this direction are facilitated by two circumstances. The first is the effect of the “law of perspective.” Operating in the macro

9. Which is dealt with in particular in Nicholas Baer’s essay in this volume.

10. Kracauer, History, 166.

11. Ibid., 167.

*dimension, the general historian reviews the potentially available evidence from an appreciable distance. At the place he is occupying detail recedes and the air becomes rarefied. He is in the measure alone with himself—more alone than he would be in the micro dimension where hosts of facts are apt to crowd in on him. But the less he is exposed to their pressures, the more he will feel free (and entitled) to give rein to his formative powers. And this naturally relieves him of inhibitions in his recourse to expedients and adjustments.*¹²

12. Ibid., 168.

At this doorway the historian enters the realm of fiction and he does so because, “the genre forces the hands of its devotees. . . . Many of them [the adjustments] serve to strengthen the impression of continuity over time.”¹³ They serve narrative coherence and bridge the cataracts of contingent time jumps— “[a]nd this brings the age-old controversy about the relations between history and art into focus.”¹⁴

13. Ibid., 171.

14. Ibid., 175 (ed. note).

Aesthetically, it is the use of language that aims to deepen the understanding of past worlds. And aiming at the whole world of human tissue, there are specific talents at stake, those that are comparable to the talents of artists and doctors:

To the extent that the historian produces art he is not an artist but a perfect historian. This is what Namier means when he compares the great historian with a ‘great artist or doctor.’ The emphasis is on the art of the great doctor; and the rationale of the comparison lies in the fact that both the doctor and the historian operate in the orbit of the ‘Lebenswelt’, dealing with human realities which, to be absorbed and acted upon, require of them the diagnostician’s aesthetic sensibilities. Burckhardt is aware of this—he would be. ‘That is something these people as well as a few others no longer know,’ he writes to Gottfried Kinkel in 1847, ‘that real history writing requires that one live in that fine intellectual fluid which emanates to the searcher from all kinds of monuments, from art and poetry as much as from historians proper . . .’¹⁵

15. Ibid., 177.

But it would be an incomplete reading of the book if one were to assert that the critique of general history’s internal need to build an aesthetic bridge leading from fact to meaning entails a general verdict that would ban aesthetics from history. What Kracauer has in mind with the ongoing analogies of photography, film, and historiography is not the non-aesthetic, but a different kind of aesthetics. The epic novelist who writes “under the law of perspective” is himself a historic character of the nineteenth century and its artistic forms and genres that are “under the law of perspective.” Once this law was broken—and perspectivism underwent Nietzsche’s criticism and revision—the optical metaphor inscribed itself in another time and in Kracauer. The metaphorical analogy between the historiographer and the filmmaker clearly replaces one aesthetic approach with another. And again, it is the artist Marcel Proust who has the sensibility to draw our attention to the changing perspectives that oscillate between the factual look and meaningful perception. Kracauer refers to Proust’s description of his rising awareness of this difference in his experience of once having seen his mother as nothing more than just an old woman who has nothing to do with his beloved object and the image of her he

has in his mind.¹⁶ It was the distancing photographic gaze that mediated this estrangement.

But I want to go back for a moment to the underlying problem of perspective that was so crucial to Nietzsche. Let me quote the famous paragraph seventy-eight from *The Gay Science*, where, in a nutshell, some of Kracauer's concerns are developed:

What we should be Grateful for—It is only the artists, and especially the theatrical artists, who have furnished men with eyes and ears to hear and see with some pleasure what everyone is in himself, what he experiences and aims at: it is only they who have taught us how to estimate the hero that is concealed in each of these common-place men, and the art of looking at ourselves from a distance as heroes, and as it were simplified and transfigured—the art of ‘putting ourselves on the stage’ before ourselves. It is thus only that we get beyond some of the paltry details in ourselves! Without that art we should be nothing but foreground, and would live absolutely under the spell of the perspective which makes the closest and the commonest seem immensely large and like reality in itself. Perhaps there is merit of a similar kind in the religion which commanded us to look at the sinfulness of every individual man with a magnifying-glass, and made a great, immortal criminal of the sinner; in that it put eternal perspectives around man, it taught him to see himself from a distance, and as something past, something entire.¹⁷

What Kracauer ascribes to the new optical media as the capacity to fill the “empty medium” of chronological time, Nietzsche ascribes to art itself: the aesthetic allows us to see ourselves as “something past and whole”—as an aesthetic fiction. For Nietzsche, the “aesthetic approach” is the answer to the “law of perspective” that entails the antinomy of general history. The distance provided by a single perspective is a pre-condition for self-reflection, and doing so means “to view oneself” as “something past.”

