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Cinema and experience – Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno

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Notes

1. *European Nightmares. An International Conference on European Horror Cinema*, MIRIAD and Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, 1-2 June 2006. Although the conference is not mentioned anywhere in the book, the core of the collection comes from the speakers' presentations. With respect to the conference programme, the collection broadens its area of investigation to Northern and Eastern Europe.
2. See, for instance: Ken Gelder (ed.), *The Horror Reader* (London-New York: Routledge, 2000); Mark Jancovich (ed.), *Horror: The Film Reader* (London-New York: Routledge, 2002); Stephen Prince (ed.), *The Horror Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Steffen Hantke (ed.), *Horror Cinema: Creating and Marketing Fear* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004); Richard Bégin and Laurent Guido (eds), *L'horreur au cinema* (Special Issue of *CINéMAS*, Vol. 20, No. 2-3, Spring 2010).
3. Rick Altman. *Film/genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999).
4. In this respect, I think that the French-Canadian-Japanese co-production *Silent Hill* (Christoph Gans, 2006) would have been a more fitting example.

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Cinema and experience

Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno

Malte Hagener

I first encountered the work of Miriam Hansen as a graduate student in the mid-1990s when her book *Babel and Babylon* was the talk of the (at that time still fairly modest) film studies town – even though it was sitting somewhat uneasily on the fence. In fact, it was this position beyond the canonical that made the book so attractive in the first place. It did not fit into the raging debate of that time between psychosemiotics and neo-formalism, nor did it offer the (often too schematic and naive) way out within the cultural studies paradigm of empowering the individual or sub-culturally constituted groups.

Building on the emerging field of early cinema studies, yet not falling into the trap of factographic fetishism, *Babel and Babylon* helped to make the ideas of the Frankfurt school productive for film studies by bridging the gap that much too often still divides history and theory. Ever since then, Hansen has worked on a

thorough historical and theoretical study of this relationship which we now can finally understand in its entirety – as the culmination and crowning achievement of a life's work, as well as a testament to a great scholar who passed away within weeks after she finished the manuscript for *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). The occasion is therefore both festive and sad, as we celebrate a major addition to film theory and cultural history but also mourn a great film scholar.

The prose in Hansen's *Cinema and Experience* is dense and layered; elegantly written, complex yet accessible, and with a rich amount of references which allows one to follow the many paths that Hansen opens. In this respect, this is also a handbook that will remain a central point of reference for future generations of scholars working on one of the many aspects that her wide-ranging argument touches upon. The architecture of the book follows a roughly chronological path. It is framed by two sections discussing Siegfried Kracauer's early work in the Weimar Republic and his *Theory of Film* (written in the United States and first published in 1960). In between are chapters on two very different thinkers who emerge as less opposed than they are usually seen – despite the many misgivings and criticisms that characterise their relation during and after their lifetime: Walter Benjamin (with a focus on his writings from the 1930s) and Theodor W. Adorno (with a focus on his writings from the 1930s to 1940s).

There are a number of subtextual and salient questions behind and beyond this chronological and biographical logic that recur in different forms throughout the book. On the surface (if one wants to employ such a term to evoke Kracauer's method), we have new readings of a broad variety of texts, some canonised and well-known with others only accessible in archives or in recent edited collections. Yet again, behind or inside these hermeneutic efforts, there are nested at least two other purposes which are probably more productive. First, Hansen retraces and details, teases out and opens up, the developments of ideas and concepts over time and different texts. Theory in this sense is not a fixed set of ideas or a checklist of concepts but rather a living, ever-changing, and self-mutating entity whose present efficacy also depends on the roots and connections it offers historically. Second, the book engages with current debates about the status of technology, perception, and aesthetics. The contemporary value of Kracauer, Benjamin, and Adorno is highlighted, if not continually then at least intermittently. Seen from this perspective, what might appear at first sight as a study of a body of work distant by more than half of a century emerges in Hansen's perceptive and convincing readings to be equally important and timely today.

The central projects of Kracauer, Benjamin, and Adorno are also very much in line with Hansen's critical project: how to articulate a notion of experience in modernity that takes modern mass media and technology into account without

falling into the simplistic traps of cultural pessimism or blatant optimism. Or, put differently: how can we theorise subjectivity at a time when modernity and technology seem to have obliterated any chance of true or authentic experience in an older sense of the concept? According to Hansen, 'notwithstanding the irrevocable decline and obsolescence of experience in its premodern and bourgeois forms, it was imperative to conceptualize some contemporary equivalent to that mode of knowledge' (p. 132).

