

THE MASS ORNAMENT



WEIMAR ESSAYS



SIEGFRIED

TRANSLATED, EDITED, AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY THOMAS Y. LEVIN

KRACAUER

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Thomas Y. Levin

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The Mass Ornament





Siegfried Kracauer, late 1920s

For Theodor W. Adorno

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Translator's Note



This translation is based on the second edition of *Das Ornament der Masse: Essays* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), which, as the editor Karsten Witte explains in his afterword, is essentially identical to the first edition that Kracauer himself supervised in 1963. Aside from the correction of typographical errors and bibliographic data, the only substantive change made in the later, posthumous edition was the reinsertion of a number of passages that had figured in the original versions of the essays published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* but that Kracauer had for some reason excised from the 1963 edition. The translation follows Witte's philological lead and reinstates all passages, titles, emphases, and text breaks from the original publications, marking them as such in the notes. Indeed, as already suggested by the slightly modified subtitle *Weimar Essays*, the various editorial additions all attempt to compensate for the irreducible temporal and linguistic distance of the texts from their original historical and intellectual context. Thus, the annotations serve not only to articulate thorny or especially rich translatable moments and to provide bibliographic and filmographic data for cited works and passages, but also to elucidate the wide range of cultural references from the Weimar period that are embedded in Kracauer's prose. The constellation of photographs from the Weimar period is intended to have a similarly evocative function. The decision to include them was motivated by a comment Kracauer made upon rediscovering the early essays that would eventually make up *Das Ornament der Masse*. In a letter to Adorno on October 1, 1950, conveying the news of his find, Kracauer expressed the wish that these Weimar texts be published in a book-length collection "which could include drawings" (cited in *Marbacher Magazin* 47 [1988]: 110). The minimally intrusive location of the photographs between,



rather than within, the individual essays is meant to signal that their function is more emblematic than illustrative. All notes, except where specified otherwise, have been added by the translator.



“Reality is a construction”: this oft-cited phrase from Kracauer’s study *Die Angestellten* is equally true for the reality of a translation project such as this one. Among my many co-constructors, I would like to thank above all Lindsay Waters and Alison Kent of Harvard University Press for their generous encouragement and heroic editorial patience; Miriam Hansen, who introduced me to Kracauer during my graduate work at Yale and encouraged me to undertake this translation; Karsten Witte for his untiring assistance and friendship at every stage in this project; Eric Rentschler and Evi and Walter Levin for their careful readings and comments on the entire volume; Jerry Zaslove and the Institute for the Humanities at Simon Fraser University for their magnanimous support of translation reviews of a number of the essays by Michael Mundhenk; Ingrid Belke and the superb staff at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach am Neckar for their help during my research in the Kracauer papers over the years; the J. Paul Getty Foundation and the Princeton University Committee for Research in the Humanities for stipends that subsidized both research and production costs; and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), which sustained this project at various stages from its beginning to its completion. Among the many friends, colleagues, and fellow Kracauer scholars who were generous with comments, suggestions, and critiques, I would like to express particular gratitude to Edward Dimendberg, David Frisby, Karsten Harries, Anton Kaes, Thomas Keenan, Michael Kessler, Evonne Levy, Leyla Mayer, Klaus Michael, Inka Mülder-Bach, Gerhard Richter, D. N. Rodowick, Heide Schlüppmann, Andreas Volk, and Judith Wechsler. Maria Ascher’s meticulous and astute editorial scrutiny has been a pleasure and an enormous help, not least in ridding the translation of residual teutonicisms in both vocabulary and style. Although Kracauer’s often poetic theoretical prose presents a special challenge to the translator, any infelicities that remain here are entirely my responsibility.

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Introduction

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Thomas Y. Levin

Today, access to truth is by way of the profane.
—Siegfried Kracauer, “The Bible in German”

Among the many refugees gathered in Marseilles in August 1940, hoping to flee the tightening grip of collaborationist France, were two German Jewish cultural critics: Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer. These long-time friends had corresponded with each other for many years, worked on similar issues, published in many of the same venues, and written about each other's work.¹ Both were now hoping to reach New York, where they were awaited by friends and former colleagues at the Institute for Social Research—Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Leo Löwenthal, Meyer Schapiro, Richard Krautheimer—who had signed affidavits and arranged for their travel to, and employment in, the United States. Weeks went by during which the two met almost every day. In late September, after Spain suddenly announced that it would no longer issue transit visas to people without passports, Benjamin attempted to cross the border illegally by way of a difficult mountain path through the Pyrenees. Carrying the same papers as Kracauer, he was detained at the border and, in desperation, took his life. Only days later Kracauer and his wife Lili attempted the same route and were also forced to turn back, ending up in Perpignan. Though likewise close to despair, they continued to wait; and in February 1941,

after a few agonizing months, they were finally able to get across Spain to Lisbon, whence they embarked for America. Here, after eight hard years of exile in France, the fifty-one-year-old immigrant and his wife had to start over once again.