“History” is a philosophical concept—one that unfolds Hegelian self-reflection under the condition of time—the process of becoming aware of one's own historicity. What remains from the “law of perspective,” which generated the historical subject as a subject of history, as Foucault called it? For Kracauer, artistic practice distorts things out of perspective and displaces them, and maybe he learned this, as Nietzsche did, “from artists”:

What one should Learn from Artists. —What means have we for making things beautiful, attractive, and desirable, when they are not so? —and I suppose they are never so in themselves! We have here something to learn from physicians, when, for example, they dilute what is bitter, or put wine and sugar into their mixing-bowl; but we have still more to learn from artists, who in fact, are continually concerned in devising such inventions and artifices. To withdraw from things until one no longer sees much of them, until one has even to see things into them, in order to see them at all—or to view them from the side, and as in a frame—or to place them so that they partly disguise themselves and only permit of perspective views—or to look at them through coloured glasses, or in the

16. See Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris 1922).

17. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom* (“La gaya scienza”), Book Second, trans. Thomas Common (New York 1924), 109f., accessed March 10, 2015, <https://archive.org/stream/completenietasch10nietuoft#page/108/mode/2up>

*light of the sunset—or to furnish them with a surface or skin which is not fully transparent: we should learn all this from artists, and moreover be wiser than they. For this fine power of theirs usually ceases with them where art ceases and life begins; we, however, want to be poets of our lives, and first of all in the smallest and most commonplace matters.*¹⁸

The god's eye perspective in general history dissolves into the artist's eye that decenters the subject—when history bursts into histories, it is not so much in favor of relativisms (Nietzsche's solution for the idiots) as it is of skepticism: truth (historical) does not lie in each perspective, as historicism wanted us to believe, but in the mighty challenge of changing perspectives/history.

*Our new 'Infinite.' —How far the perspective character of existence extends, or whether it have any other character at all, whether an existence without explanation, without 'sense' does not just become 'nonsense,' whether, on the other hand, all existence is not essentially an explaining existence—these questions, as is right and proper, cannot be determined even by the most diligent and severely conscientious analysis and self-examination of the intellect, because in this analysis the human intellect cannot avoid seeing itself in its perspective forms, and only in them. We cannot see round our corner: it is hopeless curiosity to want to know what other modes of intellect and perspective there might be: for example, whether any kind of being could perceive time backwards, or alternately forwards and backwards (by which another direction of life and another conception of cause and effect would be given). But I think that we are to-day at least far from the ludicrous immodesty of decreeing from our nook that there can only be legitimate perspectives from that nook. The world, on the contrary, has once more become 'infinite' to us: in so far we cannot dismiss the possibility that it contains infinite interpretations. Once more the great horror seizes us—but who would desire forthwith to deify once more this monster of an unknown world in the old fashion? And perhaps worship the unknown thing as the 'unknown person' in future? Ah! there are too many ungodly possibilities of interpretation comprised in this unknown, too much devilment, stupidity and folly of interpretation, —our own human, all too human interpretation itself, which we know. . . .*¹⁹

Nietzsche's deliberations seem to have made a great impression on Kracauer. For once the law of perspective itself is broken, one sees very clearly that Kracauer still adheres to his preference for optical metaphors, as well as for the optical world. Now, however, the question arises: What becomes of the optical primacy of the photograph when one wants to liquefy the internal technical perspectivism of the optic lens? And thus, we quickly come back to film, because film is, in fact, a multi-perspectival undertaking. I can turn the camera; I can move it along a variety of axes—and thus the horizon becomes permanently fluid. Even though I can always capture it in the framing, film is basically multi-perspectival, and if need be, I can ask what kind of perspective a film actually takes. That, however, would no longer be an optical perspective, but a metaphorical one, which should be used to comprehend the film's intentions. One famous metaphorical question is: What is this film actually about? Is it about death and life or life and death—or neither of them? Kracauer

18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom* ("La gaya scienza"), *Book Forth: Sanctus Januarius*, trans. Thomas Common (New York 1924), 233, accessed March 10, 2015, <https://archive.org/stream/completenietasch10nietuoft#page/232/mode/2up>

19. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom* („La gaya scienza“), *Book Fifth: We Fearless Ones*, trans. Thomas Common (New York 1924), 340f., accessed March 10, 2015, <https://archive.org/stream/completenietasch10nietuoft#page/340/mode/2up>

himself seems to understand the empirical side of this problem mainly through the concept of experience. And so, he pursues the question: How do we actually have experiences with and through the film? Here, Kracauer is still talking about the old experimental aesthetic of psycho-physical correspondences; about relationships, not simple contrasts. If, however, we include the media construction, we recognize the link to the myth of Medusa that Kracauer uses as explanation. One can see Medusa's head in Perseus's shield, but if one looks at it directly, one will, in horror, turn to stone. One cannot withstand the real horror; a medium for the experience, as it were, is included: the shield. Here, it is about a three-part relationship: something is shown in something, and the process of showing instigates the person who sees it to act. Here, we must consider Kracauer's stronger relationship to reality, because he says that images react. But it is not true that the images reflect something on a scale of one to one. On the contrary, they show only a section, and thus create significance, and it is only through this significance that an act can be experienced. For this, Kracauer's book goes back to Proust (as did the photography essay) and his concept of experience. Basically, media theorists always refer to the same place in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. It is in this place that the difference in experience is described, when the narrator suddenly sees his mother as nothing more than an old woman. His internal picture of his mother is confronted with the physical object. Proust calls this the photographic gaze. Here, we will find Kracauer's model again: I see something as part of physical reality and no longer as an idealized, internal image. This possibility of distancing oneself through the photographic gaze, through the film camera, or, more generally through art—to which Kracauer refers via Proust—can also be described by paragraph seventy-eight in Nietzsche's *Gay Science*.

Now, if one reads Nietzsche, Proust, and Kracauer together, one arrives at an interesting combination of the visual metaphor and a metaphor related to time. For Nietzsche finishes this paragraph by saying that it is only by accepting a gaze entirely outside oneself that the historical gaze is created. Thus, a nice constriction of the construct of the history of ideas manifests here, just as out of the optical in Kracauer's philosophy, something like a media philosophical, film theoretical position can arise. The idea of seeing something historically means being able to see something from a distance. And to see historically means seeing it still as a whole—or, as Nietzsche says, as something past and whole. At the same time, it is a gaze that Nietzsche describes as the legacy of religion. We see ourselves, so to speak, narcissistically enough, as the famous criminal or sinner—and naturally, we can do this only by appropriating a gaze from outside ourselves. Now, one can argue that this whole dialectic between the epistemological characteristics of the optical metaphor—the mechanical, the instrumental, and the aesthetic—this connection that Kracauer first formulates as the impenetrable legacy of historicism—also naturally applies to him, as well. This means that one probably cannot escape at all from the pitfalls of historical philosophy. In 1966 Kracauer presented an outline for his book (later its seventh chapter) to the legendary group, *Poetik und Hermeneutik* (Poetics and Hermeneutics), under the title *Das Ästhetische als Grenzerscheinung der Historie* (the aesthetic as a manifestation on the verge of history). Among the participants were renowned historians and literary theorists, who added many of Kracauer's implicit arguments. Thus, the proximity to the problem of perspective was dealt with several times, by Reinhardt Koselleck and Christian

Meier, for instance, who points out that the “form of ‘multiple-perspectivism’ resulting from the constant change in distance” has the task of writing the history ‘de notre siècle’ . . . to develop identification and perspective.”²⁰ Kracauer’s position once again developed very clearly in this discussion:

I start with the problem of general history, which I contrast according to fields of special history, such as social history, the history of law, the history of individual arts . . . My main objection to the possibility of a synthetic general history is that historians try to present events occurring over the course of time as a unified plan, meaning, they present something as consistent when it is per se not at all unified and consistent. One of the best means of manipulating this is, of course, aesthetic composition in historiography. Art, that is, an aesthetic means of presentation, helps the historiographer to aim for consistency, which, in reality, does not exist in history.²¹

Here, Kracauer becomes a critic of ideology in two ways. He criticizes both historiography, which is hidden behind the aesthetics, as it were, and aesthetics, which acts as if it were able to represent causal coherencies. Out of these two kinds of critique, film represents, for him, the potential of a different way of writing history, which, in turn, has something to do with the fact that the camera always records more than is intended. That means that whatever is intentional about human activity is suddenly broken off. The film/aesthetic conception—and this is, so to speak, Kracauer’s realism—now lies in the fact that the diversity of a reality that cannot be broken down remains intact, as a rebel underground. The potential of film also always contains other, completely different histories. As a romantic idea of film as a medium that avoids these kinds of intentional setups, one might say that the film is the medium of this flow.

