In the Introduction to his last, posthumously published book *History: The Last Things Before the Last* (1969), Siegfried Kracauer formulates a summation of his intellectual existence. The discovery of the hidden connection between his interest in history and his interest in the photographic media reveals to him the central intention that guided his thought for half a century: ‘at long last all my main efforts, so incoherent on the surface, fall into line—they all have served, and continue to serve, a single purpose: the rehabilitation of objectives and modes of being which still lack a name and hence are overlooked or misjudged.’ Kracauer particularly mentions in this connection two books from his Weimar period: the novel *Ginster* of 1928, and the study *Die Angestellten (The White Collar Masses)* of 1930. Like *Theory of Film* (1960) and the *History* book, they survey regions of reality ‘which despite all that has been written about them are still largely terra incognita’.

When Kracauer wrote these lines at the beginning of the 1960s, the readership that might have understood them no longer existed—and did not yet exist.
anew. The essays and books written before his exile from Germany had never become known in the English-speaking countries and had fallen into oblivion in Germany; the books of his American exile met largely with misunderstanding or perplexed silence. The latter circumstance is directly related to the former. For just as Kracauer in the Introduction to *History* reverts directly to expressions coined in the context of his early writings, so his later work as a whole can be understood only against the background of the traditions, themes and figures of thought of his Weimar texts. A first step in introducing the German writer of the 1920s to an English-speaking public was the recently published translation of the essay collection *The Mass Ornament.* It displays Kracauer as phenomenologist and philosopher of history, as critic of modern literature and film. *Die Angestellten* shows him in a related but somewhat different role: as a sociologist of culture and the quotidian, mapping the terra incognita of salaried employees in the last years of the Weimar Republic.

Like almost all his other writings from the Weimar period, *Die Angestellten* first appeared (in instalments) in the feuilleton—that is, the cultural section—of the prestigious *Frankfurter Zeitung.* Following studies in architecture, sociology and philosophy, Kracauer worked for this paper from 1921 on—initially as a regular freelance contributor, after 1924 as a full editor, and from 1930 until his flight from Nazi Germany in February 1933 as cultural editor for the paper’s Berlin pages. From late April to July 1929, Kracauer stayed in Berlin to carry out the research for his study on employees. In October the text was completed, but objections from the paper’s editorial board delayed its publication. Due to the support of Benno Reifenberg, the editor of the feuilleton section to whom *Die Angestellten* is dedicated, its pre-publication finally went forward in December. ‘A sensation has been handed us’, Reifenberg wrote to the newspaper’s editor-in-chief Heinrich Simon, and the readership’s

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1. This essay is an edited extract from the introduction to Siegfried Kracauer, *The White Collar Masses: Disorientation and Distraction in Weimar Germany,* trans. Quintin Hoare, Verso, London 1997, £30 HB, £10 PB.
3. Ibid., p. 4.
5. That these objections existed can be deduced, not just from Reifenberg’s intervention, but also from a letter from Ernst Bloch to Kracauer in October 1929, which contains the following passage: ‘If the work were not able to appear in the newspaper, that would certainly be a scandal. There would be nothing left to do but swallow the pill and give the thing to *Neue Rundschau.*’ See Inka Mülder-Bach, ed., *Briefwechsel Ernst Bloch-Siegfried Kracauer 1921-1966*, in Karola Bloch et al., ed., *Ernst Bloch, Briefe 1903-1975,* Frankfurt am Main 1985, Vol. 1, p. 317. The *Neue Rundschau* was a celebrated journal published by S. Fischer Verlag, in which Kracauer’s novel *Ginster* had appeared a year earlier. When pre-publication of *Die Angestellten* was under discussion, the Frankfurter Zeitung was preparing for a major staff reshuffle, coinciding with the sale of a major share of the newspaper publishing company to I.G. Farben and resulting politically in a marked swing to the Right. Thus from 1932 on, the once decidedly liberal-democratic *Frankfurter Zeitung* championed the idea of ‘taming’ the Nazis by binding them into a reactionary government coalition. Kracauer’s Berlin years were marked by increasing tensions with the newspaper, which gradually rid itself of its most celebrated, and politically most radical, cultural editor. Dismissal followed, a few months after Kracauer’s flight from Berlin, in August 1933.
reaction proved him right. In January 1930, the study also was published as a book.7

Ethnography Turned Inward

Kracauer subtitled the book, 'From the Newest Germany'—a phrase which, with laconic brevity, formulated the viewpoint, method and claim of his investigation. What his study aims to be is neither a scientific treatise 'about', nor a literary reportage 'on', the salaried class. Rather, Kracauer adopts the role of the ethnologist, who sets off on a sociological 'expedition' to a domestic 'abroad' and reports 'from the brand-new Germany' of the salaried employees as if from some exotic foreign land. Kracauer does not let slip the opportunity to juxtapose the 'exoticism' of this world with that of those 'primitive tribes at whose habits the employees marvel in films'. The ethnological metaphor, however, is not meant merely ironically but is closely connected with the method and concern of his study. For Kracauer really is setting off. Leaving statistics and learned studies behind, he embarks on an empirical inquiry into the spheres of existence, habits, patterns of thought and manners of speech of salaried employees. He talks to the employees themselves, to union representatives and to employers; he visits offices and firms, job exchanges and labour courts, cinemas and places of entertainment; he studies company newspapers, classified advertisements and private correspondence. His procedure has occasionally been compared with the method of 'participant observation' that the Lynds were developing at roughly the same time in their study of Middletown. Yet Kracauer's approach is characterized by a highly self-conscious individualism which resists methodological generalization and crucially involves the *mise en scène* of foreignness and distance as a condition of attention and a medium of knowledge.

