The Negative Church of Modernity: Siegfried Kracauer, Secularization, and Cultural Crisis in Weimar Germany

by

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Abstract

In this study I investigate the early work of the German writer Siegfried Kracauer (1889-1966) in relation to contemporary discourses of religious revival and secularization. Kracauer was one of the most renowned journalists of Weimar Germany. By the time he fled to Paris in 1933, he had written hundreds of articles for the Frankfurter Zeitung and other periodicals; he also had written sociological works and a novel. In this variegated collection of writing, Kracauer outlined a critique of mass culture that in some respects anticipated both the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and the concerns of cultural studies in our own day. His subsequent work, written after his emigration to the United States in 1941, contributed to the early development of film studies, and it is for this work that he is primarily known.

My dissertation explores the prehistory of Kracauer’s critique of mass culture, in particular, the origins of this critique in his writing prior to 1926. In this period, he closely observed and participated in contemporary philosophical debates on questions of religion and secularism. I argue that these issues occupy a position of fundamental importance in Kracauer’s
idea of criticism. Between the collision and collusion of discourses concerning the religious and the profane, Kracauer defined a space for critical practice, a space that accepted a theologically influenced view of the secular age as an age of crisis. Even after Kracauer turned, later in his career, towards a more positive valuation of secular modernity, the modern remained for him a crisis-ridden state that required the mediating efforts of the critic. His critical practice, moreover, was informed by his attempt to secularize theological concepts, in terms of both substance and rhetorical strategy. Messianic and Gnostic traditions within Judaism influenced Kracauer, but his approach to this issue was ultimately eclectic, responding to a wide array of sources including the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard.

Though previous studies have pointed out that metaphysical impulses informed Kracauer’s work, an extensive analysis of his engagement with contemporary religious movements is still needed. This dissertation situates Kracauer within these movements and discusses how his criticism evolved in relation to the claims of these competing discourses. Using Kracauer as a case study, I argue that the confrontation between the religious and the profane was a common reference point for intellectual debate, and that this conflict was pervasive in the bitterly contested cultural politics of the Weimar Republic, preparing the ground for National Socialism.
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Writing a dissertation is an exercise in humbleness, not least because one discovers how much one depends on others. To start, there are the institutions: without the support of the University of Toronto Fellowship I would never have undertaken a PhD. I owe a debt of gratitude to other parts of the University as well. Both the Department of History and the School of Graduate Studies provided funds for research, as did the Joint Initiative in German and European Studies. A further Dissertation Completion Grant from the Joint Initiative also helped keep the project afloat in the later stages. I also extend my thanks to Patricia and Alan Marchment for having supported my research abroad through the Graduate Student Travel Award. Over the past years, I also received wise and often timely advice from several individuals working in these departments and institutions, for which I am very thankful. This kept me sane (thanks to Louise Nugent and Jennifer Francesco). Abroad, I enjoyed a semester of research at the Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen as a participant in the Ontario/Baden-Württemberg Student Exchange Program. My time at the University was pleasant in every way, and I thank the support staff of the University who made it so; also, special thanks are due to Professor David Darby for having suggested I pursue this route. The added months in Germany were an immense benefit.

I conducted most of the research for this dissertation in Germany, and my thanks are due to numerous archives and institutes. I spent several months at the Deutsches Literatur-Archiv in Marbach, where the Kracauer papers reside. I met more people than I can name here, but I am very grateful for my time there, and for the assistance I received in the Handschriftenabteilung and elsewhere at the DLA and Collegienhaus. The staff of the Deutsches Exilarchiv in the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek in Frankfurt am Main were very friendly when I arrived speaking a very heavily accented German – thanks especially to Sylvia Asmus and Katrin Kokot. I owe to Stephen Roeper and company at the archives of the Johannes Senckenberg Library (also in Frankfurt) some very pleasant hours, including muffins and tea. In Stuttgart, I thank Magdalene Popp-Grilli for her assistance with the as of yet uncatalogued papers of Hermann Herrigel, kept in the Württembergische Landesbibliothek. Brief visits were made to the Leo Baeck Institute in
both Berlin and New York, the Bundesarchiv in Berlin, the Bayerisches Staatsbibliothek in Munich, the Walter Benjamin Archive in Berlin, and the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam. My thanks to all those who assisted my research and made these encounters enjoyable ones. I owe particular gratitude to Dr Gerdrun Schwarz at the Benjamin Archive who helped me negotiate the copyright maze surrounding the Adorno archive. The archivists at the International Institute of Social History helped me confirm some misattributions in the Gottfried Salomon-delatour papers. I thank the Suhrkamp Verlag for granting me permission to make some copies of the Adorno/Kracauer correspondence at the Benjamin Archive prior to their publication.

Some years ago, before my first trip to Europe, I read Rites of Spring, and it is no exaggeration to say that this book almost single-handedly incited my interest in history and my desire to pursue graduate study. Aside from this overarching indebtedness, I thank Professor Modris Eksteins for his patience in supervising this work, even when it appeared that it might drag on interminably. He allowed the dissertation all the space it needed to take shape, while also keeping me on track when the writing became wayward. It has been a pleasure to learn from him. I thank both Professor Jennifer Jenkins and Professor James Retallack, who have offered support and guidance in numerous ways throughout my time in Toronto, both before and during the writing phases of this dissertation. Their comments on my work have been both a support and a spur to further efforts. A brief conversation with Professor Derek Penslar was very fruitful for me when the dissertation was still taking shape (“religionize Kracauer”); I am deeply grateful that he agreed to assess the work as an external examiner. I thank Professor Eric Weitz for agreeing to be an external reader, and also for his remarks, all of which point the way toward strengthening this study in the future. It was a privilege and a pleasure to have so many careful and thoughtful readings of my work.

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important voices of encouragement. Carla Hustak offered camaraderie and, moreover, read and commented on some chapters of this dissertation – many thanks. The costs of staying in German cities were offset by those who, in some cases, offered their homes to a near total stranger: thanks to Anthony in Berlin (not a stranger, of course), to Jenny and Sibylle Flügge in Frankfurt, and also to KD Wolff. Sibylle also offered invaluable assistance in deciphering Kracauer’s difficult handwriting. Staying with KD Wolff afforded me a brief glimpse into the amazing publishing venture of the Stroemfeld Verlag.

Much of my education and research has derived from many hours spent in bookstores, both as an employee and a reader. My thanks to the following stores (and their staffs) who kept the bookshelves full and still stocked history when it seemed it was unprofitable to do so: the Banff Book and Art Den (RIP), the fabulous shop owned by James Munro in Victoria, Book City in Toronto, and the great shops of Tbingen (Gustl, H.P. Willi, and the excellent Quichotte bookshop). Significant parts of this work were written and researched in the comfortable surroundings of the Espresso Bar (where John Christopoulos offered much diverting conversation) and the Victory Café in Toronto. Princeton, where I have moved since 2008, has become a new home thanks to many new friends and acquaintances who have made the last stages of the dissertation much more enjoyable. I hope they will recognize themselves in these remarks.

Those relations that join the personal and professional are the deepest. To my parents I owe more than could be said in a couple of sentences, but I do want to mention their support both materially and mentally over these past years and beyond. My sister Kelly (her alias goes unmentioned here) has also taken on the role of supporting her older brother in a way that is far beyond any reasonable sibling obligations. I am deeply grateful. Finally, Janet and I started out on graduate studies at the same time, and she has done more to make this work happen than one could have reasonably expected. Without her it is hard to imagine having reached this point, or having had so much enjoyment doing so.
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Chapter 1
Introduction: Kracauer, Secularization and Modernity

1. Religious Revival and the Problem of Culture

What religion do I confess? None of all those that you have named. “And why none?” Out of religion.¹

First the Zionist Congress in Basel, then the day before yesterday Lourdes: again and again I come across profound adepts in that kind of demonstrativeness that is called religious.²

The beginning of November 1918 found Siegfried Kracauer reading Reflections of a Non-political Man by Thomas Mann. There is some irony in the fact that on the eve of the birth of the Republic, Kracauer, who would later become known as a critic on the left, was enthralled with one of the more aggressive tracts defending the cultural mission of imperial Germany. Within days an armistice would end four years of war, and, as a result, Mann’s polemic became more or less irrelevant. The armed conflict between German culture and Western civilisation was over, and Mann’s idea of the “culture nation” had lost. In his journal, Kracauer wrote down a one word entry on November 8: “Revolution!”³ He probably assumed that a fundamental transformation had begun, and that culture would be a part of this. Of course, revolution did not mean an end to the belief that culture was the best means to transform German society and politics. For some, the shocks of the war and revolution gave more impetus to these ideas, increasing the passion with which they were held.

In his early career, Kracauer sometimes subscribed to this view, often expressing a pessimistic if utopian strand of this “apolitical” idea. In his review of a 1920 publication by the philosopher Georg Burckhardt, he argued that one must turn to philosophy and religion to find a solution to

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² Kracauer to Werner Thormann, September 22, 1927, Werner Thormann Nachlaß, EB 97/145, Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, Deutsches Exilarchiv, 1933-1945, Frankfurt am Main.
³ See the diary entry of November 1, 1918, reprinted in Siegfried Kracauer, 1889-1966: Marbacher Magazin 47, eds. Ingrid Belke and Irene Renz (Marbach am Neckar, 1988), p. 30. In a letter Kracauer sent to Mann in 1935, he stated that Tonio Kröger and the Reflections had “in no small way a decisive influence on his development.” See Kracauer to Mann, June 4, 1935, Kracauer Nachlaß (KN), Deutsches Literatur Archiv (DLA), Marbach am Neckar.
the present crisis. These were the disciplines that must take upon themselves the difficult task of founding a new order. He made no mention of politics, but his idea of culture had political implications. Life in Germany had broken apart, he stated, “an order that had long rotted from the inside had collapsed, the protective circle of forms was no more; and thus, the dark, nameless life-forces flooded unrestrainedly inward, shaking the foundations of the soul.” To counter this spiritual catastrophe Germany had to draw on the resources of culture, but also, more specifically, on religion. “From within our breasts,” he wrote, “one longs for a faith to vault over us, round and full.” To Kracauer, the relevance of Burckhardt’s work derived precisely from the fact that it recognized the loss of a sheltering idea of culture. From this point of view, political crises were best resolved by importing culture into politics, rather than politicizing culture.

However, disentangling this idea of culture, especially in relation to religion, was more difficult, and the problematic nexus of religion, culture, and politics constitutes a persistent undercurrent in Kracauer’s work of the 1920s. In a letter to the Frankfurt poet and essayist, Margaret Susman (1872-1966), Kracauer approached this dilemma by privileging culture. Politics, he argued, was of limited importance for it was “all the same whether one lived under socialism or communism.” Unless there was a transformation of everyday existence, nothing of deep or lasting value would be accomplished. To be sure, revolutionary Russia offered a model of transformation, but one must look to the passions residing in the Russian spirit and not simply to the political order that arose from them. Similarly, he concluded his review of Burckhardt’s work with an exhortation to imbue socialism with cultural ideals, though he added that these were “in the best sense bourgeois.” Thus, he conflates bourgeois values with Soviet revolution; but behind these strange bedfellows was still the idea that culture preceded politics. The deep social

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4 Siegfried Kracauer, “Philosophie des Werks,” Frankfurter Zeitung (FZ), July 27, 1920 (M). The book reviewed was Individuum und Welt als Werk: Eine Grundlegung der Kulturphilosophie (Munich, 1920). For much of the 1920s the Frankfurter Zeitung published three daily editions and a Stadtblatt. The different editions have been indicated in my citations as follows: Morgenblatt (M); second Morgenblatt (M2); and A bendblatt (A). When the article in question appeared in a supplement, such as the Literaturblatt, I have also indicated this in the notes. When an article from the FZ has been reprinted in a published volume, I have referred to this volume instead of the original source, though the original date of publication is still provided.

5 Unless stated otherwise, all translations from German texts are my own. I have translated all German sources into English except in instances where an English translation, I believe, would diminish the argument.

6 Kracauer to Susman, January 11, 1920, Susman Nachlaß (SN), DLA. Some of the words in this text are not legible, but the general sense is clear. On Kracauer’s opinions of Russia and the USSR, see Ingrid Belke, “Siegfried Kracauer als Beobachter der jungen Sowjetunion,” in Siegfried Kracauer: Neue Interpretationen, eds. Michael Kessler and Thomas Y. Levin (Stauffenberg, 1990), pp. 17-38.

and political conflicts of modern Germany were to be mended neither by liberalism nor socialism, but rather by a strengthening of cultural foundations.

This variant of the German Sonderweg, of course, has a long and controversial history of its own, and Kracauer was by no means idiosyncratic in embracing the idea of Germany as a distinctively cultural nation. Nor was he alone in looking to religion and philosophy as potential sources of cultural renewal. In the post-war period, particularly among intellectuals, there were numerous calls for spiritual or religious revival. This led some contemporaries to believe that the present was in fact a time of resurgent religiosity. The Catholic philosopher Max Scheler, the Protestant theologian Karl Barth, the intellectuals associated with the Free Jewish School, all spoke of this present mood of spiritual angst and a need for a revived religion. Such convictions had deep roots, and they persisted throughout the short history of the Republic (indeed, most of these thinkers have exerted an influence up to the present). In 1928, for instance, the painter Max Beckmann, when asked to contribute his views on politics to a special feature in the Frankfurter Zeitung, stated that an interest in politics was only conceivable to him if it would hasten the end of this “materialist epoch.” Politics, he continued, only had worth in so far as it concerned “metaphysical, transcendent, and therefore, religious things in a new form.” His response was all the more provocative as the editors of the newspaper had framed this article as a secularized inversion of the Gretchenfrage from Faust. Whereas Gretchen had asked that Faust state his position on religion, the editors sought to turn the question to politics. However, Beckmann refused to accommodate their intentions; instead, he returned the question back to its original context, enmeshed in the question of religious belief.  


