

CHAPTER 1

The Early Days: A Biographical Sketch

SIEGFRIED KRACAUER is one of those authors to whom that sad saying applies: his fame is nothing more than “the sum of errors” connected with his name. Under his name we would find Harold Bloom’s fictitious “map of misreading” with all the possible contradictory but also productive interpretations and with all the unproductive misunderstandings that have tended to get in the way. Most prominent among these are some theorists of film who wish to do their best to punish the name Kracauer for having produced a naive apology for realism, without actually having understood the philosophical construction on which his phenomenology of film rests.

As a consequence, cycles of readings have come and gone. The reception of Kracauer still stands on unsteady feet, to the extent that it stands at all. And things are made difficult by the fact that his name has been entered on various topographical maps. Kracauer exists either as a film theorist or as a distant relative of the Frankfurt School, either as a journalist or as a philosopher, either as an essay-writer or as a novelist. In ironic desperation, Kracauer therefore once asked in a letter penned on the occasion of a preface that was to be attached to one of his books, not to be presented as a “film man,” but instead as “a philosopher of culture, or also as a sociologist, and as a poet. . . . With regard to film, it has always only been a hobby I pursued in order to make certain sociological and philosophical statements.”¹

Seen from a distance, we can discern a pattern in the various maps readers have made of the author’s work and the divergent interpretations they have come up with. The pattern, although it has a shape of its own, can be understood as an extension of his work—or as a “constitutive surface,” to use Kracauer’s own concept.

If we assume that the “constitutive surface” of Kracauer’s oeuvre is a structure in its own right, then we will find it easier to comprehend the internal fissures and outstanding characteristics of the individual

CHAPTER 1

writings. Indeed, anyone who is at a loss when confronted by Kracauer's writings—unable to decide whether he should approach Kracauer the film theorist, Kracauer the philosopher, Kracauer the poet, or Kracauer the journalist with a view to grasping the man's thought—will be unable to see the structural identity of these different parts. Right through to his last book, Kracauer adhered to the idea of a compositional principle behind a surface which itself had no center; it was on this surface that he tried to depict both micro- and macro-structures. A page from the manuscript version of the table of contents in that last book, *History: The Last Things before the Last*, for example, states that the first point must be an "Emphasis on minutiae—microanalysis—Close-up." Kracauer then cuts from the technical "long shot" to philosophical concepts such as "Progress" or "Dialectics."² This mixture would appear to be significant, combining both an aesthetic form of representation (e.g., the close-up) and a conceptual presentation based around abstract categories. However, Kracauer places the latter in a context he calls the "web of interpretation" in a handwritten addendum to the manuscript. In the same draft, we find a potential chapter 14 titled "Theological (and philosophical) views—lurking around the corner."³ What lurks around the corner is not only his intellectual heritage, but also a linguistic reference to his preference for images and to his vivid language, on which his fame as a journalist rested. That the manuscript in question was purely a preliminary sketch later fleshed out further and revised by hand indicates that the writer moved in such striking linguistic images in daily life. In other words, this trait is not just the stylistic finesse of the printed work but a way of thinking.

If one were to assess Kracauer's oeuvre after the fact to discover its internal consistency by separating out the different language games (such as the literary or philosophical), one would fail to uncover the unique character of Kracauer's work. This mixture of linguistic systems has for too long obscured a clear view of his oeuvre and instead has created a somewhat hapless subdivision of the research on his thought. He has been studied only in terms of the narrow confines of a particular discipline. Film theorists have come up against the limits of their profession, but so have the philosophers who suspected Kracauer of playing linguistic games on them.

THE EARLY DAYS

In the above-cited letter, with its recommendations on how best to present his own person, Kracauer asks his biographer not to mention the date of his birth. He may have feared that the fixed point given by the objectivity of a date would cause too much weight to be attached to the subjectivity of his person and would cause the author to pale like an old photograph. In the course of his life, which was not exactly lacking in bitter disappointments and rejection, Kracauer, the author of extraterritoriality, was only too aware that his oeuvre begged misunderstandings. These stemmed from the deliberate choice of different subject matters, as he suggests in the introduction to “History: The Last Things before the Last,” which took up themes that had also been treated in the older “Theory of Film”:

This book which I had always conceived as an aesthetics of the photographic media, not less and not more, now that I have penetrated the veil that envelops one’s most intimate endeavors, appears to me in its true light: as another attempt of mine to bring out the significance of areas whose claim to be acknowledged in their own right has not yet been recognized. I say “another attempt” because this was what I had tried to do throughout my life—in *Die Angestellten*, perhaps in *Ginster*, and certainly in the *Offenbach*. So 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. Perhaps this is less true of history than of photography; yet history too marks a bent of the mind and defines a region of reality which despite all that has been written about them are still largely *terra incognita*.⁴