The terrain Kracauer seeks to explore is indeed 'the newest Germany'. The superlative evokes the sensationalism of contemporary reportage and at the same time ironizes it.8 For the sensation Kracauer offers us is simply that of 'daily life', the 'normal existence in its imperceptible dreadfulness'. If both

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8 'The 'reporter'' deals in sensation—that is implicit in the foreign term we use for journalists operating at an American pace', wrote Egon Erwin Kisch in the preface to his classic anthology of reportage first published in 1924. See Kisch, *Der rasende Reporter*, Cologne 1985, p. 7.
aspects—newness and normality—are considered together, the ethnological metaphor acquires a further significance. Kracauer’s study is an expedition also in the sense that it not only offers a sociology of salaried employees, but through an analysis of this social stratum’s everyday world seeks to discover ‘the newest Germany’, the most advanced state of economic and socio-cultural modernization. His inquiry thus leads into the heart of the modern large enterprise, which—as an extreme case of economic rationalization—provides a basis for studying the organizational forms that will determine the future process of production and distribution. And it also leads into the heart of the metropolis Berlin. For just as ‘the economic process engendering the masses of salaried employees has advanced furthest’ in Berlin, so have employees here for the first time become the formative power of the public sphere.

Uncovering the Obvious

Kracauer compares the life of the employees with the purloined letter in Edgar Allan Poe’s famous tale, protected from discovery precisely by being on public display. By wresting it from anonymity and naming it, he places it in a two-fold light. He presents the employees as agents and victims of a socio-cultural modernization which has occurred in similar ways in all the advanced capitalist countries of the West. Thus, in reference to this stratum, Kracauer is the first to describe the functional connection between work and leisure, between economic rationalization and the distraction provided by the culture industry; he captures in nascent form the specific modern process of identity formation, no longer mediated primarily through origin and tradition, but increasingly through secondary and tertiary means of socialization; he describes the new physical mechanisms of selection and standardization, under the pressure of which physiognomies begin to resemble one another and a metropolitan type—uniform in terms of language, clothes and gestures—is formed; he discovers youth as a modern fetish; and he recognizes the increasing importance of women in the world of work and as targets and consumers of mass culture.

In retrospect, however, his study reads not just as a description of the modernization of everyday life, but also as an anticipatory diagnosis of the contradictions, distortions and delusions that the National Socialists were to mobilize a few years later. Below the surface of cosmopolitan fashion, the salaried employees cultivated models of self-definition in terms of bureaucratic rank and professional stratum, rooted in specifically German traditions. Indeed, there was no other Western country in which employees, both in their own consciousness and in that of the public, so early played such a central role.9 In no other were they so

intensively courted by politicians; in no other was the distinction between workers and salaried employees marked so sharply and with such far reaching consequences. The concept of the ‘new middle class’ had already been coined at the end of the nineteenth century. It defined the employees as the new centre of society; their function was to act as a buffer against socialism. The Angestelltenversicherungsgesetz of 1911—which had no equivalent in any other Western country—confirmed this concept by granting the salaried employees privileged terms of insurance and labour rights, and defining them as a higher stratum than the working class. The economic rationalization in the mid 1920s, however, which further effected the former bourgeoisie, already dispossessed by the war and the inflation, deprived this definition of any basis. For in the very process by which the salaried employees grew to mass proportions, they massively forfeited what had been used to justify their privileged position: higher earnings, relative autonomy, the chance for social advancement, and security of employment. The material conditions of their life came to resemble those of the working class.

All the more desperate was their attempt to mark themselves off ideologically and to maintain bourgeois or corporate interpretative models as distinguishing features. ‘Personality’, ‘Education’, ‘Culture’, ‘Profession’, ‘Community’—Kracauer shows how and to what end the facade of this ‘house of bourgeois concepts’ is continually re-erected; but at the same time he shows that the house has in fact collapsed. ‘The mass of salaried employees differ from the worker proletariat in that they are spiritually homeless.’ For the time being, they seek refuge in the ‘shelter’ provided for them by the culture industry. A few years later, the tension between proletarianized existence and bourgeois self-definition will drive them towards the National Socialists. In 1929 Kracauer could not yet know that. But the ‘aura of horror’ in which he sees them ensnared already anticipates the political catastrophe that he foresaw earlier than others.10

earlier in Germany than in other countries. One pioneering study was Emil Lederer’s Die Privatangestellten in der modernen Wirtschaftsentwicklung, Tübingen 1912. With Jakob Marshak, Lederer was also responsible for the summary ‘Der neue Mittelstand’, in Grundriss der Sozialökonomik, Vol. 9, pt. 1, Tübingen 1926, pp. 120-41, to which Kracauer was indebted for crucial particulars of his own investigation.