9 Frankfurter Zeitung, “Nun sag’ wie hast Du’s mit der” – Politik?” FZ, December 25, 1928 (M). The article solicited responses from a number of prominent individuals of different social and economic backgrounds, but with a slight bias towards intellectuals who furnished half of the respondents. The contributions were prefaced by the following remarks, quoted only in part: “Certainly, many swings of opinion lie beneath the commitment of non-politicians to politics. Through war and revolution, the interest in public affairs deepened: so how do things stand today? … The uniting of these expressions will be, so we intend, an interesting contribution to the question, what
Kracauer too almost stepped into the religious camp. He was an admirer of Max Scheler, and in the early years of the Republic, he was devoted to the charismatic rabbi, Nehemiah Anton Nobel, whom one contemporary described as an “uncanny mystical enchanter.”\(^{10}\) Nobel brought together the mystical traditions of Judaism and an extensive knowledge of German literature and philosophy. In Frankfurt, he led a study group to which Kracauer belonged for a short period. To be sure, Kracauer may have been drawn more by the intellectual rigour of Nobel’s group; but an interest in the mystical side of his personality cannot be excluded. The religious undertones in Kracauer’s thought at this time emerge unmistakably in his letters to Susman. In early 1920, Kracauer described himself to her as a seeker of religious knowledge. “I have only gone half way down my road,” he stated, “at the end stands knowledge of the divine.”\(^{11}\) He even spoke of his intention to construct a system of ethics based on religious principles.\(^{12}\)

Yet, Kracauer’s course soon altered. By the end of 1922, he had broken with Scheler and was in conflict with the pioneers of the religious revival. With the death of Rabbi Nobel in 1921, one of the few religious figures that he had admired was gone. By the end of the twenties, his interest in religious subjects appeared to have subsided, and he became more engrossed by the social and political ramifications of film and urban culture.\(^{13}\)

The following discussion seeks to explain why Kracauer altered course and, moreover, what this might tell us about religion and secularization in the Weimar Republic. Kracauer’s attitudes towards religion were complex, for even as he repudiated the religious revival, theological

\(^{10}\) Caesar Seligmann, quoted in Schivelbusch, p. 38.

\(^{11}\) Kracauer to Susman, January 11, 1920, SN, DLA.

\(^{12}\) Kracauer to Susman, July 26, 1920, SN, DLA.

concepts remained a part of his conception of modernity. I shall argue that Kracauer’s intellectual trajectory should be read as a moment of secularization, a period in which intellectual culture responded to the loss, transformation and revival of religious thought. As used here, secularization should be understood as the adjustment of religion to modernity, whether it be by way of a “worlding” of theological concepts, or a process of disintegration and reconstruction in terms of religious institutions and patterns of thought. Following the lead of much scholarship devoted to this subject, secularization is not a matter of the disappearance of religion, but rather of its transformation and reorientation.\textsuperscript{14} In this respect, to speak of a “moment” of secularization is slightly misleading as the term refers more to a series of moments, a complex of processes transpiring over the course of at least two centuries. Indeed, according to some historians, a truly secular society did not in exist in Europe until the 1960s; and for many the process is a subject of ongoing dispute.\textsuperscript{15} In the 1920s, however, the clash between secularist and religious discourse was still an ongoing issue in intellectual culture, and in his work Kracauer registered their contradictory impulses.

2. Kracauer during the Weimar Republic

Kracauer is a departure point for this discussion as both in his work and in his life he registered many of the contradictions of modernity, particularly where the claims of religion confronted those of secularism. His polymathic range of interests led him to pursue a number of disciplines and vocations; he thus approached the problems of modern life through a kaleidoscopic lens that encompassed philosophy, architecture, sociology and literature. He was productive in all of these areas, even though he was uninspired by his career as an architect. In terms of his background and early education, there is little that anticipated Kracauer’s later profusion of interests. He was born in 1889 to a family that was Jewish on both sides and that had engaged primarily in various forms of commercial trade. His paternal uncle, Isidor Kracauer, who studied history and his wife,


\textsuperscript{15} See the essays collected in \textit{Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians debate the Secularization Thesis}, ed. Steve Bruce (Oxford, 1992). Marcel Gauchet, in his study \textit{The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of the World} (Princeton, 1997), takes an even longer view of the secularizing process; he argues that the shift towards the secular begins with the advent of monotheism.
Hedwig Kracauer were exceptional in this regard. Yet, when Adorno attributed some influence to his aunt, Kracauer suggested, with some disingenuousness perhaps, that she had played no part in his intellectual formation. His reasons for doing so are not clear and the question of her influence, in any case, is irresolvable. Yet, the episode shows that Kracauer was concerned with how his work was contextualized by his contemporaries. The importance of this point should become clear in the chapters that follow.

In his education, Kracauer followed a path that was both technical and intellectual, practical and speculative. His primary subject was architecture, but he had stronger inclinations towards literature and philosophy. While at work on his doctoral studies in architecture, he devoted himself to these latter subjects, and he began to write in his private time. By 1919, he had accumulated several philosophical manuscripts, most of which remained unpublished during his lifetime, including the bulk of his study on the sociologist Georg Simmel with whom he established contact in 1907. During the war, Kracauer maintained relations with both Simmel and Max Scheler (whom he met in 1916), both men offering a spur to his philosophical aspirations. His friendship with Margaret Susman, whom he must have met no later than 1918, was also valuable in this respect. She too had studied with Simmel, and she had numerous intellectual contacts: Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács and Gustav Landauer were among her friends and acquaintances. Moreover, she had a potentially useful connection to the press, being a friend of Heinrich Simon, the lead editor of one of the most prestigious newspapers in Germany, the Frankfurter Zeitung (FZ). Kracauer did, in fact, suggest that Susman might speak to Simon on his behalf, though there is no evidence that she did so or that this had the desired effect.

In any case, Kracauer’s access to the cultural life of Weimar expanded after 1921, when he found a position as a journalist on the FZ. After 1924, he became a full editor, and in collaboration with his colleague Benno Reifenberg he helped to turn the FZ feuilleton into a remarkable forum for cultural experimentation. Kracauer himself appears to have thrived in this situation as his large


17 These works have been collected in Werke 9: Frühe Schriften aus dem Nachlaß, two volumes, edited by Ingrid Belke and Sabine Biebl (Frankfurt am Main, 2004).

18 Hereafter the Frankfurter Zeitung will be indicated as FZ.

19 Kracauer to Susman, January 20, 1920, SN, DLA.
literary output in the second half of the 1920s suggests. During this period, he wrote hundreds of articles on film, mass culture, and literature. In 1928, he published his first novel, *Ginster*; and two years later there followed a much-discussed sociological study of white-collar workers. In 1930, he was transferred to Berlin where he had the chance to acquaint himself with the social and cultural world of the capital.

Although Kracauer is often described as an “outsider,” or in his preferred formulation, as an “extraterritorial,” he was, nonetheless, well connected to contemporary intellectual life. This is true of Frankfurt, but also of Berlin and even of Paris. His letters indicate an extensive network of contacts including André Malraux, Ignazio Silone, Rudolf Kayser, Gabriel Marcel, Karl Mannheim, Hendrick de Man, and Jean Renoir. These names suggest something of the breadth of culture that Kracauer was exposed to in these years, from the abstruse phenomenology of Edmund Husserl to the expressionist dance troupe of Mary Wigman. To be sure, Kracauer expressed some antipathy to the world of literary cliques and official culture, especially in Berlin. Shortly after his move to the capital, he informed his friend and fellow editor Bernhard Guttmann, that he had met just about everyone there: Döblin, Brecht, Weil and so forth. “Without wanting to be arrogant,” he continued, “I must still say that in general one gives much more than one receives.” Kracauer valued his intellectual distance; extraterritoriality meant the need to preserve an arms length between himself and his milieu. His comments regarding Berlin should be read with this in mind. This does not mean, of course, that there was not some failure of communication between Kracauer and his contemporaries. He was probably disappointed by the tepid reception of his novel *Ginster*, for instance. For though the work received many positive reviews, among the “literary radicals” there were none, so one of his few admirers told him, who considered the book to be an “essential work.”

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20 Kracauer had limited contact with both. In 1934, as Kracauer was desperately searching for sources of income, Husserl wrote appreciatively of Kracauer’s early sociological work. See Husserl to Kracauer, January 14, 1934, KN, DLA. Kracauer appears to have been acquainted with Wigman’s sister, Elizabeth. Her surviving letters to him, preserved in KN, suggest a friendly if brief relationship. On April 26, 1925 (KN, DLA), she wrote to him inquiring whether or not he would be able to supply some private quarters for some of the dancers. “Is the world now so frail and beautiful?” she wrote, “Do you see that also?”

21 Kracauer to Guttmann, March 16, 1931, KN, DLA.


23 Richard Gabel to Kracauer, March 29, 1930, KN, DLA. Gabel was a freelance contributor to the *FZ*.
The severe financial problems Kracauer experienced in Paris, where he fled in 1933, have overshadowed the degree to which he still retained important social ties during his years of exile. These were critical when he later needed affidavits to secure his release from the French internment camps where he was twice placed after war broke out in 1939. While his connections were unable to reverse his perilous financial state, there is still reason to believe that he was well known and respected among French intellectuals. Jean Paulhan, for instance, described Kracauer as one of the “best Germans” and was angry to discover that Kracauer had been interned after the war began, even as well known spies roamed free all over Paris. When the art historian Julius Meier-Graefe sought a closer tie to Paulhan and the Nouvelle Revue Française, he appears to have asked Kracauer to inquire on his behalf.

Kracauer’s ties to intellectual and diplomatic circles do not negate his feelings of being on the periphery, nor do they negate the tangible hindrances that pushed him towards the margins of the intelligentsia. Kracauer was never part of the inner circles of the FZ around Heinrich Simon, even if he was close to Reifenberg. His relations to some of the leading figures of the paper, Friedrich Sieburg and Rudolf Kircher, appear to have been quite cool. In more concrete terms, Kracauer was hindered by a speech impediment and also by what many saw as his bizarre and foreign appearance. Count Harry Kessler, ever the aesthete, stated that he could scarce abide Kracauer’s “hideous ugliness.” In April of 1925, Kracauer sent Adorno a photograph of himself with the accompanying words: “I hate images of myself – this one, every one.” In an age that celebrated the blonde beast, a tendency that Kracauer believed was rife among his

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24 Belke and Renz have noted the interventions from the following individuals: the French diplomat Henri Hoppenot; the bookseller Adrienne Monnier; the historian Daniel Halévy; the publishers A. P. von Seggern and A. P. J. Kroonenberg; and Lucien Gaget from whom Kracauer and his wife rented rooms. The diplomat and later resistance member, Pierre Vénot also appears to have supported Kracauer in this regard.
26 See Kracauer to Meier-Graefe, August 24, 1933 and March 16, 1934, KN, DLA.
contemporaries (and one that he had shared), his appearance was decidedly a disadvantage.\textsuperscript{30} During the war fever of 1914, some mistook Kracauer for a “foreigner,” and, according to his friend, Viktor Klemperer, he cut his hair in an effort to look less “exotic.” The anxiety caused by his appearance is difficult to measure, but one can assume that it contributed to his sense of exclusion.\textsuperscript{31} These impediments, together with his Jewish birth, effectively barred Kracauer from an academic career. Even those who were friendly towards him, such as Meier-Graefe and Joseph Roth, found it difficult to imagine him taking on a leading public role for the newspaper.\textsuperscript{32}

What little is known in regards to Kracauer’s sexual inclinations also suggests an outsider status. One can only speculate on the subject as nothing can be stated with any certainty; but his expressions of affection for Adorno do suggest a strong degree of attraction that does not exclude the erotic. This led him to confide to Löwenthal that, at least in intellectual and spiritual matters, he was homosexual.\textsuperscript{33} The relationship with Adorno will be discussed further below, but it should be noted here that Kracauer appears to have had an inclination towards similar mentoring relationships with younger men. His intentions in these relationships may or may not have been entirely platonic, but in either case it attests to the high value that he placed on intellectual friendships and the role such collaborative dialogues would play in his critical endeavours.\textsuperscript{34} Of course, this did not preclude relationships with women. In 1926 he met Elisabeth Ehrenreich, a student of music and art history, and a librarian at the Frankfurt School. They married in 1930.

After the Reichstag fire of 1933, Kracauer fled Germany in the company of his wife to Paris, a city where his prior friendships and professional contacts would have led him to assume the

\textsuperscript{34} In this respect, see the discussion of the Adorno/Kracauer relationship in Heide Schlüpmann, \textit{Ein Detektiv des Kinos: Studien zu Siegfried Kracauers Filmtheorie} (Frankfurt am Main, 1998), pp. 11-34.
potential for a stable existence. Nonetheless, his emigration to France brought his career as a journalist, more or less, to an end (though he did contribute to the odd French periodical such as *L’Europe Nouvelle*). Later that year, he was dismissed from the FZ under acrimonious circumstances. Afterward, the Kracauers spent much of their time fending off financial collapse and anxiously planning their emigration to the United States. At the same time, they were trying to help Kracauer’s mother and aunt leave Germany. What time remained he devoted to a work that he hoped would become a tangible success, *Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of his Time* (1937). However, the much needed relief that this “social biography” was supposed to bring never materialized. The book sold miserably and many of his friends (especially Adorno) condemned it on theoretical grounds. He would not publish another substantial work until ten years later when his study of the German cinema *From Caligari to Hitler* appeared in English. By that time, he had emigrated to New York, arriving after much struggle early in 1941. The move to the United States would become permanent, his Parisian exile constituting a threshold across which he would not pass again. To one of the few friends from Frankfurt with whom he renewed contact after the war, he wrote:

There lies too much in between. To name only the most personal: the unthinkably terrible end of my old mother and aunt; and the long years of our first emigration in France when, with one or two exceptions, none of our German friends let some sign come our way, even though it would have been possible until ‘38 or ‘39. From this come the distinctions of position, experience, point of view, and, not least, of human relationships that were forged in difficult times and now fulfill our present life. The past is actually past, and even if I wanted it, I cannot transform it into the present.