Forced to learn yet another new language, Kracauer was nevertheless able to eke out a living in New York as a freelance writer, publishing articles in a wide range of journals (including the *Nation*, *Commentary*, the *New Republic*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, and the *New York Times Book Review*), as well as preparing commissioned but largely unpublished "reports" for various government and research agencies such as the Experimental Division for the Study of War Time Communications (in Washington, D.C.), UNESCO, the Voice of America, and the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University.² Grants from the Rockefeller, Guggenheim, Chapelbrook, and Bollingen foundations also enabled him to pursue his own research, first as "special assistant" to Iris Barry, curator of the film library at New York's Museum of Modern Art, and subsequently as an independent scholar. Though he was often interrupted by other income-producing work, such as his obligations as consultant to the Bollingen and the Old Dominion foundations, it was during these difficult last twenty-five years of his life that Kracauer also produced the books which made his reputation in the English-speaking world: his polemical history of Weimar cinema *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton University Press, 1947), his *Theory of Film* (Oxford University Press, 1960), and a meditation on the philosophy of history published posthumously as *History: The Last Things before the Last* (Oxford University Press, 1969).

Kracauer was able to reach the New World, whereas Benjamin was not. Curiously, however, the opposite is true of their writings from the Weimar period. Unlike Benjamin's oeuvre, which is well known and increasingly available in translation, Kracauer's successful emigration to the Anglo-American realm effectively delayed the English-language reception of the fascinating corpus of early writings which had built his reputation as one of Weimar Germany's most incisive political and cultural critics. Indeed, Anglo-American readers generally know only

the many works Kracauer produced in English during his exile in the United States and his “social biography” of Jacques Offenbach, which he wrote and published during his years in France.³ They remain largely unaware of the nearly two thousand articles he published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* during the 1920s and 1930s.⁴ This disproportionate emphasis on Kracauer’s exile production has certainly played a key role in the reductive categorization of his work as “realist” film theory, a misperception in urgent need of revision. An exposure to his early writings, such as those collected here, will foster such a rereading, bringing to light the epistemological foundations, the philosophy and theology of history, the sociological sensibility, and the political motivations that inform, in various and constantly shifting ways, Kracauer’s turn to cinema and its relation to his other writings. Furthermore, by locating Kracauer’s pioneering film criticism from the 1920s within the larger project of his cultural criticism, these early texts reveal that Kracauer was, as he himself once insisted, not exclusively “a film person but rather a cultural philosopher, or a sociologist, and a poet as well . . . (So far as film is concerned, it was never anything but . . . a means of making certain sociological and philosophical points.)”⁵

It is thus no accident that in the collection of his Weimar writings which Kracauer himself edited in 1963 under the title *Das Ornament der Masse* (*The Mass Ornament*), the few—albeit crucial—texts on photography and film are surrounded by allegorical meditations and scholarly essays on everything from Kafka, Benjamin, Weber, Scheler, and Simmel to the Buber-Rosenzweig translation of the Bible, historical biography, boredom, urban arcades, and more. These texts present a very different Kracauer, one formally, thematically, and epistemologically reminiscent of the Benjamin of *Einbahnstraße* (*One Way Street*, 1928) and *Illuminationen* (*Illuminations*, 1961), the Bloch of *Spuren* (1930) and *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (*Heritage of Our Times*, 1935), and the Adorno of *Minima Moralia* (1951). It is here that one finds, for example, an explicit anticipation of Adorno and Horkheimer’s “dialectic of enlightenment” thesis, but inflected in a way that leads to a refreshing rehabilitation of popular culture and “distraction” in defiance of polemically dismissive accounts of mass culture. In their relentless interdisciplinarity, and as an

exemplary articulation of aesthetics and politics, these early essays shed an important new light not only on Kracauer's own later work, but also on the Frankfurt School (and especially its analysis of mass culture), on the genealogy of film theory and cultural studies, on Weimar cultural politics and, not least, on the exigencies of intellectual exile.