10 In August 1930, Kracauer wrote in a letter to Adorno: ‘The situation in Germany is more than serious... We are going to have 3 or 4 million unemployed and I can see no way out. A disaster is hanging over this country and I am convinced that it is not just capitalism. That capitalism may become bestial is not due to the economy alone. (How am I to formulate the causes? I simply keep noticing in France, even though there’s plenty to criticize there, all the things that have been destroyed here: basic decency, good nature in general, and with it people’s trust in one another.)’ Quoted in Marbacher Magazin, pp. 58, 63. In his Berlin years Kracauer deliberately attempted by journalistic means to prevent the spread of fascism in the ‘middle strata’. See on this, apart from the essay ‘Revolt of the Middle Classes’, in The Mass Ornament, pp. 107-127, also the texts ‘Zwischen Blut und Geist’, in Kracauer, Schriften 5, ed. Inka Mülder-Bach, Frankfurt am Main 1990, pt. 3: Aufsätze 1932-1965, pp. 93-6; ‘Gestaltschau oder Politik?’ (1932), in Schriften 5, pt. 3, pp. 118-24; ‘Wunschräume der Gebildeten’ (1932), in Schriften 5, pt. 3, pp. 154-9; and ‘Theologie gegen Nationalismus’ (1933), in Schriften 5, pt. 3, pp. 186-90. Kracauer’s contributions to the pioneering series ‘Wie erklären sich grosse Bucherfolge?’ [‘How can best-sellers be explained?’] also belong in the context of this argument. See Richard Voss, Zwei Menschen’ (1931), in Schriften 5, pt. 2: Aufsätze 1927-1932, pp. 287-94; and ‘Bemerkungen zu Frank Thiess’ (1931), in Schriften 5, pt. 2, pp. 312-18. The essay ‘On Best-sellers and their Audience’ (1931), in The Mass Ornament, pp. 89-98, is a synopsis of the methods and results of this series.
Not although, but because, it leads into the ‘brand-new Germany’, his study is at the same time a diagnosis of the beginning of the end of the first German republic.

Loitering in the Void

It is not known what gave Kracauer the immediate impulse for his journey of discovery. Perhaps he felt provoked by Walter Ruttmann’s celebrated film Berlin, Symphony einer Großstadt (1927), whose use of montage he subjected to scathing criticism; perhaps the idea for the study came to him in the course of his analysis of the German film production of 1928, in which he first subjected his concept of the mass-cultural audience to differentiation by social strata. In retrospect, it seems he hardly needed a particular motive. For the study of salaried employees combines themes and interests that Kracauer had been pursuing since the beginning of the 1920s. The theoretical perspectives, hermeneutic attentiveness and literary techniques that distinguish his text, however, were acquired only in a remarkable process of intellectual self-modernization.

The germ of this programme of modernization is contained in an essay that first appeared in 1922 in the Frankfurter Zeitung, under the title of ‘Die Wartenden’ (‘Those Who Wait’). Already in this essay Kracauer is concerned with one specific social stratum’s attitude toward life; and already he formulates his findings in spatial metaphors of ‘emptiness’ and ‘the void’. The space indicated by these metaphors is, however, not an ideological but a metaphysical one. And the stratum is not the declassed one of salaried employees, but the educated stratum to which Kracauer himself belonged, the elite of ‘scholars, businessmen, doctors, lawyers, students and intellectuals of all sorts’, who ‘spend most of their days in the loneliness of the large cities.’ Finally, what forms these many individuals into a group is not a sociological, but an existential condition. It is, as Kracauer explains, the ‘metaphysical suffering from the lack of a higher meaning in the world’—from their ‘exile from the religious sphere’—‘which makes these people companions in misfortune.’

In the guise of a group-sociological diagnosis, Kracauer here expresses the sense of existence that marked the starting point of his own intellectual and literary development. In his early texts, there is little trace of modernist enthusiasm, let alone of any revolutionary stance. Kracauer sees himself not at the beginning of a new age, but at the end of a historical process of ‘decay’ in which, with the ‘disappearance of a meaning embracing reality as a whole’, the once saturated totality of being is broken up into isolated subjects and a chaotic multiplicity of things. Only in the perspective of a catastrophic fragmentation and desubstantializa-

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13 The Mass Ornament, p. 129.
14 Ibid., pp. 129 ff.
tion, a breakdown of ‘community bound by form’, and a loss of metaphysical security, is he able to perceive the modern ‘thoroughly rationalized, civilized society’.