In America, Kracauer abandoned the German language and wrote his final works, *Theory of Film* (1960) and the unfinished *History: The Last Things before the Last* (1969) in English.

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36 His mother and aunt were deported in August of 1942 to Poland or Theresienstadt where they were probably murdered shortly afterward. See Belke and Renz, *Siegfried Kracauer*, p. 103.
37 Kracauer to Max Niederlechner, February 21, 1947, KN, DLA.
This brief overview of Kracauer’s career demonstrates the degree to which he was embedded in the daily bustle of Weimar culture and its afterlife. To one observer, Kracauer was one of the “most considerable talents” on the FZ, a writer who had created a “new kind of journalistic genre.” In the sphere of cultural experimentation, he was both investigator and participant. Educated in a variety of fields, his conception of modernity remained multifaceted and flexible. He was influenced by Marxism, but he was never a doctrinaire thinker, and he was often critical of Marxist inspired literature. On the other hand, he was remarkably open to the forms of “low culture” that accompanied the rise of a consumer-based society.

How then does religion figure into Kracauer’s conception of modernity and the critic’s role as its interpreter? As Kracauer was an acute observer of Weimar’s cultural pluralism, and as he was a writer who tried to reckon with the contradictions of modernity in his own critical practice, his response to this issue is of more than passing interest. In Kracauer’s criticism, the emergence of a secular society was a basic premise; yet, it did not follow from this that he had thrown in his lot with secular culture, let alone one with an idea of culture that assumed religious functions.

Likewise, he rejected any sacralisation of mass politics. Religion was not to be replaced by either a “political religion” or a secular one. Instead, Kracauer sought to mediate theological concepts into cultural modernity, and this meant that traces of these concepts persisted in his work in a variety of forms. As the idea of religion was besieged by the impersonal forces of ratio, its concepts were detached from the life of religious faith, and they began a period of wandering in the secular world. Here, they lead a kind of shadow existence – a form of functional negativity which, cloaked in irony and humour, undermined and interrogated the notion of a complete or fulfilled culture. To be sure, such ideas remained vaguely expressed in his work, and they cannot be readily equated with positive religiosity. Nonetheless, they suggest the complex and

40 See the comments in David Frisby, Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin (Cambridge, 1986), p. 118.
ambiguous way in which Kracauer approached this issue, and his reluctance to totally dispense
with the legacy of religion. As Inka Müller argued in her pioneering study of the early Kracauer,
his seeming realism was always predicated on ideas of an “essentially metaphysical sort, even
after 1925.”

More significantly, Kracauer’s deliberation on the fate of religion in modernity was not an
isolated venture in Weimar culture. His discussions on religion and cultural crisis did not occur
in a vacuum, but rather were part of an ongoing dispute with the religious and intellectual
currents of his day. This suggests that attitudes towards religion, both in the later years of the
Kaiserreich and during the Republic, were not negligible to the formation of cultural criticism,
and hence, they are not negligible to an understanding of Weimar’s seemingly intractable
cultural crisis.

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The following argument is divided between an investigation of Kracauer’s intellectual career and
a discussion of the content of his work in relation to that of his contemporaries. The second
chapter is devoted primarily to the former and situates Kracauer as a Jewish intellectual amidst
the cultural crisis of late Imperial Germany. This chapter shows why Kracauer is an important
case study for the theme of secularization. The chapter also offers a basis for the subsequent
discussion of his response to the literature of secular crisis and religious revival that arose after
the war. In Chapter 3 I analyze some of the so-called “war books” as a means of illuminating
some of Kracauer’s positions between the end of 1918 and 1922, a period for which there are
few sources. To a degree, Kracauer himself disappears for part of this discussion, but this is not
entirely accidental; for, as Dagmar Barnouw has pointed out, Kracauer was interested in the
process of inserting himself into the “recorded thought of others,” and of conceptualizing how
his own work would be perceived when set against the work of his contemporaries. Thus, his

41 Müller, Siegfried Kracauer—Grenzgänger, p. 18. See also the comments in Thomas Y. Levin, “Introduction,”
42 At this point, I should make clear my indebtedness to the discussion of these issues in Vince Pecora,
textual milieu needs to be discussed in order to situate his own work.\textsuperscript{43} Moreover, this dovetails with one facet of my argument that seeks to draw attention to Kracauer as an exemplar of a particular kind of critical approach. In this respect, I do not suggest that he was representative of a specific attitude or point of view regarding religion and modernity; but rather that his work gave expression to the polarities that emerged in an ongoing dispute over the fate of religion in a secular world. This is evident in his criticism of the “war books.” In his essays and letters concerning this literature, Kracauer outlines one of the key motifs of his thought in the post-war period: the desire to open a critical space between the theological sphere and that of secular modernity.\textsuperscript{44} The third chapter then considers the ramifications of this motif as they appear in his approach to the feuilleton as a vehicle of criticism.

An early model of Kracauer’s criticism is to be found in his posthumously published study, \textit{The Detective Novel}, which is the subject of the fourth chapter.\textsuperscript{45} Kracauer wrote this unusual work between 1922 and 1925, and only one chapter was published in his lifetime. Scholars have noted the transitional nature of the work, for it is here that Kracauer first joined his early philosophical and sociological interests to an investigation of mass culture. Ostensibly a study of the detective genre, the work was also indebted to Kierkegaard, whose model of interrelated spheres (aesthetic, ethical, and religious) Kracauer appropriated. This importation of Kierkegaard was only “seemingly archaic,” for as Hannah Arendt commented in 1932, after the war Kierkegaard was the philosopher of the day.\textsuperscript{46} Why such a deeply Christian thinker should prove to be so influential to intellectuals of different confessional backgrounds is a broad question that cannot be answered here; but some discussion of the contemporary reception of Kierkegaard is needed to contextualize Kracauer’s use of Kierkegaardian concepts. These, I would argue, deeply

\textsuperscript{44} On this motif, see Leo Haenlein, \textit{Der Denk-Gestus des aktiven Wartens im Sinn-Vakuum der Moderne} (Frankfurt am Main and Bern, 1984), pp. 66-67; Mülder, \textit{Siegfried Kracauer—Grenzgänger}, p. 60; and Miriam Hansen, “Decentric Perspectives: Kracauer’s Early Writings on Film and Mass Culture,” \textit{New German Critique} 54 (Autumn, 1991): p. 50.
informed his concept of critical vocation. It is also in this study that Kracauer expresses the idea of a “negative church.” This terminology certainly alluded to the negative theology that was so pervasive in post-war religious thought; but it can also be related to the photographic negative that renders the black and white world in reverse. What is positive becomes negative and vice versa, compounding the minute distortions that already inhered in the photographic medium. Reading such images was no simple matter for Kracauer, and it was part of his critical project to construct an interpretive art, or method of reading, that would be appropriate to this negative aspect of modernity.

Kierkegaard also offers a tragic frame for Kracauer’s cultural-political agenda in the Weimar period. Adorno and Kracauer shared an intense interest in Kierkegaard throughout the twenties, and it was as a symbol of this shared affinity that Kracauer dedicated The Detective Novel to Adorno. Eight years later Adorno returned this gesture when he completed and published his Habilitationsschrift. The work, entitled Kierkegaard, the Construction of the Aesthetic, was dedicated to “my friend Siegfried Kracauer.” Adorno’s work appeared on an unpropitious day in German history, the very day that Hitler came to power. Kracauer wrote a short review of the book with the intention of having it published in the FZ, but events rapidly intervened and Kracauer fled Germany shortly afterwards. Adorno had been eager to know Kracauer’s opinion of the work, for to his mind the book was no individual achievement, but rather a testimony of their “common philosophical past.”47 The joint project symbolized by this book came to an end in 1933 and the intellectual distance dividing Kracauer from Adorno grew wider in the years of exile and emigration. Nonetheless, between these two works the outlines of an alternative reception of Kierkegaard appeared, one that differed considerably from the work of other writers influenced by his work such as Theodor Haecker, Emmanuel Hirsch and Martin Heidegger.48

Chapter Five discusses how the critical model manifested in the detective study was influenced by, and responded to, contemporary religious trends. In the early years of the Republic, Kracauer had a demonstrable interest in contemporary religion. Moreover, Frankfurt offered an excellent vantage point from which to observe the various efforts to reform and revive religious thought.

and practice. The concluding chapter explores how Kracauer’s criticism continued to be influenced by the rivalry of sacred and profane in light of a controversy provoked by the 1930 publication of a polemical work by Alfred Döblin: To Know and to Change! Open Letters to a Young Man. 49

An Afterword will attempt to synthesize some tendencies in Kracauer’s work that I argue are representative of a strand of thought within Weimar culture. The baroque figures of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza furnish the departure point for these concluding remarks. Quixote, of course, has become cultural shorthand for delusional romanticism; yet, for some German intellectuals Quixote was an iconic figure who symbolized the ambiguities of the “unfinished project of modernity.” There can be found in the work of a number of these writers a tentative shift of sympathy from the flamboyant Quixote to his relatively earthbound squire, Panza. Yet what conceptual distance is actually traversed in the course of this move? The increased sympathy for Panza was not usually meant as an abandonment of utopia in favour of a pragmatic realism; rather it was a matter of inflecting revolutionary passions across a different paradigm. It was also a means of questioning the meaning of utopia, its origins, and its potential actualization.

3. Searching for the “Hollow Spaces”: Between Secularization and Political Religions

Before proceeding to the argument concerning Kracauer specifically, I want to situate the discussion that follows by offering both an overview of the discourse of religious revival and the historiography of secularization. Revived interest in religion was far from uncommon after the Great War, and the phenomenon has been the subject of increasing historical interest. Throughout Europe this resurgence took various forms, from the persistence of traditional belief that resulted in a return to the church, to spiritualist attempts to commune with the souls of the dead. 50 As a defeated power, Germany was susceptible to the mood of crisis, a perception that

49 Döblin, Wissen und Verändern! Offene Briefe an einen jungen Menschen (Berlin, 1931).
was aggravated by the revolution of November and the threat of civil war; there was rich material upon which a rhetoric of crisis could build and proliferate. In the wake of these catastrophes a plethora of utopian visions emerged, many of which offered alternative models of spiritual and social redemption.  

 Attempts to reach beyond the confines of a materialist point of view were common, and even the relatively secular forms of social transformation could still be interpreted with a religious slant. In this vein, the Frankfurt writer Alfons Paquet, a fellow traveller, Quaker, and a member of the German-South Slavic Association, perceived the Russian revolution as a manifestation of the spiritual profundity residing in the Russian soul, a depth of passion that had also been expressed in the works of Dostoevsky.  

 Publications inspired by utopian longings spilled from the presses. The Spirit of Utopia (1918) by Ernst Bloch and The Theory of the Novel (1920) by Georg Lukács are two of the more prominent and durable publications of this kind. However, there were numerous lesser known and today mostly forgotten works such as The Intellectual Crisis of the Present (1923) by Arthur Liebert, or Kristina Pfeiffer-Raimund’s A Woman’s Letters to Walther Rathenau (1918).  

 Some of these utopian expressions had roots in the nineteenth-century attempts to construct a theodicy from aesthetics and philosophy, or in enthusiastic visions of technocratic progress. However, in the aftermath of war such projects took on a more radical and sometimes apocalyptic character. Radical experiments in cultural redemption appeared all the more viable in light of the political and social events then taking place in Russia and, briefly, in Bavaria and Hungary.  

 These redemptive desires did not seem so out of place after four years of warfare and a devastating loss of life. If, as Hannah Arendt claimed, death was the “fundamental problem”


52 See Kracauer’s account of a speech by Paquet on behalf of the Deutsch-Südslawische Gesellschaft in Kracauer, “Deutsch-Südslawische Gesellschaft,” FZ, December 14, 1921 (A).  

53 Kracauer reviewed the work by Liebert and a subsequent book by Pfeiffer-Raimund; see Kracauer’s review of Die geistige Krisis der Gegenwart, by Arthur Liebert, Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik 51, no. 3 (1923/1924): pp. 381-382; and Kracauer, “Von kommender Hochkultur,” FZ, August 7, 1921(M).  


