

CONFERENCE REPORT

Letdown

'Siegfried Kracauer', University of Birmingham
13–14 September 2002

Only the superstitious would argue that the omens should have been heeded. Was it really the power of Friday the 13th that jinxed the event, such that all four 'big name' international speakers failed to show at this two-day conference devoted to the work of Siegfried Kracauer? Miriam Hansen and Tom Gunning made their apologies in more or less good time, but Tom Levin and Gertrud Koch simply failed to appear. Bad luck is a becoming a regular guest in Birmingham lately. The conference was to be hosted by the legendary Cultural Studies department, had it not been closed down, virtually overnight, and its staff sacked. Conference organization moved over to the English Department, but http404s made progress difficult (http404 is what comes up on your computer when you visit an inactive URL or website). So



the conference was small, just thirty-odd of us, but all nicely bonded in a sense of camaraderie against the disappointment of the no-shows and the malign forces of the university management.

The question of 'who is' Siegfried Kracauer taxed conference participants more than is usually the case, struck as many of them had been by the virtual anonymity that he possesses even in some Cultural Studies circles, particularly in comparison with his acquaintances Benjamin and Adorno. It was mooted on several occasions that these friends of Kracauer were part of the problem. Their bitchy comments on Kracauer's writings, such as his 'social biography' of the Paris of Offenbach, expressed in letters to each other, or their subtly critical reviews of his work sullied his writings' reputation, prejudiced readers and put others off. And the news from Germany – brought by Graeme Gilloch, who has been combing the archives for a forthcoming intellectual bibliography – is not good. Kracauer's work is mainly out of print, the future of the selected works uncertain (the volumes that have already been published are remaindered), and the many unpublished manuscripts in the archive – an extended study of Simmel, diverse plans, manuscripts and letters – are likely to remain there and there alone. But here in Birmingham were a handful of scholars happy to spend two days in the Frankfurter's company.

Erica Carter discussed Kracauer's film criticism in relation to mainstream Weimar and Nazi film criticism, and used close-ups of Marlene Dietrich to touch on idealist Kantian aesthetics as they emerge in 1930s film analysis with its emphasis on integration and 'the Beautiful'. Through a Kracaueresque phenomenology, John Allen investigated the new Potsdamerplatz with its spaces of unpressurized but seductive high-tech consumption at Sony Plaza. Eric Jarosinski glided through a history of glass architecture and its attendant ideologies (the transparent imperative in Greater Germany's new spaces of democracy) before invoking Kracauer's critique of modernist white cube architecture, a harbour for concealed ghosts and (suitably enough) remain-

ders. This chimed with my paper on Kracauer's melancholic presentation of the 'hollow space' of 1920s Berlin, populated by ghosts made invisible by neon and fluorescent lighting in a culture of distraction.

Steve Giles also spoke of visibility and invisibility, the hidden and the manifest as represented in debates on photography and realism in the 1920s, examining Kracauer's attractions to both formalism and Brechtian aesthetics. Barry Langford constructed a passage from Ruttmann's 1927 *Berlin: Symphony of a City*, with its opening shots of a train whizzing towards a Berlin main station, to Lanzmann's train to Treblinka in *Shoah*, via Kracauer's troubled poetics of the real, as presented in *Theory of Film* from the 1960s. Frances Guerin analysed that 'poetics of the real' in the context of film, a medium that both records (realistically) and reveals (via construction, and non-realist filmic devices). This dual aesthetic – documentary and revelation, realist and formative – was then explored in connection with Errol Morris's documentary practice in *The Thin Blue Line*. James Donald introduced the most distancing note into the proceedings. Railing against Kracauer's structural homology of dance forms (the Tiller Girls revue shows) and capitalist rationalization, he pointed to the existence of other dance styles, in particular those of Josephine Baker. Here was a figure who, as an American, signified modernity, and was involved with the modernist avant-garde (Le Corbusier was a lover and Adolf Loos designed a house for her), but who as a black woman was identified as 'primitive'. For Donald this complicates Kracauer's analysis of the homogenization of modernity and the singular logic of capitalism. However, it could be argued that for all the theorists involved with the Frankfurt School the dialectical entwinements of modernity and primitivism in capitalism are acknowledged, rather like the analysis of still existing ghosts in the self-advertised new objective space.

Jan Campbell, one of the organizers of the conference, delivered reflections on Kracauer in the context of a phenomenological reading of mimesis and hysteria and a notion of experience in which the borders between the conscious and unconscious are dissolved. The paper attempted to bring Kracauer into the orbit of Marxian psychoanalysis (and also Jungian notions of the dream picture) and draw him away from Freud, Lacan and the Oedipus complex, where film theorists still tend to operate. The import of Kracauer, it was suggested, is that he does not divide the private and social imaginaries. Campbell's defence of this position goes against much contemporary embarrassment about such a proposition as it appears in Kracauer's most famous book. Defenders of *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947) have been scared off by its unfashionable thesis of a 'social unconscious' manifested in films, through which the push towards Hitler's rise to power appears in the movies of the 1920s. The final paper was by Graeme Gilloch, and it was a lively reading of a film script by Kracauer, who hoped to turn his book *Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of His Time* (1937) into a Hollywood movie. The idea had been forcefully criticized by Adorno, who imagined a gruesome biopic that would contradict all of Kracauer's modernist and critical ideas on film. Through a close reading of the script, its scenes, its filmic techniques, Gilloch showed how Kracauer's critical theory of society was embedded in the innovative script both in terms of subject (e.g. the importance of milieu and the critique of the personality) and in terms of form – the use of cinematic devices, montaging of scenes, *mise-en-scène*. The film was never made – a recent composer biopic had not done well at the box office and so there was no chance of a studio backing another one. Between his friends and the commercial system, Kracauer seems to have been (and still to be) constantly let down.

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