Kracauer obtains the explanatory models and figures of thought which guide this perception by combining topoi of the contemporary conservative critique of culture with theoretical paradigms of the philosophical and sociological avant-garde. Thus his concept of a ‘thoroughly rationalized, civilized society’ is indebted, on the one hand, to the cultural-conservative opposition between society and community, or civilization and culture, and on the other hand, to Max Weber’s disenchantment theory, which Kracauer initially appropriated with a considerable shade of cultural pessimism. His technique of translating existential and social facts into spatial images—and conversely of decoding spaces as material hieroglyphs of social facts—is inspired by Georg Simmel, under whom he studied and about whom he wrote an as yet unpublished monograph. Finally, in the metaphor of ‘exile from the religious sphere’, it is not hard to recognize the notion of ‘transcendental homelessness’ which Georg Lukács introduced in his Theory of the Novel as a definition of modernity. Kracauer enthusiastically reviewed Lukács’s book; he retained its notion of ‘homelessness’ and revised it for the purposes of his own critique of ideology in Die Angestellten.

The Object of Sociology

The contours of Kracauer’s early diagnoses of modernity stand out more sharply in the scientific and epistemological critique of his monographs, Soziologie als Wissenschaft (1922) and Der Detektiv-Roman (written between 1922 and 1925). Long before Horkheimer and Adorno, he discovered that the Kantian critique of reason can be read as a kind of ‘cryptography’, which not only elaborates the conditions of possible knowledge, but also attests to the structure and function of modern rationality as a motor of alienation and an instrument of abstract self-assertion through the domination of nature. Kracauer also sees the legacy of idealistic abstraction in contemporary ‘formal sociology’, which

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16 The Mass Ornament, p. 132.
17 Kracauer, Schriften 1, Frankfurt am Main 1971, p. 105.
18 Kracauer, Georg Simmel. Ein Beitrag zur Deutung des geistigen Lebens unserer Zeit, undated typescript, circa 1919-20, Kracauer-Nachlass, Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Necka. Only one chapter of this study has been published; it appeared in 1920, under the title ‘Georg Simmel’, in the journal Logos, and was reprinted in The Mass Ornament, pp. 225-57. For the imagery of space in Simmel and Kracauer, see Anthony Vidler, ‘Agoraphobia. Spatial Estrangement in Simmel and Kracauer’, in New German Critique, no. 54, Fall 1991, special issue on Kracauer, pp. 31-45.
20 Soziologie als Wissenschaft was republished in Kracauer, Schriften 1, pp. 7-101. The study on the detective novel, of which only the chapter ‘The Hotel Lobby’ included in The Mass Ornament (pp. 173-85), appeared during Kracauer’s lifetime, was first published fully in Schriften 1, pp. 103-204.
defines itself ‘as an objective, value-free science’ that ‘strives to grasp social reality according to its necessity’. In this self-definition, Kra- cauer counters, sociology loses its object. For in the ‘empirical reality of socialized human beings’ no general and necessary laws prevail, nor is it possible to reduce this reality to objective facts that can be established as value-free. The world of social experience is a world of interpretations and individual phenomena that can be known only to the extent that they are interpreted as such: that is, as individual and meaningful.

Parallel to this epistemological critique, Kracauer’s newspaper articles engage in another, increasingly pointed debate with the religious and pseudo-religious reform movements of his day. However, if much of his own critique of contemporary civilization initially focused on metaphysical deficiencies, he was quite unable to make the sacrificial intellectus that joining one of those movements would have demanded. He therefore reacted with particular harshness against the ‘new’, intellectual ‘hominis religiosi’, whom he encountered, for instance, in the figures of the Catholic philosopher Max Scheler and the Jewish scholars Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. He at first also strongly opposed the messianic philosophy of Ernst Block, with whom he was later to become friends. Lack, as he well knew, is a bad architect and the ‘home’ of transcendence cannot be restored just because it might provide protection.

What alternative is left between the Scylla of abstract rationality and the Charybdis of faded doctrines of salvation? The question leads back to ‘Those Who Wait’. The title of this essay is not without ironic implications. It echoes a letter from Franz Rosenzweig who had criticized Kracauer’s sceptical distance from the religious reformers as ‘Waiting with folded arms—and folded behind your back to boot’. The attitude, however, that Kracauer proposes is not that of the onlooker. He describes it as ‘an attempt . . . to move out of the atomized unreal world of shapeless powers and figures devoid of meaning and into the world of reality and the domains it encompasses’. This attempt is associated with a figure who will reappear in another guise in Die Angestellten: the figure of the stranger. Kracauer carefully locates the ‘one who waits’ in a metaphorical context of ‘exile from the religious sphere’ and of ‘moving into [einkreisen] the world of reality’. For what he aims at is the stance of an intellectual who seeks to make the exile of transcendental homelessness, if not into a home, at least into a familiar dwelling. The ‘one who waits’ is certainly

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23 Ibid., p. 62.
24 Letter to Leo Löwenthal, 16 December 1921, quoted in Marbacher Magazin, p. 36.
25 For Kracauer’s early critique of Scheler, see especially ‘Catholicism and Relativism’ (1921), in The Mass Ornament, pp. 203-11. For his debate with Buber and Rosenzweig, see the review of Buber’s Ich und Du (1922) published under the title ‘Martin Buber’ (1923) and included in Schriften 5, pt. 1, pp. 236-42; also the celebrated essay ‘The Bible in German’ (1926), The Mass Ornament, pp. 189-201, a critical analysis of the first volumes of Buber’s and Rosenzweig’s translation of the Bible.
26 See the essay ‘Prophetentum’ (1922), Schriften 5, pt. 1, pp. 196-204, a withering critique of Block’s Thomas Müntzer als Theologe der Revolution (1921). Kracauer’s critique of Buber’s and Rosenzweig’s translation of the Bible prepared the ground for his reconciliation with Block.
27 Letter to Kracauer, 12 December 1921, quoted in Marbacher Magazin, p. 36.
28 Kracauer, The Mass Ornament, p. 139.
not yet the ethnologist of the ‘newest Germany’. But he is already the stranger, who has decided to stay in the modern world, because he does not know where else to go—and because he is curious.