55 Anson Rabinbach, In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals Between Apocalypse and Enlightenment (Berkeley, 1997), pp. 1-23.
confronting Europeans after 1918, then the numerous attempts to redeem existence seem warranted.\textsuperscript{56} Aside from the massive suffering that the war caused, the Weimar Republic was also beset by a virtual catalogue of what could go wrong in modern societies. To this day the Republic remains a short-hand for crisis, whether one views it as a democratic experiment that failed, or as a more radical project that succeeded in its worst imaginings.\textsuperscript{57} In every sphere there was rupture of some kind. The economy was wracked by depression and inflation, creating severe and nearly chronic instability; cultural affairs often assumed an extremist and militant tone; and parliamentary grid-locks plagued the political system while dramatic social transformations accompanied and responded to these events. Historian Detlev Peukert described the resulting political and social collapse as a “crisis of classical modernity,” a crisis that compounded the traumas of war and its aftermath with the darker potential lying dormant beneath the rational face of modern industrial societies.\textsuperscript{58}

Within this classically modern setting religion occupies a somewhat anomalous position. Drawing on centuries of tradition and on long established institutional hierarchies, religion appears to have retained its connections to the supposedly pre-modern. At the very least, the traditional sources of authority in Christianity and Judaism could be said to antedate both industrial capitalism and mass politics; therefore, they could offer little impetus to cultural modernity.\textsuperscript{59} The very presence of the aged gothic churches in German towns and cities appeared to proclaim religion’s foundations within a deep and mystical past. Moreover, definitions of modernity, especially those influenced by early sociology, often viewed the decline or subordination of religion as a precondition of modernity itself.\textsuperscript{60} Indeed, for Kracauer and some of his contemporaries, religion’s decline and the accompanying disenchantments of the secularized world were often perceived as established facts, a decisive shift that had occurred

\textsuperscript{56} Hannah Arendt, quoted in Rabinbach, \textit{In the Shadow}, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{59} The primary focus of this study is on the religions of the Judeo-Christian tradition. This is not to suggest that other faiths had no significant presence in Western Europe during this period; moreover, as will be seen, awareness of the growing popular interest in religions outside the Judeo-Christian traditions was a part of the religious landscape of Weimar. This delimitation results more from the fact that the intellectual milieus that comprise the focal point for this study were primarily concerned with the evolution of Jewish and Christian religions, and most often, though by no means always, drew upon these traditions in their discussions.
\textsuperscript{60} See the study of German sociology by Harry Liebersohn, \textit{Fate and Utopia in German Sociology, 1870-1923} (Cambridge, 1988).

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during the course of the nineteenth century. The loss of this world was to be mourned, but it was, nonetheless, irrevocable.\footnote{Koch, \textit{Siegfried Kracauer}, pp. 20-21.} From this point of view, religion had to “modernize,” that is, it must accept its limitations in a secular world.

Yet, if the days of pilgrimages and holy tunics were supposedly over, religion still preserved a ghostly relationship to the modern. Thus, Kracauer sounded almost surprised to find himself in 1927 attending the Zionist congress in Basel, and then participating in a torchlight parade to the Catholic shrine at Lourdes. It was as if he had discovered again Max Weber’s “old gods” who still worked their magic beneath a “Janus-faced” rationalism.\footnote{Kracauer to Werner Thomann, September 22, 1927, Werner Thomann Nachlaß, EB 97/145, Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, Deutsches Exilarchiv, 1933-1945, Frankfurt am Main. See Peter Fritzche’s discussion of the work of Detlev Peukert in “Did Weimar fail?” pp. 648-649.} He saw the signs of religious vitality everywhere, yet the meaning of this tenacity was uncertain. Religion appeared to have a dual existence. In one sense, it represented a vanished mode of life, pushed aside by the triumphal march of reason; yet, simultaneously, it could not be denied that the disappearing idols still held their allure. They preserved a lost social vision, a vision of the whole, of the spiritually grounded community that religion presupposed. To some this appeared as a counterweight to the modern world and a means of renewing it. The search for the new could then look backwards as well as forwards. To some observers, such as Adorno, this retrospective gaze to the past could be dismissed as the re-emergence of the archaic in the form of the new; but Kracauer, as will be seen, was not ready to completely disavow religious contents.\footnote{Adorno to Walter Benjamin, August 2 and 4, 1935, in \textit{The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940}, ed. Henry Lonzit, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 109-110.}

How then should one conceive the relationship between religion and modernity, and what role did it play in the European crisis of culture, particularly in 1920s Germany? Moreover, how was this crisis perceived, contested and, in some sense, legitimated within intellectual milieus? A recent discussion of modernism draws attention to its frequent use of images depicting violence and wounds, and herein lies some of the grounds for looking at the critique of religion as a contribution to the crisis of modernity, as a means of creating a discourse of crisis.\footnote{Modris Eksteins, “Drowned in Eau de Vie,” \textit{London Review of Books} 30, no. 4 (February 21, 2008): pp. 23-24.} The perception of violence in modernist art is ambiguous. It may be celebrated in so far as its “primitive passions” contain a regenerative power; in this guise they constitute a purgative force.
that wipes the slate clean and creates a new order. The sacrifices that it demands become a catalogue of martyrs depicting the sufferings obligatory to the creation of the new. In this regard, the sometimes violent language that infused Kracauer’s descriptions of rationalization is not without significance. “Dismember,” “disembody,” “hollow out” (zerreißen, entwirklichen, entleeren) are common verbs in his early writing, and the individual is often dismantled into “complexes of atoms” and “particles of soul.” Thus, it is secular reason that destroys and the religious vision of the whole that suffers. In its victimization and in its clear hostility towards a materialist worldview, religion then finds an ally with some strands of “Janus-faced” modernity. If cultural modernism rejected the staid and materialist culture of the nineteenth-century, it could find support in religion. A faith in religious passion could emerge as a critique of a faded past, as something startling and new – thus, the vision of the Christian aviator in Apollinaire’s poem “Zone.” In the sinking world of modernity, the poem implies, only religion retained the aura of the new. Within this world of modernist experimentation, Pius X emerges (much to his own surprise, no doubt) as “the most modern of Europeans.” Therefore, however “old” religion was, it still preserved its originary force, a force that was akin to the primal impulses that modernists had also sought in regenerative violence, or the unruly passions of the so-called “primitive.” Such violence was redemptive, an originating act; as Karl Kraus once stated “origin is the goal.” Thus, for some strands of modernity religion could appear in modern guise.

A rhetorical strategy that framed the conflict between the secular and the religious in terms of violence probably did little to alleviate the prevailing sense of crisis in Weimar. Secularization was portrayed as a metaphysical catastrophe, uprooting humanity from its origins, and leaving individuals spiritually bereft. Therefore, to some observers, secularization could only appear as a crisis; as a result, the clash between the sacred and profane was often perceived as trauma. Moreover, it was an event with consequences for national vitality; wherever rationalism and

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65 See discussion in Chapter Five below (pp. 184-185); and Schröter, “Weltzerfall und Rekonstruktion,” pp. 38-39.
67 David Pan, Primitive Renaissance: Rethinking German Expressionism (Lincoln, 2001), pp. 63-88; see also Eksteins, Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age (Toronto, 1989).
68 Kraus, quoted in Rabinbach, In the Shadow, p. 31.
69 On the role of intellectuals in the crisis of Weimar, see the concluding remarks of Istvan Deak, Weimar Germany’s Left-wing Intellectuals: A Political History of the Weltbühne and its Circle (Berkeley, 1968), pp. 222-228.
abstract reflection reared their ugly heads – in the newspapers, the state schools, the Reichstag, or cinema – the weakening of the nation’s intellectual and spiritual vitality would soon, so it was argued, wither away. In this regard, Kracauer too was not immune to the belief that secularization had harmed the national community.\textsuperscript{70} This is not to say that the cultural crisis of Weimar should be reduced to a critique of secularization, nor could it be said that all such critiques were intended to incriminate the Republic; but such polemics did contribute to the fevered pitch in which cultural matters were discussed. Viewing secularization as crisis and wound perpetuated a mood of spiritual turmoil, and it prodded intellectuals to search for increasingly radical solutions to a supposedly deepening malaise.

Hence, in so far as Kracauer partook of this language, it can be argued that he contributed to a more general discourse that depicted the conflict of sacred and profane in the starkest of terms. Moreover, this discourse readily crossed the political spectrum from right to left.\textsuperscript{71} Thus, one finds that the Kracauer of the early twenties has a marked affinity for the cultural pessimism of the late nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{72} Writing to Margaret Susman, for instance, he declared his antipathy to all things intellectual, to cliques of the literati, and to the hopes placed in the post-war political order.\textsuperscript{73} However, in spite of this hostility, his public statements were far more moderate, especially when compared with those of his contemporaries.\textsuperscript{74} Moreover, Kracauer was ambivalent towards programs of violent renewal. In general, the apocalyptic or messianic tendencies that one finds in the work of Ernst Bloch or Walter Benjamin are, by and large, absent even in his writing during the crisis-ridden years of 1918 to 1923.\textsuperscript{75} Still, his contribution to this apocalyptic discourse should not be discounted. The discourse of secular crisis embraced both


\textsuperscript{71} See the comments in Graf, “God’s Anti-liberal Avant-Garde,” pp. 21-24.

\textsuperscript{72} Most critical writing on Kracauer draws a distinction between his early years as an exponent of a somewhat conservative strand of \textit{Kulturpessimismus}, and his later period as a more perceptive observer of modern culture (see note 13 above). Also see Momme Brodersen, \textit{Siegfried Kracauer} (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 2001), pp. 28-35; Janet Ward has drawn attention to the motifs that Kracauer shared in common with cultural criticism from the right even late in the Weimar era; see Ward, \textit{Weimar Surfaces}, pp. 184-189.

\textsuperscript{73} Kracauer to Susman, July 26, 1920, SN, DLA.

\textsuperscript{74} See his feuilleton entitled, “Bekenntnis zur Mitte,” \textit{FZ}, June 2, 1920 (M); reprinted in Kracauer, \textit{Schriften 5.1}, ed. Inka Müller-Bach (Frankfurt am Main, 1990), pp. 55-58; and also Brodersen’s comments on the political considerations informing this article in \textit{Siegfried Kracauer}, pp. 32-34.

\textsuperscript{75} On messianic thought in German Judaism, see Rabinbach, \textit{In the Shadow}, pp. 27-65; and Lowy, \textit{Redemption and Utopia}, pp. 14-26.
problem and solution; the radical, sometimes violent, proposals for a root and branch reconstruction reflected to no small degree the alarmist tones in which the crisis had been perceived and represented, and Kracauer was an avid participant in the latter part of this equation. He too, as his friend the writer Joseph Roth once stated, had taken upon himself the role of “God’s policeman.” According to Roth, this term was used by eastern Jews to describe the excessively zealous, but it could just as readily describe many of those who sounded the alarm of cultural crisis in the Weimar era.76

Yet, such a conclusion would only address one side of Kracauer’s approach to this problem. Kracauer had, in fact, explicitly warned against the confusion of the religious with the political. This implied a repudiation of the simplistic equation of religious concepts with secular ones, a position that was fundamental to his 1922 polemic against Ernst Bloch’s work on Thomas Müntzer.77 These were not lightly held points of view, and Kracauer’s intellectual positions often spilled over into personal acrimony between himself and his friends. Indeed, a number of his personal conflicts in the twenties revolved around precisely these issues. Defining the middle ground between sacred and profane was a project fraught with both difficulty and misunderstanding, and one that blurred the distinctions between public and private spheres.

Kracauer’s stance was essentially one of resistance to what he saw as a harmful overgrowth of superficial religiosity. This was, in effect, an attempt to stake out a territory within the expanding discourse of sacred and profane, a linguistic territory contested by a profusion of new religions that rushed in to fill the spiritual void allegedly produced by modern society. The result was a kind of religious dilettantism, or what one sociologist has called religion à la carte.78 This could be described as a kind of metaphysical flânerie, a subject that Kracauer discussed in disparaging tones in his 1922 feuilleton “Those Who Wait.”79 Yet, to some degree, he himself partook of this new religious landscape, as his letter to the Catholic journalist and critic Werner Thormann

76 Roth to Stefan Zweig, August 30, 1930, in Joseph Roth: Briefe 1911-1939, pp. 175-176.
77 Kracauer, “Prophetentum,” FZ, August 27, 1922 (M); reprinted in Schriften 5.1, pp. 196-204. Bloch’s Thomas Müntzer als Theologe der Revolution was published in 1921.
78 Karel Dobbelaere uses this term to describe the fragmentation of religious practice and belief. See Dobbelaere, Secularization: an Analysis at Three Levels (Brussels, 2002), pp. 173-174.
suggests. Free to inhabit any number of religious milieus, Kracauer too could on one day witness the debates between Orthodox and Reform Judaism, and on the next, tour the shrine at Lourdes. He recognized that the choice to participate in a religious community was no longer simply a matter of inner conviction, but just as often a manifestation of personal curiosity, or, as in his own case, a product of rational observation coupled with a vague and imprecise sense of spiritual longing.

What did it mean for an individual to engage with religion in such a haphazard fashion? The fragmentation of religious beliefs meant that redemption had left the churches and synagogues and had gone out “into the street.” Religious ideas circulated among spiritual consumers as if they were so many goods on the shelves of a department store. The individual who sought spiritual wholeness was now at liberty to peruse and sample these spiritual goods and then to move on when a particular product did not satisfy. Aside from the wares on offer from the established faiths, there were now numerous disciplines of the soul from which one could choose. One contemporary called these beliefs “disguised religions” (verkappten Religionen), while historian Thomas Nipperdey has referred to them as “vagabond religiosity.” These movements existed on the fringes of, and sometimes in opposition to, the so-called civil religions of state and nation.