The History of Media and Media Historiography

What are the consequences of the observations Kracauer developed in his book on film theory and history? What does it actually mean—historicization in a medium that did not exist at the time when the thematic events occurred? For one can enrich language in terms of historicism with the sensitivity of the doctor and the author, but for eras that knew no visual media, what actually changes? Here, we can cite an interesting little genealogy: Kracauer’s own arguments are strictly historical, when he says that there are ways of experiencing and seeing things that are so influenced by the media familiar to us, their operations so determined by the same media, that they are simply incapable of showing us a world in which these media have not existed. Deontologizing that a little, one could ask whether media were, therefore, created in abrupt leaps, or if there might not possibly be optical metaphors that basically spell these contexts of meaning “backward.” One of these cases is, naturally, Madame Dubarry—both the historical figure and the film (MADAME DUBARRY (D 1919)). Dubarry was the working-class girl who rose to become the king’s mistress, and was then guillotined because she was considered an aristocrat. All of these stories about the aesthetics of the guillotine as a medium that created chains of meaning can be traced back to one study, *The Guillotine and the Terror*²² by the French historian Daniel Arasse. Arasse points out that the images of the guillotined make up an established genre—are even historical

20. “Form der ‘Multiperspektivität’, des ständigen Wechsels der Distanz [...], der Identifikation und Perspektive zu entwickeln”, Christian Meier, “Diskussion,” in *Die nicht mehr schönen Künste: Grenzphänomene des Ästhetischen*, ed. Poetik und Hermeneutik (Munich 1968). Reprinted as an appendix to the new edition of Siegfried Kracauer’s *Geschichte: Vor den letzten Dingen*, Werke, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main 2009), 408. (Transl. A.M.).

21. “Ich gehe von der Problematik der allgemeinen Geschichtsschreibung (General History) aus, der ich die nach Bereichen gesonderte Geschichtsschreibung (Special History, wie z.B. Sozialgeschichte, Rechtsgeschichte, Geschichte einzelner Künste) gegenüberstelle. [...] Mein Haupteinwand gegen die Möglichkeit einer synthetischen Allgemeingeschichte zielt darauf, dass hier versucht wird, die Ereignisse im Ablauf der Zeit als einen einheitlichen Plan darzustellen—d.h. etwas in Konsistenz darzustellen, was per se gar nicht einheitlich und konsistent ist. Eines der besten Mittel dieser Manipulation ist selbstverständlich die ästhetische Komposition in der Geschichtsschreibung. Die Kunst, d.h. ästhetische Mittel der Darstellung verhelfen dem Historiografen dazu, eine Konsistenz zu erzielen, die realiter in der Geschichte nicht vorgegeben ist.“, Kracauer, *Geschichte*, 398f. (Transl. A.M.).

22. Daniel Arasse, *The Guillotine and the Terror* (London 1991).

images, because in the eighteenth century the portrait was considered a sign of a person's historicity. He argues that the guillotine unleashed an endless array of pictures of severed heads, as well as the death mask and the practice of photographing the dead. There is, for example, the photographic technique of placing the head next to the body.²³ The interesting thing is that Ernst Lubitsch finishes his classic 1919 portrait of the woman by showing a severed head (which, by the way, did not appear at all in the American version). It is, as a matter of fact, a metaphor for revolution; a sign of history, as Immanuel Kant would consider it. In Lubitsch's film, however, there is also a special sense of irony—namely, that it is actually the 'proletariat' woman who is not allowed to rise in the world. A sideways transition once again turns the whole thing into a theme, as the sense of drama that was associated with the guillotine throughout the nineteenth century. For the film stages the guillotine (in French, the word for the locking mechanism on a camera, and hence the semantic link to cutting the rays of light, the rays of life—the light of life) once again, and ends with the death mask, the portrait of the dead. Again, this establishes a link to photography. That is the kind of genealogy of which one can say that it shows how the history of media is an effective way of writing history—and which perhaps continues to write some of the aporias that appear in Kracauer's history book. Ultimately, in telling a historical story, Lubitsch's film also seizes upon medialization—in this respect one cannot escape the trap of representation.

Translated by Allison Moseley

23. See Katharina Sykora, *Die Tode der Fotografie*, vol. 1: *Totenfotografie und ihr sozialer Gebrauch* (Munich 2009).