The Photographic Face of the Public Sphere

The essay ‘Those Who Wait’ appeared just a few months after Kracauer had joined the editorial staff of the feuilleton of the Frankfurter Zeitung as a regular freelance contributor. This was not just accidental. For the intellectual modernization that Kracauer projects is also and essentially a literary one, intimately linked to the institution of the feuilleton. Here Kracauer had found the forum that suited his interest in the quotidian and his plans for public activity. Here were traditions of the small literary form that could be used to pursue the ‘big’ questions not in the form of philosophical systems but in reference to the phenomena themselves. Here, finally, he was offered a field for experimentation, where the concreteness of thought he strove for could be converted into literary styles and genres that crossed the established boundaries between scientific disciplines, as well as between journalism, poetry and philosophy. Kracauer was not the only one to take advantage of the possibilities of the feuilleton for reflection upon, and criticism of, modernity. Authors like Joseph Roth, Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin likewise recognized its potential. Thanks to Kracauer’s support and the prudent leadership of Benno Reifenberg, they were engaged as regular contributors to the Frankfurter Zeitung.29 Thus in this paper during the 1920s, the space ‘below the line’—in other words, below the graphic marker optically separating the feuilleton from the other sections—became what it had never been before and would never be again: the production site of a fragmentary theory of modernity.

At first hesitantly, but from 1924 onwards with growing consistency and determination, Kracauer opened the feuilleton to the new media and genres of mass culture—photography and film, radio and popular music, sport and revue—and the distracted forms of perception and modes of reception that they engender. He showed how the book market, with its multitude of popular genres and the hitherto scarcely noticed phenomenon of the best-seller, become transformed under the competitive pressure of these media. He studied the new codes of social communication and described the ritual of their forms and gestures. He discovered amusement palaces and hotel lobbies as centres of cult worship in which the modern age celebrates its emptiness and its distraction; and he explored the exemplary spaces of public life: cities and streets, arcades and railway-stations, restaurants and stores, and, last but not least, the labour exchanges and soup kitchens in which those eliminated from the economic process congregated.30

30 Kracauer’s essays are catalogued in Thomas Y. Levin, Siegfried Kracauer. Eine Bibliographie seiner Schriften, Marbach am Neckar 1989. For the period 1921-33, the years with the Frankfurter Zeitung, the bibliography lists almost 2,000 titles. Kracauer himself put together two selections of these essays: The Mass Ornament, and the anthology of short prose texts, Strassen in Berlin and anderswo, Frankfurt am Main 1964. Both were incorporated in the expanded selection of essays comprising the three-part Volume 5 of his
In these investigations, Kracauer puts into practice what he resolved upon programmatically in ‘Those Who Wait’: he ‘moves into the world of reality’. His interest, however, is not directed at reality as such, but specifically at those fugitive and imperceptible phenomena that most stubbornly resist interpretation, that fall through the mesh of theoretical systems and elude conceptual generalization. He coined for these phenomena the famous term ‘inconspicuous surface-level expressions’ [Unscheinbare Oberflächenäußersungen].\(^{31}\)

The metaphor of the surface—an updated descendant of the concepts of ‘emptiness’ and ‘unreality’, around which Kracauer’s early cultural-pessimist writings revolved—is programmatically counterposed to the ‘depth’ which bourgeois culture identified with genuineness, authenticity and truth. At the same time, the metaphor reflects upon a basic feature of modernity itself: namely the degree to which its public sphere begins to adapt to the conditions of its technological reproducibility and to develop a ‘photographic face’, a physiognomy modelled on the demands of the media.\(^{32}\)

In *Die Angestellten*, Kracauer will quote a Berlin department-store manager who describes the ‘pleasant appearance’ necessary for employment in his firm as a ‘morally pink complexion’. Visibility here becomes the ‘projection surface of a faculty of judgement that itself merely again tests suitability for superficial appearance’.\(^{33}\)

Just as the metaphor of the ‘morally pink complexion’, precisely because of its casual nature, does not merely say what the manager thought but also betrays ‘what is so self-evident to him that he does not even have to consider it’, so the significance that Kracauer ascribes to the surface is directly connected with its inconspicuousness.\(^{34}\)

Here—according to the central thesis of his critical phenomenology—social control decreases; here, encoded as a material ‘hieroglyph’, a social being is expressed that is masked and disguised by interested consciousness.\(^{35}\)