In regards to this discourse there were two vital issues at stake for Kracauer. On the one hand, he was increasingly aware of contemporary desires to infuse religious meaning into collective entities, and he was alarmed by the emergence of a sacred aura around the collective in nationalist, and to a lesser extent, socialist rhetoric. In part, this was a critique of what he saw as a reductive form of collectivism, but it was also part of his fear that an ill-considered plunge into a falsely conceived religiosity precluded engagement with social realities. This aspect of his critique was on the surface directed at religion, but in the early twenties Kracauer sometimes voiced the belief that the essence of religion was, in fact, to be found through contact with the profane. A religiosity that fled from this excluded itself from the religious sphere it sought to attain. It is for this reason that Kracauer sometimes cited religious authorities when criticizing

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80 Cited at the beginning of this Chapter on p. 3.
81 Christian Bry, Verkappten Religionen (Gotha, 1924); and Thomas Nipperdey, Religion im Umbruch: Deutschland, 1870-1918 (Munich, 1988).
the religious revival. Thus, in repudiating the work of Ernst Bloch, he referred to the doubt and irony that he claimed to find in the work of Augustinian and rabbinical tradition; such expressions, so he implied, were both more in keeping with contemporary reality and closer to the truth of religion. In a sense, he sought to preserve a potential sphere in which religious contents could survive, safe from the dual threats of encroaching rationalism and resurgent religiosity. This was associated with a position of “waiting” – a decision to remain suspended between scepticism and devotion, to neither believe nor to conclusively deny. A conception of Judaism as the faith of a people who waits is clearly relevant here, though as a religious motif it had a wider resonance of which Kracauer was well aware.

The theological implications of this gesture of “waiting” constitutes an undercurrent in modernist culture as can be found in the work of Samuel Beckett, or also Kracauer’s more immediate contemporary Robert Musil. Similarly, his friend Walter Benjamin conceived of a “life of deferment,” an existence based upon perpetual waiting before the divine. This was a theology of the unspeakable; it was predicated on an unspoken anticipation of revealed truth, an event that took place outside of material reality, but nonetheless had definite consequences within it. This type of “negative theology” is not without some echoes in Kracauer’s work. Similar ideas were widely discussed among his contemporaries – Ernst Bloch, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Susman. Their writings contested common ground and, as a result, their disagreements were pursued with a good deal of tenacity. Kracauer’s position on religion was taken in direct disagreement with many of these writers.

Still, in spite of his combativeness on this question, one should not lose sight of the fact that even as Kracauer became increasingly enmeshed in the cultural life of Weimar he still appears to have felt himself intellectually adrift. Drawing a line between his opinions and those of his contemporaries was a means of defining his own position vis-à-vis modernity. As his letters to Susman between 1920 and 1922 demonstrate, he was a writer in search of a cause. He was

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84 See the discussion in Rabinbach, In the Shadow, p. 54.
anxious to find his critical vocation, a position that would allow him to engage with the real
while remaining at a remove from the intellectual cliques that he observed around him.³⁵

This sense of vocation did not explicitly repudiate religion, and at times he even sought to
legitimate his critiques by stressing this fact. Thus, his critical interventions do not usually attack
religion whole cloth; more often he intervened on one side or another in the debates over
religious reform; or he condemned the “pseudo-spirituality” of movements such as Rudolf
Steiner’s anthroposophy. As already mentioned, he sometimes appealed to religious authority in
these matters, and he was not averse to framing his arguments within a religious context. One
cannot rule out tactical motives in this regard, but the practice occurred often enough to suggest
that he had a genuine interest in how his work would be perceived from a religious point of view.

What meaning this might have had for him is difficult to determine, and since war and
immigration led to the loss of a significant portion of his papers, his early views on religion
remain obscure. We know little to nothing of his early attitudes towards Judaism outside of a
brief reference to the perfunctory observances practiced among his relatives.³⁶ Still, there is no
evidence of a break or repudiation of Judaism. As historian Enzo Traverso has argued, there was
little need for Kracauer to discuss, let alone repudiate, whatever religious beliefs he may once
have had; for him religion appears to have been a truly “invisible church.” Religious positions
were best left unstated, and thus they could not become a point of internal dissonance in his work
of the late 1920s.³⁷ Yet, even as religion became a less important theme in his writing,
thelogical concepts remained, stowed away as a kind of contraband close to the core of his
critical project.³⁸

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³⁵ The correspondence between Kracauer and Susman is fragmentary; outside of a single letter from Susman written
in 1926, only Kracauer’s letters have survived, and only for the years between 1920 and 1922. In 1925, Kracauer
told Adorno that Susman had broken off their friendship because of a disagreement over one of his recent articles
(see Kracauer to Adorno, April 16, 1925, Briefwechsel, 1923-1966, pp. 46-53, esp. p. 49). The letters from Kracauer
to Susman are in the Susman Nachlaß (SN), kept at the DLA.
³⁶ See the diary entry of September 17, 1907, reprinted in Belke and Renz, Siegfried Kracauer, p. 10.
³⁷ Enzo Traverso, “Sous le signe de l’extraterritorialité: Kracauer et la modernité juive,” La pensée dispersée:
³⁸ Mülder, Siegfried Kracauer—Grenzgänger, p. 18.
The primary contention of this study is that Kracauer’s idea of critical vocation derives from the conflict between discourses of religious revival and secularism. Given this premise, what might the continued presence of theological motifs in his work then tell us about intellectual culture in Weimar and about the process of secularization more generally? Recently, scholars have begun to investigate the religious and theological influences in the work of Horkheimer, Adorno and others associated with the Frankfurt School. Given Kracauer’s proximity to this milieu and his influence on the young Adorno, a study of this theme in connection to Kracauer will help illuminate this important chapter in Weimar cultural history. A study of Kracauer can shed light on the prehistory of the school, how this intellectual milieu perceived secularization and how it was represented rhetorically. What distinctions were used to separate the religious from the profane? Moreover, how did these distinctions influence their theories of modernity?

The debate over such questions has generated a discourse on culture that retains its relevance up to the present day. A recent discussion of the origins of Marxist socialism offers some context for this development. As Gareth Steadman Jones has argued, Marxism did not arise from a discussion of social justice and equity, but rather out of a philosophical debate concerning the meaning of history after the disappearance of God – the answer eventually being found in a materialist teleology. Similarly, one could argue that theories of mass culture arose from the debate over the post-religious meaning of culture itself. With the disappearance of divine purpose the meaning of history was cast in doubt; without this larger schema to legitimate it, culture had to respond by relying on its own resources. The critic of culture then stepped into the

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89 The description of these discourses as “rivals” does not mean to suggest that they shared no common themes or points of view. Secularization, for instance, was viewed as a phenomenon with religious origins by the theologian Friedrich Gogarten. See the comments in Ulrich Ruh, “Bleibende Ambivalenz. Säkularisierung/ Säkularisation als geistesgeschichte Interpretationskategorie,” in Ästhetik, Religion, Säkularisierung I: Von der Renaissance zur Romantik, eds. Silvio Vietta and Herbert Uerlings (Munich, 2008), pp. 29-30.

90 See the essays collected in The Early Frankfurt School and Religion, eds. Raymond Geuss and Margaret Kohlenbach (London and New York, 2005). A collection of Frankfurt School writings on religion has also been published: The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the major Thinkers, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (New York, 2005).


place vacated by religious authority, or which religious authority could no longer secure for itself.  

Kracauer is relevant to this question because he incorporated the contradictions of secularization. In his work, theology is juxtaposed with secular modernism; at one moment, he repudiates religious revival, but then he turns and defends religious concepts. Schopenhauer once mocked those individuals who clung to religious sentiments that they knew could not be true; however, something different is at stake for Kracauer. Religious concepts were not needed to provide solace to the individual, as much as they were needed in order to maintain a critical stance towards modernity. In this sense, Kracauer attempted to fashion religious concepts for different purposes. The fate of religious institutions seemed a secondary matter to him, but this was not true of religious ideas. Thus, even as late as 1929 he suggested that it was a mistake to confuse religion entirely with ideology. Many scholars of his work have recognized this stubborn persistence of theology. Miriam Hansen has argued that the Gnostic and messianic traditions within Judaism were an important influence that bridges the early and later periods of his career, though she stresses that both of these influences are somewhat nebulous. Inka Mülder-Bach, Martin Jay and Gertrud Koch have also pointed out the durable presence of religious or metaphysical motifs in his work. It is generally accepted that after the middle of the 1920s these motifs begin to recede as Kracauer began, under the influence of Marx and Weber, to reassess his attitudes to mass culture.

To be sure, if Kracauer had stopped writing before 1925, he probably would have remained by and large unknown, for it is difficult to imagine that his earlier writings would have elicited the same degree of interest as his later work. Nonetheless, I would argue that this early period was something more than a transition leading from “cultural pessimism” to a relatively progressive

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93 Miriam Hansen also argues that a kind of “redemptive critique” readily facilitated Kracauer’s shift towards mass culture and away from overtly metaphysical subjects; see Hansen, “Decentric Perspectives,” p. 71.
94 Schopenhauer, Sämtliche Werke V: Parerga und Paralipomena, kleine philosophische Schriften (Frankfurt am Main, 1986), p. 316.
95 Kracauer, “Zwei Arten der Mitteilung,” Der verbotene Blick, p. 222.
98 Mülder, Siegfried Kracauer—Grenzgänger, pp. 57-67.
theory of modern culture. His perception of the critic’s vocation was solidified mostly during the earlier period: to the critic of modernity he gave the task of mediating between the social realities of a secular world and the theological concepts that continued to haunt it in new shapes and guises.

Through an exploration of this idiosyncratic mingling of the sacred and the profane, this study will engage with two further interrelated themes: the historiography of secularization and the concept of political religion. In respect to the latter, it is not without significance that the critical analysis of political religions begins in earnest in the first decades of the twentieth century. Likewise, one of the most famous expressions of the theological origins of modern politics was articulated in this period: Carl Schmitt’s dictum that all modern political concepts are derived from theological ones. That post-enlightenment society had inherited an intellectual and structural framework from religion was certainly not an unknown idea in this period. The conflation of religion and politics was a problem that caused Kracauer deep misgivings and his few comments on Schmitt’s work attest to this ambivalence. To Kracauer political religions were indeed a potentially significant factor in modern politics, but he insisted that at root politics and religion had different intentions. Therefore, he believed they should not be too readily conflated, and that there was nothing inconsistent in the fact that an individual could be both politically radical and a devout Christian, for instance. The former did not need to supplant the latter, as some models of political religion might imply.

Recently, historians Philippe Burrin and Michael Burleigh have revived the argument that the extremist political movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries may best be understood as “political religions.” On the one hand, as Neil Gregor has pointed out, this idea runs the risk of becoming a mono-causal explanation, underestimating the importance of other social and

100 Carl Schmitt, Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty, trans. George Schwab (Chicago, 2005). See the comments on Schmitt in Rabinbach, In the Shadow of Catastrophe, p. 6.
102 See note 96 above.
political factors. Yet, the formal correlations (the teleology of redemption, structural hierarchies, individual sense of vocation) do allow for some fruitful comparisons. In his final work, François Furet suggested that nothing was less explicable than a vanished passion; perhaps, the concept of “political religion” can still allow us to approach this problem without necessarily blurring our ideas of the political and the religious.

Kracauer was indeed aware of this latter problem, and his criticism was attentive to the distinctions that could be drawn between the religious and the political. He commented directly on this issue in 1924 in an article on the religious mood in Germany. Here he claimed that in spite of the religious aura that hovered over revolutionary Marxism, it was clearly distinguishable from the religious confessions. It was true that the exponents of Marxism had become charged with a religious intensity. Still, in terms of its ends and means Marxism remained vastly different from religion proper; indeed, he argued that the differences between Catholics and Protestants paled in comparison. While socialism struggled for the loyalty of its adherents with a passionate fervour, and while it contested spheres of social and political value that were also important to religion, Kracauer still thought the religious and the political engaged different social desires. Thus, the distinctions between the sacred and the profane, so his work suggests, were still operative to a degree that the concept of “political religion” may obscure.

This is a problem that is inherent in Eric Voegelin’s formulation of the concept. He argues that the “ersatz” or “Gnostic” religions of modern politics are derivative of Christianity; yet, one must still ask what set of criteria allows us to make this claim. If modern forms of political organization resemble the institutional structures of the church, does it necessarily follow that the former is derived from the latter? And in what sense can these forms be said to be religious? In making these distinctions, the primacy of dogma enters into Voegelin’s discussion. The problem is a serious one as the term “political religion” implies that true religions are somehow apolitical or less political, a conclusion that is at least arguable. Voegelin himself was certainly aware of

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105 Kracauer, “Zur religiösen Lage in Deutschland,” *Gemeindeblatt der Israelitische Gemeinde Frankfurt am Main* 3 (1924/1925); reprinted in *Schriften 5.1*, pp. 273-277.
the issue, and in an essay of 1960 inserted as a mediating influence between religion proper and the ersatz religions, the utopian and quasi-heretical writings of Joachim of Fiore. Thus the flaws of contemporary gnostic movements could be explained by way of their borrowings from an already corrupted and politicized idea of Christianity. The political forms of religion were thus already degraded by their mediation through heresy. This brief account, of course, cannot pretend to do justice to the more sustained argument that Voegelin has offered, but it should suggest that there remains a critical problem in the term “political religion” in so far as this concept makes assumptions about what can and cannot be deemed political or religious. As will be seen, this problem of definition was central to how some viewed the problem of secularization.