Here, Kracauer himself outlines the reasons for one of the various obstacles that a “proper” reception of his work has had to overcome. Like Walter Benjamin, Kracauer casts the gaze of a flaneur on the surface, construing the latter as a system of information, a new social text, which many jointly write and only a very few read. As a consequence, even in his early writings we find a phenomenological interpretation of the everyday world of modernity. He thus placed things that were ostensibly close at hand at a great distance; for example, under his pen the physical proximity of the “Tiller girls” gels to form an abstract ornament, which readers are expected to understand

CHAPTER 1

as a sign. It is quite easy to see in such figures of thought the old phenomenological agenda, but Kracauer's actual interest is in reading the world of objects contemplated as a picture, in terms of an ideology critique. This dual structure of knowledge—as contemplation and interpretation—links Kracauer to more recent issues in film theory.

The dual structure can also be found from an early date in the intellectual development of Siegfried Kracauer, who started his professional life in the first decade of the twentieth century as both an architect and novelist, as well as in the family into whose midst he was born on February 8, 1889, in Frankfurt on Main. His father Adolf claims to have become a businessman because, by choosing a practical profession, he enabled his younger brother Isidor to study. The two brothers eventually married sisters in Frankfurt, Rosette and Hedwig Oppenheimer. From earliest childhood, Siegfried spent his days not just with his parents, but also with his Uncle Isidor and Aunt Hedwig. In keeping with his mother's wish, Isidor Kracauer had embarked on studies at the Theological Faculty in Wroclaw with the goal of becoming a rabbi.

However, Isidor allowed himself to be swayed by his interest in secular studies, specifically in history. In so doing, he made a name for himself, not as a rabbi, but instead as a teacher at the Philanthropin, the Jewish high school in Frankfurt. Founded by the Frankfurt Jewish community to promote schooling in the humanities, and open to both Jews and Gentiles, the Philanthropin brought together an enlightened group of people who were interested in theological issues. It was to this group that Siegfried Kracauer often implicitly referred in his writings. His uncle Isidor, who taught history at the school for over forty years, also undertook research into regional Jewish history. This culminated in his two-volume *Zur Geschichte der Juden in Frankfurt am Main 1150–1824* (On the history of the Jews in Frankfurt on Main, 1150–1824), which is to this day considered a standard work on the uncertain fate of the Jewish community in Frankfurt. Siegfried would undoubtedly have been encouraged in numerous ways by his uncle, and it was to him that Siegfried wrote high-spirited letters while vacationing. Shortly after finishing high school in 1907, Kracauer's first article appeared in *Frankfurter Zei-*

THE EARLY DAYS

tung, and he commenced studying architecture in Darmstadt the very same year. He studied there as well as in Berlin and Munich, where he finally graduated in 1911.

Parallel to his practical work as an architect, he continued pursuing his study of philosophical, sociological, and epistemological questions—an interest sparked during his student days. He was captivated, above all, by Kant's theory of cognition. It would be easy to conclude from Kracauer's studies and short professional career as an architect that he had some special talent and inclination for spatial thought and imagination. One source of proof is his Ph.D. thesis, completed in 1914, *Die Entwicklung der Schmiedekunst in Berlin, Potsdam und einigen Städten der Mark vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zum Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts* (On the development of the art of smithy in Berlin, Potsdam and several towns in the March, from the seventeenth century until the beginning of the nineteenth century), which is an example of his intense focus on ornament. However, the first jobs he got in architectural offices were not exactly inspiring and were relatively short-lived.

When the Great War broke out, he returned to Frankfurt and started writing before he found a new job with an architectural firm. In 1916, he designed a memorial cemetery for soldiers. In *Ginster*, his autobiographical novel, he described the layout:

The general times of war . . . called for a layout in which the horrors of war were repeated. Instead of using the previous sketches, Ginster therefore applied his set square and ruler to manufacturing a cemetery system that resembled a military flow chart. . . . Laid out according to strictly scientific principles, open to all members of the public. Rectangular graveyards were aligned to a central square, on which the memorial rose upwards like a superior officer. It consisted of an elevated cube, crowned by several slabs. Three sides of the cube were to be used for the names of the dead, while the fourth was to bear a motto. . . . The monument looked down on its troops as if stopping to watch them parade; indeed, not the slightest irregularity was to be seen.”⁵

In 1917, Kracauer was conscripted into an artillery unit in Mainz; it was a complex experience that he shared along with most of his generation—who enthused about the war. In *Ginster*, the successfully

CHAPTER 1

designed structure of 1916 gives way to an edifice analyzed with great coldness and distance, and is critically altered. It reflects the experience of life in a conurbation, of modern architecture as part of an overall plan for life in which even questions of style become social ciphers.