Compared to an ‘epoch’s judgements about itself’, ‘surface-level expressions’ are unintentional and uncensored.\(^{36}\)

When they can be successfully deciphered, the ‘fundamental substance of the state of things’ presents itself without ideological distortion, without the ‘interference of consciousness’, and hence as ‘unmediated’.\(^{37}\)

Self-Destructive Modernity

Kracauer elaborated the theoretical foundations of his critical phenomenology between about 1923 and 1926 in an intensive reading of Kier-
Kierkegaard, Marx, and Max Weber, the latter reconsidered through the lens of Marx’s early writings. In the course of this reading, he translated his early, cultural-pessimist diagnosis of modernity into the context of a ‘material philosophy of history’. Its perspectives are formulated in what is perhaps his best known essay, ‘The Mass Ornament’ of 1927. In the analysis of an icon of the culture of distraction—the revue performances of the Tiller Girls—Kracauer attempts to determine ‘the position’ which his ‘epoch occupies in the historical process’. In his early writings, he had interpreted the history of modernity as a fall from an anterior plenitude of meaning. Now, in the 1927 essay, he conceives of it as a process of ‘disenchantment’, a ‘demythologization’ of natural bonds. In both cases, history is essentially viewed as a destructive process, a process of disintegration and desubstantialization. Accordingly, Kracauer particularly emphasizes the implications of dissolution and decomposition inherent in his new notion of ‘demythologization’. But, whereas from the melancholy outlook of his early writings the historical process was at best acknowledged as irreversible, it is now emphatically affirmed as a necessary negation on the way to the ‘breakthrough’ of reason (Vernunft). In this speculative construction, modernity appears in a new light. It marks a crisis of history not because it represents the most advanced state of disenchantment—on the contrary, therein precisely lies its truth. It makes a crisis, rather, because it threatens to bring the dynamics of disenchantment to a halt. By virtue of its negative spirit of analysis, modern rationality does partake of the truth of disenchanting reason. But this progressive potential is neutralized by the increasing stabilization of capitalist relations of production. In the ‘ratio’ of capitalist economy, as Kracauer puts it, the ‘false concreteness’ of myth is reversed into its unmediated opposite, a ‘false abstractness’ that knows no other purpose than the ‘domination and use of self-contained natural entities’. This abstract rationality itself bears mythic traits, since it treats the product of its own historical destruction—capitalist productive and social relations—as if they were an immutable natural basis.

It was with good reason that Adorno assured Kracauer in 1933 that he had ‘been the first of us all to tackle afresh the problems of Enlightenment’. In retrospect, ‘The Mass Ornament’ reads like a nucleus of The Dialectic of Enlightenment. Unlike Horkheimer and Adorno, though, Kracauer in 1927 had not yet lost faith in the possibility of historical progress—or, more precisely, of a messianic ‘breakthrough of truth’, a ‘reversal’ of ‘emptiness’ into ‘the fullness of being’.

40 The Mass Ornament, p. 80.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., pp. 80ff.
43 Letter to Kracauer, 12 January 1933 (Kracauer-Nachlass, Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar).
This faith is grounded in the eschatological notion of a productive, 'revolutionizing negativity'. Under its influence, Kracauer in the mid 1920s committed himself to a critical strategy according to which only the intensification of the destructive process of modernity offers the chance of unleashing its emancipatory and utopian energies, neutralized within capitalist relations of production. Thus, when Kracauer in 'The Mass Ornament' provocatively states: 'capitalism... rationalizes not too much, but rather too little', he is gambling on the possibility that, through further rationalization, what Weber called the 'spirit of capitalism' will turn its inherent critical-analytical potential against itself. The process of 'demythologization' must be driven forward so that the capitalist epoch, in its turn, can be exposed to dissolution and 'its negativity is thought through to the end'. ‘America’, Kracauer writes in 1925, in imagery familiar to his contemporaries, ‘will vanish only when it fully discovers itself.

Data from the Pleasure Barracks

‘The Mass Ornament’ outlines the methodological and theoretical premises upon which Kracauer, in the second half of the 1920s, explored the cultural spaces of the anonymous public that in 1929 he identified as the salaried class. In the beginning he saw no reason to anchor his observations in a sociological analysis of class structure. On the contrary, if Kracauer initially ascribed an emancipatory potential to capitalist culture, he did so not least of all because he understood this culture as a formative power capable of shaping a mass audience in which perceptual differences between classes and genders are levelled. Thus, in his 1926 essay, ‘Cult of Distraction’, he introduced the concept of a ‘homogeneous cosmopolitan audience in which everyone has the same responses [eines Sinnes ist], from the bank director to the sales clerk, from the diva to the stenographer’. The specific stratum to which the sales clerk and the stenographer belong became significant for him to the extent that he shifted the emphasis of his analyses from cinema to film, and hence from a phenomenology of the spaces and the forms of reception of mass culture, to an ideological critique of its contents. A first attempt to practice film criticism as an ideological criticism of society was the essay Film und Gesellschaft, published in several instalments in 1927. It was followed by another serialized essay, ‘Film 1928’, in which Kracauer explicitly calls attention to the ‘lower white-collar workers’ as ‘one of the principal groups of movie spectators’. It is no accident that this reference occurs

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in a text in which Kracauer enters the lists against the ‘stupidity’, ‘false-
ness’ and ‘meanness’ of the general run of contemporary German films,
not just with unparalleled bitterness, but also with a confession of his
own helplessness. For the more rigorously he analyzed the ideology
of mass media products, the more insistently the question confronted him
of the audience that would swallow these products. And the more this
question engaged him, the more urgent the need became to supplement
his phenomenology and philosophy of history with sociological knowl-
edge.