Overall, the issue of political religion is perhaps best approached in conjunction with the wider historical contexts of secularization, as Burrin and Voegelin both imply. The thesis of secularization, as mentioned above, has been the subject of historical controversy. Still, few would argue against the view that relations between church and state underwent a dramatic change in the course of the long nineteenth century, and, likewise, that forms and patterns of religious belief also altered dramatically. However, whether or not this means European societies became primarily secular before 1914 is much less clear. Evidence of the persistence of religious thought and sentiment in the last century has led some researchers to reject the thesis of secularization altogether, arguing that it has no interpretive value. From the point of view of its critics, the concept of secularization is damaged irreparably by its dependence on some of the dubious assumptions that have supported sociological theories of modernization. The equation of modernity with the secular, for instance, has been questioned by the anthropologist Talal Asad among others. The normative assumptions that posit secularism as a model appear less defensible in increasingly multi-confessional societies. To some critics, the secular definition of modernity stems primarily from the fact that the origins of the thesis are deeply intertwined with the early development of sociology itself. The latter was predicated on the former, a relationship

109 Talal Asad, Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity (Stanford, 2003). Indeed, Kracauer’s critique of normative secularism in some ways anticipates the work of Asad.
that was recognized by the sociologist, Niklas Luhmann.\textsuperscript{110} Sociology as a field of critical discourse on society and politics, so the argument goes, was won at the expense of religion. It is to be expected that Kracauer, as a student of sociology, would have been well acquainted with some of these fatalistic views of religion that influenced sociology’s early development.\textsuperscript{111}

However, in spite of the objections made against the secularization thesis, it has nonetheless proved to be remarkably durable. Karel Dobbelare, the author of a classic study of the subject, recently revised his work in light of two decades of new research and debate, but he still held to most of its central premises.\textsuperscript{112} Nonetheless, few historians would now view secularization as a linear process in which religion was on the losing side of a zero-sum game with rational enlightenment. Instead, historians have emphasized the resilience of both religious institutions and beliefs.\textsuperscript{113} Rather than dwelling on the declining “social significance” of religion, they have identified the different forms of religious practice that emerged in modern contexts. Such practices grew steadily even as the churches and synagogues became increasingly empty. One speaks more of the adjustments of religion or the “decline of Christendom” in order to indicate that the waning of religious institutions does not entail a decline in religious sentiments. Thus, a crudely linear narrative has been displaced.\textsuperscript{114}

In Kracauer’s work, there is an assumption that modernity is inherently secular. Ratio has emancipated us from faith and disenchanted the world. In effect, the forces of secularization have won and there is no going back.\textsuperscript{115} Yet, this study will argue that Kracauer’s critical project only makes sense when it is understood as a response to secularization as an ongoing process. As he stated in his famous essay on the “mass ornament” the process of “demythologization” was not

\textsuperscript{110}Luhmann, p. 284.
\textsuperscript{111}Harry Liebersohn, \textit{Fate and Utopia in German Sociology}, pp. 4-10.
\textsuperscript{114}Hugh McLeod has tried to steer a middle ground between these positions, recognizing what is valid in opposing interpretive models. It should be added that some of the classic statements of the secularization thesis such as that of Dobbelare or Owen Chadwick’s \textit{The Secularization of the European Mind in the nineteenth Century} (Cambridge, 1975) have in fact been aware of many of the issues raised by critics of the thesis.
\textsuperscript{115}See Gertrud Koch, \textit{Siegfried Kracauer}, p. 20.
yet complete.\textsuperscript{116} Instead, it was a hesitant and continuing process, one that moved in a number of twists and turns that were to be found in the reorientation and redefinition of theological concepts. To observe and reflect on this process, as well as to intervene in it, was the leitmotif of his critical efforts.

For these reasons, Kracauer’s work offers a good vantage point to the problem of secularization as it was perceived during the Weimar Republic. Moreover, many themes that emerged from his attempt to expose the inner workings of disenchantment have remained important to discussions of secularization up to the present day. If one compares Kracauer’s work with the list of subjects that Luhmann, for instance, argued were central to the study of religion and society, Kracauer seems remarkably prescient. The emergence of a polyphonic (polykontextural) mode of observation, an expanded definition of culture in which religion is accorded a distinct if ambiguous sphere, a transformed perception of time and space, a recognition of the crucial role played by media – all of these themes were approached by Kracauer in the course of his work in the 1920s.\textsuperscript{117}

That there should be some correlation between Kracauer and later theorists is all the more striking when one considers that Kracauer never addressed a single major work to this subject; rather his ideas on religion are woven into a variety of texts (fiction, sociology and journalism) as a constantly resurfacing theme. This study will show that the lack of a focused treatment on his part makes his relevance to a discussion of secularization more, not less, compelling. Kracauer argued that the ephemeral and chance expressions of a society afforded deeper insight into its true nature. By using some of Kracauer’s lesser known writings, I hope to demonstrate the continued relevance of his claim.\textsuperscript{118}

4. "God’s policeman"? Preliminary Conclusions

\textsuperscript{117} Luhmann, pp. 289-290 and pp. 307-314.
Before proceeding to the main argument, I want to use a contemporary judgment concerning Kracauer and his work as a means of offering some brief conclusions that will guide the following discussion. In 1930, the Austrian writer Joseph Roth wrote to his friend, Stefan Zweig:

Dr. Kracauer ... has angered me greatly. He is one of the Jehovah Jews and Marxism is his Bible; the Eastern Jews have a good word for such men: God’s policemen. It is a matter of their inability to understand their own nobleness that, in any case, is no longer meant for this world.119

By 1930, when Roth wrote these words, he had known Kracauer for some years, probably since the early 1920s. Roth had been a regular contributor to the FZ, and he was also close to Reifenberg who had supported the work of both writers. The friendship between Roth and Kracauer was sometimes uneasy, but this was true of most of Roth’s friendships.120 In any case, they remained in contact until Roth died in Parisian exile in 1939. Roth was an admirer of Kracauer’s work, and he had intervened with his publisher, Samuel Fischer, in order to promote the publication of Ginster. Indeed, Kracauer later credited Roth with the impulse to begin the novel.121 His death, Kracauer stated, had been hard for him, provoking reflections on their common struggles together in Germany and their shared fate in exile.122

Despite this comradeship, Kracauer and Roth did have some differences of opinion in terms of writing and criticism. Some of these differences emerged in his letter to Zweig. However, though Roth claimed to be upset with Kracauer, he does not entirely condemn him and even shows a hint of admiration for the tenacity with which Kracauer pursued his critical agenda. In this particular case, Kracauer’s critical edge had been turned against Zweig in a dismissive review that Kracauer had written on the recent work of a young novelist, Otto Zarek.123 In the course of this review, Kracauer had directed some barbs against Zweig who had contributed a few words

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119 Roth to Zweig, August 30, 1930, in Joseph Roth: Briefe, pp. 175-176.
120 See the engaging memoir by his friend Soma Morgenstern, Joseph Roth’s Flucht und Ende: Erinnerungen (Kölh, 2008).
121 Belke and Renz, Siegfried Kracauer, p. 94. See also, Kracauer to Max Tau, May 13, 1961, KN, DLA. Kracauer told Tau that Roth was his graphologe: “One evening in the Hotel Englischer Hof in Frankfurt, where we usually sat in the evenings, I recounted to Roth my experiences in the war, how I had peeled potatoes against the enemy and so forth. He laughed and laughed and told me I had to make a novel out of this … and so it began.”
122 Kracauer to Walter Landauer, June 4, 1939, in Belke and Renz, Siegfried Kracauer, p. 94.
praising the book that had appeared on its dust jacket. Such haphazard criticism, so Kracauer contended, furthered the decline of critical standards, and Zweig, so he continued, should be held accountable. Perhaps, in an effort to console Zweig, Roth portrayed Kracauer as a reckless cultural militant, but at the same time, there is nothing in his letter that explicitly contradicts what Kracauer had written.

There are two aspects of Roth’s statements that should be noted. First, he suggests that Kracauer is the model of someone who has found a political religion. The works of Marx displace the Bible; the religious fanatic is transformed into the ideological zealot. Kracauer, the “policeman of God” thus becomes the exponent of a secular religion conceived of as a political creed; from the doctrinaire believer comes the political dogmatist.

This is consistent with one of the two theories of secularization that were proposed by the French historian Jean-Claude Monod.124 On the one hand, secularization is conceived of as old wine in new bottles, a model in which the forces of secularization appropriate religious functions. They adopt its hierarchical institutions and its sense of historical mission; hence, they mediate religious energies into a secular world view. On the other hand, secularization represents a distinct, if qualified, rupture – a position argued by Hans Blumenberg in his study, *The Legitimacy of Modernity*. Blumenberg believed that some aspects of religious thought would actually have hindered secular ideas of progress and, as a result, secularization meant more than just an adaptation of religious energies to secular practices. Instead, a deeper shift in terms of content had to have occurred in terms of how people thought, felt, and expressed the differences between sacred and profane.125 Only in this way could one explain modernity. These two theories are, of course, not mutually exclusive, as literary historian Vince Pecora has pointed out. What he argues is of greater significance is how these interpretations confronted one another in specific historical contexts.126 If we return to Kracauer as a case study, there is good reason to subscribe to the “old wine in new bottles” theory, for as his interest in Marxism and mass culture increased, the interest in religious subjects faded.

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124 Jean-Claude Monod, *La querelle de la secularization de Hegel à Blumenberg*, (Paris, 2002); see the discussion of Monod and Blumenberg in Pecora, pp. 5-6.
125 This was not, however, viewed by Blumenberg as an absolute rupture as Pecora points out.
126 Pecora, pp. 5-6.
Yet, the transformation of socialism into a pseudo-religious creed is not straightforward in Kracauer’s work. As discussed above, he was alarmed by the emergence of a political religiosity. Indeed it was probably this phenomenon that led him to conceive of a more positive valuation of reason. For if ratio is the villain of earlier studies such as The Detective Novel, after 1925 he sees in reason more than just the destroyer of religious unity, or a malignant force in the grand narrative of secularization. The “cloudy reason” of ratio is set against a positive form of reason, and from this latter instrument one need not fear that it “rationalizes too much, but too little.”  

However, as will be discussed below, this reflective form of reason was to be used not only against the old truths of religion, but also against the new faith of secularism.

Moreover, Kracauer stressed that there were clear distinctions between secular and religious teleology. A worker’s paradise or a “national community” may have structural similarity to religious eschatology, but this was, so Kracauer maintained, altogether different from the religious idea of revelation. The former occurred within history, while the latter blew it apart. Did Kracauer actually believe in this idea of redemption? The answer remains unclear. While he steered clear of messianic thinking for the better part of his career, the subtitle of his last book, “the last things before the last,” suggests that he never wanted to fully close the door on redemption as a possibility. Part of my argument contends that it would have made little sense for Kracauer to express himself on this matter. As he stated in a letter to Simmel, general principles are, in a certain way, “invisible” (Unsichtig). It is this impulse in Kracauer’s work that I think best explains Roth’s remark that Kracauer’s sense of obligation as a writer and critic was “no longer meant for this world,” that is, his intentions were not unambiguously secular. Roth, who we can assume knew an aspect of Kracauer’s thought that was not expressed in his public statements, thus drew attention to the theological undercurrents that persisted in the work of his friend.

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130 Thus, I agree with Pecora in his contention that for Kracauer, criticism is not an entirely secularly defined task. See Pecora, pp. 3-5 and pp. 70-72. See also, Haenlein, p. 133. He remarks that Kracauer’s concept of the real is “anti-theological in an almost theological fashion.”
To be sure, the concept of religion or redemption that emerges in Kracauer’s writing is difficult to identify with positive religiosity. Kracauer probably understood this when he made the remark to Susman that he was a pagan, but in the sense that Goethe meant it, that is, one that did not categorically eliminate religion. The definition of religion is, of course, a vast and intractable subject that is outside the scope of this study. Durkheim once stated that society is religion, a formulation that provokes as many questions as it could answer. For my purpose, it may do to accept the definition offered by Luhmann that “religion is whatever can be observed as religion.” The imprecision that ensues when one tries to pin down the religious is, in fact, one of its aspects that contributed to the debates that will be discussed in this study. What remains more important, however, is not the relative validity of such concepts and assumptions, but rather how they emerged and functioned in Weimar-era discourses – how they derived from, or responded to, specific contexts. In other words, what were the social and political stakes involved in trying to decide what belonged to God and what to Caesar?

The conflict that ensued over this question, I would suggest, was not a minor one in the context of Weimar culture. Secular viewpoints could alienate voters and galvanize religious communities. As one scholar has recently pointed out, conflicts over issues such as the separation of church and state or religious instruction in the schools were still capable of provoking social interests into political action. Thus, when a number of independent Socialists returned to the SPD, it was thought expedient to alter the charter of the party in order to accommodate the return of the radicals. In 1925, the new charter dropped a significant tenet of the earlier Erfurt program of 1891: the statement that religion was a “private affair.” This may have been more a matter of political tactics than one of secular convictions; however, the move implicitly recognized the persistent struggle over religion in politics.

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131 Dagmar Barnouw, for instance, rejects reading Kracauer’s later work as evidence of lingering religious sentiments. See Barnouw, Critical Realism, pp. 285-286.
132 Kracauer to Susman, May 2, 1920, SN, DLA.
133 Luhmann, p. 308.
Given the present revival of conflicts between religion and secularism there is good reason to explore these conflicts in different historical contexts. The ban of headscarves in France, the proposed entrance of Turkey into the European Union, and the debate over “reasonable accommodation” in Québec, are just some of the issues that have stimulated a renewed interest in these historical conflicts. This interest has found expression in numerous publications that make it clear that the debate is not confined to academia. Charles Taylor, Michael Burleigh, Slavoj Žižek, Jürgen Habermas, Mark Lilla and Christopher Hitchens are among those who have recently made contributions to the subject. It is certainly noticeable that some of these discussions have returned to the same textual terrain that Kracauer went over in the 1920s: Kierkegaard, Weber, and Barth, and more surprisingly, the Catholic mystery writer, G. K. Chesterton. There should be no surprise, then, that present day discussions have been fraught with baggage from the Weimar period. In 2004, Jürgen Habermas addressed this resemblance in an essay written at the invitation of the Catholic Academy of Bavaria. In part, the speech defended the legitimacy of secularization. When confronted with the argument that European secularism was an idiosyncratic and flawed response to the claims of religion, he countered that “this reminds one of the atmosphere in Weimar Germany ... it evokes Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger, or Leo Strauss.”