If we consider their journalistic origins (twenty-one of the twenty-four texts reprinted in *Das Ornament der Masse* were first published in the daily newspaper *Die Frankfurter Zeitung*), Kracauer's Weimar writings are astonishing not only in the freshness and relevance of their arguments, but above all in their decidedly philosophical character. For whereas the contemporary daily newspaper with its editorial constraints and inflexible production schedule is only rarely a forum for sustained theoretical writing, such substantive sociocritical reflection was the staple of the continental tradition of feuilleton journalism for which the *Frankfurter Zeitung* was renowned. Founded in 1856 as a trade and finance newspaper by the Jewish banker and politician Leopold Sonnemann, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* quickly became one of the leading and internationally acclaimed organs of the liberal bourgeois press, highly regarded in economics and business circles. Its politics were close to those of the liberal Deutsche Demokratische Partei, with some leanings toward the Social Democrats. Explicit in its support of the Weimar constitutional democracy, it favored the signing of the Versailles treaty and advocated nationalization of major branches of the economy of the new republic. Although it never had the circulation of any of the other competing bourgeois papers, all of which were located in Berlin, it was a highly visible publication, appearing daily in no less than four editions (three local and one national), each with numerous special supplements. Once described by Joseph Roth as "a microcosm of Germany," the *Frankfurter Zeitung* complemented its political and economic coverage with an equally prestigious feuilleton—somewhat equivalent to today's arts and culture section—which was featured prominently on the lower third of the cover and subsequent pages in every issue. It was here, "below the line" (a reference to the graphic marker which served to separate the section devoted to cultural criticism from the remainder of the paper), that Kracauer published the vast majority of his work.

The feuilleton as a genre had existed since the nineteenth century as a site for belletristic excursions of all sorts, but it began to play an important role in Germany only in the wake of World War I, at a moment when the inherited cultural vocabulary seemed particularly inadequate to the reality of the nascent republic. Indeed, as evidenced in the prescient journalistic writings of feuilleton editors such as Joseph Roth and Siegfried Kracauer, one could say that in the Weimar era the feuilleton took on an avant-garde function as the locus of a concerted effort to articulate the crisis of modernity. Its transformation from a belletrist forum into a site for diagnostic analyses of contemporary phenomena is perhaps best exemplified in Kracauer's very popular dissection of the new employee class of white-collar workers, first published serially in the feuilleton of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, and subsequently in book form as *Die Angestellten*.⁶ Through the combined efforts of the regular feuilleton authors, many of whom Kracauer himself engaged—including Alfons Paquet, Friedrich Sieburg, Wilhelm Hausenstein, Soma Morgenstern, Bernard von Brentano, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, and Joseph Roth—the *Frankfurter Zeitung* feuilleton assumed a new shape in response to the rapidly changing social and cultural character of modernity. Here, Kracauer and others examined the Weimar Republic in the way that, as Adorno recalled in an intellectual portrait of his friend, Kracauer had taught him to approach philosophy—that is, “as a kind of coded text from which one could read the historical situation of the spirit [*Geist*], with the vague expectation that in doing so one could acquire something of truth itself.”⁷

It was Kracauer who, in a programmatic insight, perhaps best captured the new orientation of the feuilleton: “We must rid ourselves of the delusion that it is the major events which have the most decisive influence on us. We are much more deeply and continuously influenced by the tiny catastrophes that make up daily life.”⁸ Besides presenting book reviews, conference reports, and other analyses of the state of intellectual and cultural life in the republic, the feuilleton was thus the realm of the quotidian—unemployment offices and arcades, travel experiences and dance troupes, bestsellers and boredom, neon-light displays and mass sports events—which became the focus of philosophical

and sociological analyses very much in the tradition of Kracauer's teacher Georg Simmel (about whom he wrote a book-length monograph in the early 1920s).⁹ To explain this new cultural landscape, the feuilleton now practiced a sort of physiognomic essayistics, a minute decoding of the surface phenomena of modernity as complex historical ciphers. The polemical stakes in Kracauer's deployment of such philosophical micrologies (Simmel called them *Momentbilder*, snapshots) may be less evident today in light of the ubiquity of "thought-images" (*Denkbilder*, to use Benjamin's term for the genre), as popularized, for example, by Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*.¹⁰ At the time, however, the feuilleton of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* effectively provided Kracauer with a laboratory in which he and others could experiment with such new forms along the lines of the "material theory of knowledge" that he had proposed in 1920 and whose theoretical contours he had articulated in his 1922 study *Soziologie als Wissenschaft (Sociology as Science)*.¹¹

Kracauer joined the *Frankfurter Zeitung* as a salaried writer in August 1921, abandoning an unfulfilling career as a trained architect in order to pursue, as a journalist, his double passion for sociology and philosophy. During the first years his assignments consisted mostly of reports on local Frankfurt events and topics: lectures, conferences, architecture, city politics, and films, as well as short notices on new books (especially in philosophy, the social sciences, and architecture) and occasional essayistic pieces, many written under pseudonyms. Benno Reifenberg's appointment as head of the feuilleton staff in 1924 strengthened Kracauer's position at the paper: he became a full editor with his own office, a promotion that allowed him to delegate much of his local reporting duties and to expand his writings on cinema into a regular column, in which he effectively pioneered the genre of sociological film criticism. However, as Kracauer's feuilleton contributions became more polemical and ideologically critical in the wake of political developments in the late 1920s, they were increasingly at odds with the new financial and political allegiances of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. The economic crisis in the 1920s and structural transformations in the advertising market following World War I were having dire consequences for many newspapers in Weimar Germany, and the *Frankfurter Zeitung* was no exception.