It is in these terms that we can understand the origins of Kracauer's
interest in the salaried class and the theoretical constellation from which
Die Angestellten took its bearings. In this book, Kracauer no longer argues
for an emancipatory potential, let alone a ‘revolutionizing negativity’, of
distraction. If, a few years before he had claimed that ‘the homogeneous
cosmopolitan audience’ could become aware of its own ‘reality’ in the
‘fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions’, he now interprets
mass culture as an instrument of class rule, and at the same time as the
medium of a collective repression that aims to ‘cast once and for all into
the abyss of imageless oblivion’ the ideas of ‘revolution’ and ‘death’, and
therrewith ‘those contents that are not embedded within the construction
of our social existence, but that put this existence itself’ into parentheses.
Accordingly, in the need that drove the employees into the ‘pleasure barr-
racks’ of the entertainment industry, he is now able to discern only the
symptom of a lack: the symptom of an ideological homelessness and exist-
tential despair springing from ‘a life which only in a restricted sense can
be called a life’. This revaluation of the concept of distraction in turn
points to a comprehensive theoretical shift touching the basis of Kra-
cauer's whole construction of modernity. It is not just the empirical
research and sociological focus that fundamentally distinguishes his
investigation into salaried employees from his previous essays. It is also
the abandonment of the grand récit of the philosophy of history, which
since the mid 1920s had underpinned his programme of deciphering
unconscious surface-level expressions. As a result, Kracauer was later
reproached by Adorno for lack of theoretical rigour, even for a tacit com-
plicity with the status quo. From today’s viewpoint, Kracauer's scepti-
cal detachment from speculative constructions of a general historical
process appears rather as a further step in the modernization of his intel-
lectual existence. For this abandonment of grand philosophical schemes
finds its complement in a reflection upon the relation between sociologi-
cal knowledge and textual representation that points forward to present-
day debates in cultural theory.

The Mosaic of Social Description

‘What does an ethnologist do?—he writes.’ Clifford Geertz's famous
redefinition of ethnology as ethnography is to some extent anticipated
by Kracauer. His sociological expedition into 'employee culture' is like-

51 Ibid., p. 307.
52 Ibid., p. 326.
53 Adorno, 'Der wunderliche Realist', pp. 90ff.
wise a sociographical undertaking which tackles anew a question that Kracauer had already been concerned with in his early epistemological treatise, *Soziologie als Wissenschaft*. This is the question of the possibility of a ‘material sociology’, which mediates between the claim to concreteness and the claim to valid cognition. For Kracauer, neither abstract ‘idealistic thought’ and the scientific tradition of ‘formal sociology’, nor the literary genre of empirical reportage, which ‘generally draws from life with a leaky bucket’, present a satisfactory answer to this two-fold claim. In the preface to his celebrated anthology, *Der rasende Reporter* (1924), the writer Egon Erwin Kisch had defined the reporter as a witness without a standpoint, and reportage as a ‘photography of the present’ not touched up. Kracauer seizes on this definition in *Die Angestellten* and turns it against the genre: insofar as reportage ‘photographs life’, the functional coherence of reality—its artificial, constructed quality—eludes it. This ‘constructedness’ demands a representational method that dissolves the fortuitous empirical coherence of the raw material, and rearranges and combines the ‘observations on the basis of comprehension of their meaning’. Kracauer calls the resulting textual structure a ‘mosaic’. Behind this image it is not hard to recognize the technique of another optical medium, namely the montage technique of film.

Microscopic description on the one hand, construction on the other—the representational methods that Kracauer seeks to combine are indeed so near to film close-up and montage that one could argue a posteriori from them how he visualized a good film. What Kracauer conceived of as the specific materialist possibility of film—the possibility of analyzing and representing reality in the medium of the optical itself, that is, purely through focusing and cutting—he seeks in *Die Angestellten* to translate into a text. If his earlier essays deciphered surface-level phenomena as the reflex of a conceptually preformulated ‘fundamental substance of an epoch’, now theory forfeits its hierarchically privileged position in relation to empirical material. It infiltrates the surface, so to speak, manifesting itself in the way the tessera of the ‘mosaic’ are cut and in the interstices left between them.