Here again, we are in terrain that Kracauer would have found familiar. Weimar’s cultural crisis was never resolved; rather it was submerged in the conformist cultural policies imposed by the Nazi regime. For Kracauer and many of his contemporaries, 1933 meant flight, exile, silence or death; but for others, such as the FZ editor and archivist Hermann Herrigel, 1933 was the year of potential redemption. A follower of both Martin Buber and the Protestant theologian Friedrich Gogarten, Herrigel’s philosophical trajectory found its terminus in a pro-regime theology. The relationship of National Socialism to religion is, nonetheless, too complex to do justice to in this study, but at the very least at a time when it has become common to refer to the inability of some

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136 See the discussion of Herrigel below in Chapter Six, pp. 225-231.
religions to adjust to secular modernity, it is worth considering whether or not secularization has been such an easy process in European history.\textsuperscript{137}

Chapter 2
“Location suggests Content”: Kracauer on the Fringe of Religious Revival

1. Kracauer and the German-Jewish “Hermaphrodite”

In his final work, published after his death, Kracauer asserted that “location was suggestive of content,” but he probably did not intend that this premise should be used to interpret his own work, except in the sense that it could be applied to historical extraterritoriality. In the passage from which this quotation comes, Kracauer stated his abiding interest in historical periods of social flux and uncertainty, periods that preceded the establishment of dominant orthodoxies: the late Hellenistic age before Christianity, the Reformation, and his own period before the rise of Communism. He argued that these historical moments contained a “message” that had yet to be deciphered and that had, to his mind, eluded present day thought. He did not identify this message concretely beyond a vague expression of humanism that he associated with Erasmus; but he did argue that what he had in mind was not to be found in the “contending causes” of these periods, but rather in their “interstices”:

The message I have in mind concerns the possibility that none of the contending causes is the last word on the issues at stake; that there is, on the contrary, a way of thinking and living which, if we could only follow it, would permit us to burn through the causes and dispose of them.1

These words offer a potential entry point into Kracauer’s critical work of the Weimar era, an attempt to negotiate a position that cannot be equated with the burning causes of his own day, with Marxism or nationalism, with religious confessions or radical scepticism. Such a position would, of course, lead to the idea of the extraterritorial that attracted Kracauer through much of his life, for this was the location in which he sought to situate himself.2

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1 Kracauer, History, p. 8.
Hence, a discussion of Kracauer should also start with location; but in this case with his territorial home in Frankfurt, a city whose history of independence was part of contrasting historical traditions. During the Holy Roman Empire, Frankfurt had been an important site of imperial politics, and from 1562 until the French Revolution it was there that the emperors travelled in order to receive their crown. In contrast, on account of the Frankfurt parliament in 1848, the city was also enmeshed in narratives of democratic tradition. Of his home city and its history Kracauer offered the following somewhat perfunctory description in *Ginster*:

Like other cities, it exploited the past in order to generate tourism. Imperial coronations, international congresses and shooting festivals took place in its walls which had long since been transformed into public assets ... some Christian and Jewish families traced their origins back to the city’s forefathers. Families without pedigree had brought in a banking trade that entertained connections with Paris, London, and New York. Places of worship and stock markets were only separated from one another in spatial terms. The climate is tepid; the population that does not live in the West End, and to which Ginster belonged, scarcely enters into consideration.³

In contrast to this grey portrait, Frankfurt in the 1920s did have an eclectic cultural life. The university attracted figures such as Karl Mannheim, Max Scheler, Paul Tillich, and Hendrick de Man. A fervid interest in sociology squared off against intellectuals wedded to the aestheticism of Stefan George.⁴ The nearby cities of Heidelberg, Marburg and Freiburg, moreover, were the hotbeds of contemporary philosophical movements, pitting the neo-Kantian idealism of Ernst Cassirer against its up and coming phenomenological rivals.⁵ The traffic of visiting students kept Kracauer aware of these disputes. On the level of mass culture, Frankfurt was also the home of some of the more progressive experiments in public radio, and under the guidance of Bernhard Sekles its music conservatory welcomed one of the first jazz programs in Europe.⁶ Thus, if not as exciting as Berlin or Munich, Frankfurt was still not a cultural backwater.

Kracauer was born in Frankfurt to Jewish parents on February 8, 1889. He was born into the second largest Jewish community in Germany and during a period when German Jews had been unsettled by reformist movements from within and anti-Semitism from without. What Pierre Mendes-Flohr called the “dual identity” of German Jews was a palpable fact for many, if not most Jews. The complexity of this dual identity was given sensational expression by Moritz Goldstein in early 1912. “We Jews,” claimed Goldstein, “are administering the spiritual property of a nation that denies our right and our ability to do so.” Instead of persisting in the delusional belief that Jews could become full participants in German society, he called for a deliberately Jewish culture. There is no mention of this affair in Kracauer’s work, but he most probably knew of the outcry that it provoked. Walter Benjamin, who would become friends with Kracauer after 1918, followed the affair’s progress with intense interest, and Goldstein was not the only voice that spoke of the need for a renewed Judaism. The much admired speeches of Martin Buber on Hasidic tradition, for instance, were published in the same year and thus added a mystical element to the debate. Tradition vied with innovation, and claims were followed by counter-claims. Jews, so it was said, could neither be fully German, nor could they avoid the German part of their identity.

Contemporary discussions of religion were bound to become entangled in this matrix of culture, nation, and identity. Growing up in Frankfurt, a focal point of the Jewish revival during the Weimar Republic, Kracauer would have been familiar with these discussions. It is certain that he heard the voices emanating from the Free Jewish School and very probable that he knew of the anti-Semitic gatherings that took place at the Kölner Hof hotel, near the Frankfurt train station. Among Frankfurt Jews, according to one observer, there was at this time an increased interest in the Zionist movement, but, on the other hand, the Liberal-Reformers had also become more assertive.

8 Goldstein quoted in Mendes-Flohr, pp. 46-48.
9 On the influence of Buber’s *Drei Reden*, see Rabinbach, *In the Shadow*, pp. 35-36.
10 On social and cultural currents in German Judaism, see Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven and London, 1996), pp. 11-65; also see the comments of Paul Amsberg in *Bilder aus dem jüdischen Leben im alten Frankfurt* (Frankfurt am Main, 1970), pp. 196-225 and pp. 257-259.
Kracauer occupied an ambiguous position in this regard, as his parents were of varying backgrounds, divided between Eastern and Western Europe. On his maternal side, the Oppenheim family was long established in Frankfurt. The father of Rosetta Oppenheim, his mother, had worked there in the financial trade. On his paternal side, however, the Kracauer were relative newcomers from Eastern Europe, his father and uncle having relocated there from Silesia. As a result, his education was almost certainly influenced by the twin forces of dual identity – not only that of German and Jewish, but also of East and West.

A study of Kracauer’s youth is, however, unfortunately hindered by the relative scarcity of sources before 1914. After World War Two, when Kracauer had settled in New York and was unpacking those of his papers that had survived the catastrophe, he expressed a desire to one day write his memoirs, a desire he unfortunately never fulfilled. If he had, the numerous gaps existing in his papers might have been partially compensated. His Nachlaß preserves a substantial number of notes, letters and unpublished manuscripts; however, for the years before 1920, such sources are on the whole very meagre. War, forced exile, and the deportation of his mother and aunt in 1942 resulted in the loss of an unknown quantity of material. When he fled to France after the Reichstag fire in 1933, whatever papers he left behind in Frankfurt were lost when Nazi authorities took possession of the Kracauer apartments. As a result, some of his early and intellectually important friendships, with Otto Hainebach and Max Flesch for instance, have left only intermittent traces; they are mentioned in his notebooks but the letters between them have been lost. Moreover, Kracauer kept his notebooks in a sporadic fashion; those written between 1903 and 1907 are the earliest written evidence that has survived in his hand. Later notebooks cover parts of the years 1911 and 1912; during the war, he was inspired by his reading of the diaries of Hebbel to again keep a personal record, devoted, he said, less to daily affairs and

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11 Brodersen, Siegfried Kracauer, pp. 41-42.
12 An excellent overview of the Kracauer papers is to be found in Belke and Renz, Siegfried Kracauer (Marbach am Neckar 1989).
13 Both Rosette and Hedwig Kracauer were deported to Poland or Theresienstadt sometime after August 1942 and were probably murdered there shortly thereafter.
more to his inner development.\textsuperscript{14} However, this impetus soon faded, and by December the entries that consisted mostly of quotations from his reading dwindled to a halt.

Such limitations are only slightly less problematic for the period between 1914 and 1920. During the first years of the war, Kracauer devoted himself to writing, while employed as an architect in Frankfurt. In 1917, he was recruited into the foot artillery near Mainz. This lasted only a short period, after which he was transferred to Osnabrück where he worked for the rest of the war—again as an architect. From this period come his earliest attempts at philosophical criticism. These reflections on the limits of the natural and human sciences and the nature of the soul bear witness to some of his early influences: Nietzsche, Simmel, Bergson, and Scheler. Fragments of his correspondence with both Scheler and Simmel have likewise survived, but only after 1920 does a more substantial record emerge, and the pivotal year after November 1918 remains obscure. The most important sources for the post-war years are his detailed and intimate letters to Margaret Susman written between 1920 and 1922; and also the letters between him and the later critical theorist, Leo Löwenthal, with whom Kracauer kept a lifelong friendship.\textsuperscript{15} Together with some of his unpublished manuscripts, these letters offer the potential for a rough sketch of the early Kracauer. Still, some caution is needed to avoid either projecting his post-war scepticism backwards into his youth, or of assuming too readily that there was a deep shift occasioned by the war. The truth is probably somewhere in between these positions. Even if, as Löwenthal suggested, Kracauer became more secular in his outlook after he began to work for the FZ, it is not altogether clear what his attitudes towards Judaism and religion were before that time.\textsuperscript{16}

Of the cultural offerings of his day, Kracauer partook in many which were far from exceptional. He wrote in his notebooks of 1907 of the deep impression made upon him by his reading of \textit{Tonio Kröger} and \textit{Crime and Punishment}, both of which were widely read at the time. The popularity of Dostoevsky led one Gymnasium instructor in Munich to lament over the possible side-effects of this contagion from the East; while, according to Kracauer, \textit{Tonio Kröger}

\textsuperscript{14} Excerpts from the diaries have been reprinted in Belke and Renz, \textit{Siegfried Kracauer}, pp. 9-13 and pp. 18-19; on the encounter with Hebbel see pp. 28-29.

\textsuperscript{15} On the extent of the correspondence with Susman see page 24, note 82 above. Much of the correspondence between Löwenthal and Kracauer has been published in \textit{In steter Freundschaft: Leo Löwenthal-Siegfried Kracauer, Briefwechsel, 1921-1966}, eds. Jansen, Peter-Erwin and Christian Schmidt (Lüneburg, 2003).

generated a swarm of admirers for the “blonde and blue-eyed doers.”\(^{17}\) Aside from his interest in contemporary literature, Kracauer had also begun to read philosophy in earnest, in particular the works of Nietzsche, Kant, and Simmel.\(^{18}\) However, towards Nietzsche Kracauer maintained a sceptical reserve even as he admired the Nietzschean critique of the materialist culture of the past century (he appears to have been alienated by his “monomaniacal” tone).\(^{19}\) In general, philosophy appears to have stimulated his interest more than religious subjects, and there are few traces of religious engagement in his notebooks. An entry written on Yom Kippur in 1907 suggests that the conflict between secular philosophy and sacred tradition had been largely won by the former. He spent the holiday that year reading Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche’s biography of her brother and then reading Kant with his friend Felix Hentschel.\(^{20}\) Moreover, he grumbled over the fact that the ritual obligations of the day resulted in a waste of his time.\(^{21}\) Such references are, however, quite isolated, so the conclusions one can draw from them are tentative at best.

In any case, it is clear that Kracauer was not brought up in a fully secularized or assimilated milieu.\(^{22}\) As already mentioned, both parents were Jewish, though with different backgrounds. Moreover, the family of his father, Adolf Kracauer (1849-1918) had been closely connected to the synagogue in his hometown of Sagan. The father of Adolf had been active at the local synagogue, and his mother had wanted his younger brother, Isidor (1852-1923), to become a rabbi. Her aspirations for him never materialized, but Isidor Kracauer did come to occupy a prominent position in the Jewish community of Frankfurt. There he became an instructor at the Philanthropin, a respected school that had been popular in the previous century among Jewish liberals. He was also a noted historian of Frankfurt’s Jewish community and published several articles on regional history.\(^{23}\) Kracauer offered a sympathetic portrait of his uncle in his autobiographical fiction, *Ginster*, where he was portrayed as a fastidious historian and a staunch German nationalist. Indeed, as a historian of the Jewish community, Isidor Kracauer was

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18 See the notebook entries reprinted in Belke and Renz, *Siegfried Kracauer*, pp. 8-12.
19 Ibid., p. 10.
20 Kracauer met Felix Hentschel, a student of math and physics, at the home of his aunt and uncle, Isidor and Hedwig Kracauer. Hentschel rented a room in the same building; see Belke and Renz, p. 8.
21 Entries of September 17 and 18, 1907, Belke and Renz, *Siegfried Kracauer*, p. 10.
22 For biographical details on the Kracauer family, see Belke and Renz, *Siegfried Kracauer*, pp. 1-2.
23 Isidor Kracauer, *Geschichte der Juden im Frankfurt am Main, 1150-1824* (Frankfurt am Main, 1925-1927).
immersed in its religion and tradition, but he was also a staunch German nationalist and receptive to the intellectual currents of German society in general.\textsuperscript{24} Thus, Kracauer later claimed that had exerted an at least indirect influence on him. It was because of his uncle that Kracauer first read Friedrich A. Lange’s massive *History of Materialism*, a “wonderful book towards which I have great piety.”\textsuperscript{25} His uncle thus offered a way not only in Judaism, but also to materialist socialism.