Despite evidence pointing to the contrary, at the time (and still today), the cinema could be seen as a medium capable of such much-needed self-awareness and critique: '[f]or the promise the cinema held out was that it might give the technologically altered sensorium access to a contemporary, materially based, and collective form of reflexivity that would not have to surrender the mimetic and temporal dimensions of (historically individualized) experience.' (p. 161) Just like the thinking of the three protagonists, the book offers no easy answer to this central question; however, it does open up ways of addressing it and identifies concepts to use; it delineates problems and cul-de-sacs, in effect presenting not a closed and finished body of ideas but an active question that keeps returning to us as one of the central problems of film and media studies.

This is particularly true in the chapters on Benjamin, which follow his antonymous thinking and frame his intervention within the political debates of the 1930s. These chapters are a magisterial demonstration of how the book is simultaneously an erudite historical study and theoretical intervention. Hansen offers a reading that goes against the grain in relation to Benjamin's seminal essay on artwork in the age of mechanical reproduction, which has met the same fate as other key texts in the discipline (Laura Mulvey's text on visual pleasure comes to mind as another example) – being reduced to catchphrases such as the loss of the aura due to the onslaught of new media, the dichotomy of contemplation vs. distraction, or the chock as the quintessential stimulus of the modern metropolis. In fact, one wishes to assign this part of the book as compulsory reading for anyone placing Benjamin's essay on the syllabus of (new) media classes.

Through an analysis of its different versions, Hansen demonstrates how Benjamin's essay was a measured intervention in a specific political situation rather than a general theory of media transitions and transformation. In this perspective, Benjamin's 'gamble with history' can be seen as a desperate attempt to find a position that was both activist enough to be able to participate in the political struggle of the 1930s and also able to take photography and film seriously as means of expressions capable of reflexively giving the people a constructive image of themselves. Ultimately this is a book not only *about* Benjamin but at the same time *in his spirit*, as it wants to simultaneously address the productive utopian side of media (as it was seen in the 1930s) and its remaining utopian possibilities today:

> the ability to imagine both vast possibilities and deadly risks in technological media practices – and to gamble on particular combinations and constellations – makes his thinking more productive than critical approaches that ultimately come down on either techno-utopian or media-pessimistic sides. His legacy for film and media theory today may consist, not least, in the ways in which the structure of his thinking, his habit of thinking antithetical positions through in their most extreme implications, highlights contradictions in media culture itself …. (p. 204)

Whereas a discussion of Kracauer and Benjamin in media studies is not new in itself, the rather broad space offered here to Adorno is more of a surprise. Adorno (a philosopher who famously quipped that every visit to the cinema leaves him dumber and worse than before) is certainly not a thinker who has been held in high regard within film studies and the hegemony of the 'culture industry' argument has largely cancelled out any serious interest from within the discipline towards his ideas. Hansen's chapter puts Adorno squarely back on the map as someone to take into account when surveying the Frankfurt school legacy for media studies. Rather than tackling the culture industry chapter from the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* head on, Hansen is interested in how sideways glances and remarks in texts not specifically concerned with technical media (e.g. writing on music and aesthetic theory) might allow one to reconstruct an implicit theory of film that Adorno never wrote. Or, as Gertrud Koch has put it, it offers a way of thinking *with* Adorno *against* Adorno.

In the introduction to the book, Hansen sketches her own trajectory from studying in Frankfurt in the 1960s (where Adorno was a towering presence) through feminist film debates in the 1970s, until her move to the United States, where early cinema became a major topic of interest. Seen from this angle, the book can also be read as a summary of Hansen's work as an academic and intellectual; on occasion, it also addresses the question of what a Jewish identity might mean in light of the catastrophes of the 20th century. However, the central concern remains whether we can still hope for the cinema, despite many misgivings, to redeem and rescue us.

In what is ultimately a rich and rewarding work, Miriam Hansen has meticulously prepared many leads that we can all – to paraphrase Benjamin, in the midst of the far-flung ruins and debris constituted by the numerous finished and unfinished texts – use to navigate calmly and adventurously through past, present, and future media culture. A better roadmap than *Cinema and Experience* for these exciting travels is hardly imaginable.

About the author

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