This representational method is demonstrated in miniature in the two short texts which follow the preface and serve as an epigraph to the book. They describe two concrete situations, rendered anonymous and universal by the present tense and the indefinite articles. Each of these situations is in itself significant, but the paradoxical state of affairs they are supposed to illuminate emerges only from the mirror-image combination into which Kracauer assembles them. If one wished to define this state of affairs abstractly, one would have to speak of a contradic-


56 Kisch, *Der rasende Reporter*, pp. 7ff.

tion between proletarianized existence and bourgeois sense of identity, and of an ideological inversion of the priority of public and seemingly private relations, reproduced for its part in the socially institutionalized separation between the sphere of work and a complementary sphere of leisure which stages the lost bourgeois status on the level of appearances. Yet this conceptual language misses precisely what matters most to Kracauer: the details of the situations, their complexity, the perspectives of their agents, and not least the tragi-comic irony inherent in them. His investigation, therefore, refrains from formulating its insight in a conceptual language removed from its material. Instead, Kracauer seeks to construct in that material. In other words, knowledge of the material’s significance becomes the principle of its textual representation, so that the representation itself articulates the theory.

Exhibiting Specimens

Like the montage of the material, the form of its linguistic mediation—quotation, conversation, report, narrative, scene, image—depends on the knowledge of its significance. The chapter ‘Repair Shop’ reads like the outline of a story. Its narrative structure mirrors the actual connection between works council, labour court and labour exchange, the path of plaintiffs and complaints through the institutions. In the passages on the labour courts, ‘close-ups’ delay the progress of the bare narrative, in order to call attention to those apparent trifles which, in the light of the courtroom, ‘emerge with unwonted clarity’. Individuals who have been sacked are introduced: a salesgirl who advised a friend to buy her shoes more cheaply from another store; a young employee whose private notebook was confiscated during a bodily search by his firm; an elderly sales representative who seeks to furnish proof of his bourgeois origins through Latin quotations. The dramatic form of presentation is mimetically adapted to the actual situation of the hearing, through which ‘harassment, customs, economic relations and social conditions are not just illustrated, but present themselves in person.’

The chapter ‘A Few Choice Specimens’, inserted between the analysis of salaried employees’ material living conditions and that of the ideologies superimposed on this reality, is devoted to ‘features, patterns and phenomena’ which do not readily coincide with the ‘image’ that has been formed in the ‘general consciousness’ of the salaried stratum. The ‘dashing’ cigarette salesman who lives in a kind of ‘pre-ordained harmony’ with the demands of modern life; the accountant and the cashier who turn into ‘fantastical’ figures from the world of E.T.A. Hoffmann during the nocturnal dancing at a widows’ ball; the proletarian girl ‘Cricket’ who has climbed to the filing department of a factory and who can hear no popular ditty without automatically ‘chirruping along’ with it; the young business employee who conducts his private correspondence on love and sexuality with methods that would be worthy of the bureaucratic organization of a large firm: Kracauer portrays these types with the love for detail of a botanist compiling a specimen-album of rare plants. What emerges, though, is no botanical system, but a small sociological archive of human figures and manifestations of life.
When *Die Angestellten* appeared in 1930, hardly a critic was able to resist the ‘appeal of Kracauer’s style of presentation’. 58 ‘Popular descriptions of social relations’, wrote the journalist Walter Dirks, ‘are to Kracauer’s method as amateur lyrical portrayals of landscape are to the descriptions of a good landscape morphologist’. 59 Ernst Bloch emphasized the ‘sober colourfulness’ of Kracauer’s style; 60 Walter Benjamin its ‘laconic tone’, in which ‘humanity’ is born from the ‘spirit of irony’. ‘In Kracauer’s analyses’, Benjamin continues, ‘there are elements of the liveliest satire that has long since withdrawn from the realm of political caricature in order to claim an epic scope corresponding to the immeasurability of its subject’. The economist Hans Speier, who shortly afterwards wrote one of the best books to date on salaried employees, placed Kracauer’s description of milieux in the tradition of the great French and English novelists of the last century; Kracauer not only ‘measures out the space in which employees live’, Speier wrote, he also renders ‘the air they breathe.’ 61

That it captures the most elusive element of reality is one of the reasons why Kracauer’s text has survived and can be read anew today. A ‘thick description’ avant la lettre, Kracauer brings us ‘into touch with the lives’ of Berlin employees, 62 and convinces us that he ‘has truly “been there”’. 63 Measured against the present state of ethnographical discussion, he undoubtedly underestimates the precariousness of his own position and the problematic nature of delimitation and distancing as means of constituting the object of his observation and description. There are relations of power and oppression, however, not just between the ethnological researcher and the other culture he seeks to explore, but also within this other culture’s socio-political and symbolical structure. By making transparent these power structures in a skilful combination of documentation and construction, Kracauer’s study transcends the ethnographical hermeneutics of ‘thick description’ and becomes a socio-political diagnosis pressing for reorganization and change.

58 Ernst W. Eschmann, ‘Die Angestellten. Ergänzungen zu S. Kracauer’, *Die Tat* 22 (1930), vol. 2, p. 460. *Die Tat* was a central organ of the ‘Conservative Revolution’, and in political terms Eschmann was one of Kracauer’s sharpest critics. For Kracauer’s analysis of the *Die Tat* circle, see ‘Revolt of the Middle Classes’, in *The Mass Ornament*, pp. 107-27.


62 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 16.