After the war, it proved difficult to find a new job. Kracauer increasingly worked as a reviewer for *Frankfurter Zeitung*, becoming editor of the arts section in 1921. It was about then that he first met members of the future Frankfurt School; he became close friends, above all, with Theodor Adorno and Leo Lowenthal. These friendships lasted for the rest of his life, even if Kracauer never belonged to the inner circle of people associated with the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. Later, when in exile in the United States, Leo Lowenthal and Siegfried Kracauer closed ranks, even if in the final analysis they stood for different philosophical positions.

Until moving to Berlin, his last stop before taking the arduous road to exile, Kracauer was essentially influenced by Frankfurt intellectual life, if we ignore brief periods of study in Munich and Berlin. And in particular he was inspired by the thought that was prevalent in the Yeshiva, where Rabbis Nobel, Rosenzweig, and Buber (who passed through) did not fail to make an impact on Kracauer and Lowenthal, despite Kracauer's later sharp critique of Rosenzweig and Buber's new translation of the Bible.⁶ Many years later, Adorno, who studied Kant with Kracauer on Saturdays, remembered above all the idiosyncratic and convincing introduction Kracauer gave his young friend. In his famous essay on Kracauer, Adorno described these study sessions and the Kant interpretation that they resulted in:

I may be qualified to make a start on this . . . by outlining some of the features of the figure of Kracauer: he and I have been friends since I was a young man. I was a student at the *Gymnasium* when I met him near the end of the First World War. A friend of my parents, Rosie Stern, had invited the two of us to her house. She was a tutor at the Philanthropin, where Kracauer's uncle, the historiographer of the Frankfurt Jews, was a member of the faculty. . . .

For years, Kracauer read the "Critique of Pure Reason" regularly on Saturday afternoon with me. I am not exaggerating in the slightest when

THE EARLY DAYS

I say that I owe more to this reading than to my academic teachers. . . . Under his guidance I experienced the work from the beginning not as mere epistemology, not as an analysis of the conditions of scientifically valid judgments, but as a kind of coded text from which the historical situation of spirit could be read, with the vague expectation that in doing so one could acquire something of truth itself. . . .

Without being able to account for it fully, through Kracauer I perceived for the first time the expressive moment in philosophy: putting into words the thoughts that come into one's head.⁷

Many years later, his old friend Leo Lowenthal was to vouch for the fact that Kracauer was an unusual intellectual. Lowenthal described him as one of those thinkers who found the role of "thorn" or "debunker" more appropriate than that of prophet or soothsayer: "As a critic he always maintained, I would say, an attitude of extreme commitment and, at the same time, a constant unwillingness to surrender to any absolutes; he always raised doubts, always retained this critical attitude. In this sense he was really a super-member of our school of critical thinking."⁸

His recalcitrant insistence on critique did not only make him friends; it also destroyed the friendly relations of others. Lowenthal, for example, reports that following Kracauer's sharp critique of Buber and Rosenzweig, and Rosenzweig's equally vehement reaction, he had to put his own friendship with Buber at risk when standing by Kracauer.⁹

As early as 1921, Kracauer composed an essay titled "On Friendship," in which he made all sorts of clever distinctions in order to dissect the different forms of human relationships.¹⁰ The combination of analytical categories and phenomenological observations already attests to Kracauer's feel for psychological detail, something that may have been the product of his early study of those philosophers who wrote on the subconscious emotions of the soul.

On finally abandoning architecture as a profession and joining the editorial staff of *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1921, he was already thirty-two years old. On emigrating to France in 1933, he was in his mid-forties. On disembarkation in New York in 1941 (where he was met by his old friend from Frankfurt, Lowenthal), he was fifty-two and

CHAPTER 1

faced the awesome prospect of having to start a new life and find a new way of making a living and new friends. In the 1920s, as a witty gesture, he had sent Lowenthal and Adorno a letter posted from the “headquarters of the transcendental homeless.”¹¹ Now, it looked dangerously as if he had gone ashore precisely at that headquarters.