There is reason to think that the Kracauer family in general partook of this dualism. When Adolf Kracauer died after a long illness in 1918, the leader of Frankfurt’s Liberal-Reform community, Rabbi Caesar Seligmann (1860-1950) gave the address at his graveside.\textsuperscript{26} Seligmann had once argued that Jews should remain open to German culture while simultaneously preserving their faith.\textsuperscript{27} In 1910, he published a prayer book to be used in the reform community; according to one contemporary, the reformed service at the West-end synagogue, where the book was used, was of the most radical kind of Reform Judaism. The use of Hebrew, for instance, was kept to a minimum, and one prayed and sang in German.\textsuperscript{28} In 1905, Seligmann had published a work that embodied this dual task of preserving Jewish identity while cultivating receptiveness to German culture, even coining a phrase from the current vogue for Nietzsche: the “will to Judaism.”\textsuperscript{29}

Similarly, the school where Isidor Kracauer taught, and where Kracauer also studied from 1898 to 1904, sat on the cusp of a dual German and Jewish identity. According to one former student, Tilly Epstein, there were in addition to the few Christian students at the school a number of Christian teachers, particularly in the technical subjects. The mixed confessions, in general, preserved a harmonious relationship so that when the odd anti-Semitic incident (*Risches*) did occur it was not taken too seriously.\textsuperscript{30} However, the secularly oriented program of the school did provoke some misgivings. The alleged weaknesses of an educational system that sat uneasy

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Kracauer2} Kracauer to Löwenthal, March 15, 1957, *In steter Freundschaft*, p. 114.
\bibitem{Seligmann} Seligmann was a rabbi in Frankfurt from 1902 to 1937, at which time he emigrated to England.
\bibitem{Aschheim} Steven E. Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990* (Berkeley, 1992), pp. 97-98.
\bibitem{Amsberg} Amsberg, p. 257-258; Kracauer’s inability to read Hebrew was later attacked by his critics on the occasion of his polemic against Buber and Rosenzweig. See Martin Jay, “Politics of Translation: Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin on the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible,” *Permanent Exiles*, pp. 198-216.
\end{thebibliography}
between secular modernity and religious identity had been criticized by one of the early instructors at the school who had argued that the secular curriculum was emblematic of those Jews whose misfortune it was “to no longer want to be Jews.” The relative emphases given to religious instruction varied during the nineteenth century, but by its end Hebrew was only offered in the school as an elective. On the other hand, this may have improved the liberal reputation of the school, for the Philanthropin was admired as the epitome of pedagogical liberalism in the sense intended by the Swiss romanticist educator, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi.

For his part, Kracauer appears to have thrived academically, even if he was bored by the manner of instruction. Moreover, whatever incidents may have occurred, the Philanthropin must have been relatively free of the anti-Semitism that he later encountered at the Klinger Upper School which he attended after 1904.

Thus, Kracauer, from an early age onwards, would have been sensitized to his German and Jewish identities. His response to this dilemma appears to have been one of acceptance, arguing that neither his Germanness nor Jewishness could be denied – in fact, that it would be intellectual suicide to do so. To Löwenthal he once wrote that they were both “hermaphrodites” (Zwitern) and this was a situation from which they could not escape. Thus, he warned Löwenthal not to turn away from European philosophy in order to follow the mystical paths of Martin Buber or Gershom Scholem (buberisieren or scholemisieren); for this would cost him his ability to “draw closer to the things of the world.” Something of this hermaphroditic character also appeared in his novel, Ginster. When the protagonist finds work at an architect’s office in the east end of Frankfurt, he is struck by the presence of the Jews he finds in the neighbourhood: with flowing beards and kaftans, “Jews who strike one as imitations, so genuine do they appear.” Yet, a few pages later, as Ginster is sitting in his office where he leads an unsatisfying existence, he gazes out the window upon these Jews in a more ambiguous fashion. He perceives them as strangers,

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32 Amsberg, pp. 110-111.
33 Belke and Renz, Siegfried Kracauer, p. 3.
35 Kracauer to Löwenthal, April 12, 1924, In steter Freundschaft, pp. 53-55, esp. p. 54. The hermaphrodite was a loaded image in this context, drawing attention not only to his Jewish and German duality, but also to the ambiguous sexual overtones of his relationships to younger male companions. This will be discussed further below.
36 Kracauer to Löwenthal, April 12, 1924, In steter Freundschaft, pp. 53-56.
37 Kracauer, Ginster: Von ihm selbst geschrieben, in Werke 7, p.62.
as a remote kind of other; but at the same time their affirmation of religious identity draws attention to his own feelings of displacement. Whether he thinks their religiosity is authentic or not is another matter, but the claim to authenticity that he attributes to them draws attention to his own tentative and undefined nature.\textsuperscript{38}

The hermaphroditic description of Kracauer’s dual identity does find an echo among his contemporaries. The philosopher Franz Rosenzweig expressed himself in comparable terms, though on the question of Judaism they were decidedly not in agreement. Still, a comparison between the two may elucidate how Kracauer responded to this issue, and how it differed from others in his milieu. Rosenzweig sometimes described dual identity in terms that would probably have been familiar to Kracauer. In letters to his mother Rosenzweig stated that if forced to choose between the Jewish and German sides of his self he knew he would choose the former, but that he also knew he would not survive the operation. In one of the last letters he wrote before his death he stated more ambiguously that language triumphs over “blood.”\textsuperscript{39}

The ramifications of this language of dualism might be clarified by a consideration of the distinctions between filiative and affiliative relations as proposed by Edward Said.\textsuperscript{40} Said argues that whereas the affiliative relationship was based on invention, construction, and will, the filiative relation was grounded in the historical, cultural, and social contexts that surrounded the individual. Thus, the former was derived from ideas, the latter from social relations. There are, of course, some problems of interpretation here as it may be difficult to set a border between these two categories. However, setting aside the question of how these distinctions might be made (or fail to be made) I would suggest, nonetheless, that they can still assist one to see how Rosenzweig and Kracauer to a large extent talked past one another. Both men were influenced by a largely, but not entirely, secularized setting; but for Kracauer this meant that an affiliative relationship was no longer possible. He did not deny that Jewish tradition had influenced him,

\textsuperscript{38} Kracauer, \textit{Ginster, Werke} 7, p. 77.
\textsuperscript{39} Rosenzweig quoted in Mendes-Flohr, p. 84; and Franz Rosenzweig to Adele Rosenzweig, October 6, 1929, in \textit{Franz Rosenzweig: Der Mensch und sein Werk. Gesammelte Schriften} 1.2, \textit{Briefe und Tageb"{u}cher, 1918-1929} (Hague, 1979), p. 1230.
\textsuperscript{40} Edward Said, \textit{The World, the Text, and the Critic} (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 17-24
that is, he accepted the filiative relationship but the authentic religious gesture was lost to him. Moreover, he tended to view expressions of religiosity as an affiliative construction.

Rosenzweig, on the other hand, perceived this relationship as essential, and he blurred the distinctions that appear important to Kracauer. As he stated in a letter to his mother, he could seek a relationship to the divine by virtue of nature and birth, by the fact of having been born Jewish. Just as importantly, the process of secularization, as Rosenzweig conceived it, was not as fatal as it was for Kracauer. The test of Jewish religious authenticity was, on the contrary, demonstrated by its ability to survive successive waves of secularization, an experience that he argued Judaism had undergone. Therefore, he remonstrated with Kracauer that in religious terms he possessed the “positive,” a relationship between himself and the sphere of revelation that prevailed over the merely secular; Kracauer’s position, he claimed, was only a matter of a tendency (Tendenz).

The uneasy relationship between Kracauer and Rosenzweig will be discussed further in the post-war context, but for the moment a couple of points should be emphasized. One, Kracauer did retain a filiative relationship to Judaism, and there is little to suggest that he ever sought to deny his Jewish background. However, this acceptance did not mean that he identified with Jewish religiosity; on the contrary, he viewed such expressions as deliberately affiliative relationships. They were a contrived kind of authenticity, and, as he warned Löwenthal, the “glimmer of authenticity” was not becoming. The second point follows from the first, which is that his sense of Jewish identity was not simply a matter of external imposition, that is, he did not accept “Jewish” identity just because German society forced it upon him. As Jack Jacobs has argued in his study of intellectuals from the Frankfurt School, Jewish identity emerged out of a complex nexus of social and cultural currents, both traditional and contemporary, both internal and

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41 Traverso, “Sous la signe de l’extraterritorialité,” pp. 193-198. See also Kracauer to Susman, February 10, 1921, SN, DLA.
42 Rosenzweig to Adele Rosenzweig, October 23, 1913, Franz Rosenzweig: Der Mensch und sein Werk 1.1, p. 129.
44 Kracauer to Susman, April 20, 1921, SN, DLA. Kracauer reported the following statement from Rosenzweig: “I myself have the positive. I live within it; I have that which you call form.”
45 Kracauer to Löwenthal, April 12, 1924, In steter Freundschaft, pp. 53-54.
external. They may have been influenced by social and political anti-Semitism, but they were not determined by it.46

2. From the Revolt of Life to the Margins of Cultural Pessimism

Overall, in the post-war period the question of Jewish identity does not appear to have been a significant issue for Kracauer. Indeed, he confessed to Susman that the “Jewish question” did not excite his interest.47 Religious or metaphysical themes are, in fact, more traceable in his engagement with philosophy, especially in his critical position towards the natural and human sciences. His earliest fragmentary expressions on these themes were often informed by the prevalent tropes of the late nineteenth century crisis of culture.48 For instance, he shared the common conviction that Wissenschaft failed society whenever it pretended to answer existential questions. The quantifying impulse of modern thought was incompatible with the spirit of inwardness, and it degraded the “things of the world” when it reduced them to categories and numbers. Philosophers, he stated in his notebooks of 1912, were deluded if they thought that a system of metaphysical knowledge could be constructed out of scientific rules: “they did not recognize that philosophy needs to be lived and suffered...that it requires poets and prophets.”49 In accord with his preference for cultural solutions to social problems, it is the prophet or artist that is valorized here, not the politician. The linkage between the prophet and the artist, moreover, was based on more than their common superiority over the politician, for religion and aesthetics were akin to one another because they both struggled to find meaning outside of the confines of scientific method.50 There is, of course, a messianic tinge to this argument – the longing for the prophet who would give form to a meaningless and disorderly present. Thus, in

47 Kracauer to Susman, April 2, 1920, SN, DLA.
49 See notebook entry of August 12, 1912, Belke and Renz, Siegfried Kracauer, pp. 19.
50 See also his letter to Susman, October 17, 1920, SN, DLA.
spite of his subsequent repudiations of the messianic tradition, Kracauer was not always immune to its attractions.\textsuperscript{51}

Much of this discourse was in accord with the philosophy of life at the turn of the century. Crudely put, the general impulse of these philosophical trends posited a metaphysical conception of life that was elevated over and against the models offered by reason. According to Thomas Mann, by the turn of the century calls for the return to “life” had become “common currency across the nation,” a movement that was evident in the influence of Nietzsche, Bergson, and Dilthey.\textsuperscript{52} This concept of life designated what was irreducible in existence; it was the thorn in the side of any system based on abstract and scientific models. Thus, it was a counter-claim to a determinist and mechanistic explanation of life as envisioned by Laplace as early as 1814.\textsuperscript{53} Since it resisted a purely materialist point of view, the concept of life was also a means of asserting culture against the rule of mere facts. The latter were the indifferent by-products of civilisation and its various processes. Culture, on the other hand, was closer to the core of existence; it was what demonstrated that “life was always more than life.”\textsuperscript{54} This vision of the cultural struggle against a life-negating civilisation found expression in Thomas Mann’s notorious polemic of 1918.\textsuperscript{55}

Yet, for Mann, art was still susceptible to the contagion of intellect. Thus, in Tonio Kröger the young protagonist reflected the incapacity of the artist, forever looking in upon the flow of life that his intellect forbids him to join. Kracauer appears to have identified with this predicament, suspended between life and the artifice of the mind. In his journal of 1907, he projected Mann’s conception of the struggle between life and art onto his own passions. In Tonio Kröger’s love for Hans Hanssen, he found a resemblance to his own “hopeless” passion for one of his closer friends at the time, Max Flesch.\textsuperscript{56} This conflation of aesthetic conflicts and personal ones was probably what Kracauer had in mind when he later told Adorno that the “chasm in the world”

\textsuperscript{51} Hansen, “Decentri
c Perspectives,” pp. 52-53.
\textsuperscript{52} Thomas Mann, \textit{Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen}, quoted in Dirk Oschmann, \textit{Auszug aus der Innerlichkeit: Das literarische Werk Siegfried Kracauers} (Heidelberg, 1999), p. 21.
\textsuperscript{53} For a discussion of Kracauer’s indebtedness to \textit{Lebensphilosophie} and Vitalism, see Oschmann, pp. 20-27.
\textsuperscript{55} See Chapter 1, p. 3, note 3 above.
\textsuperscript{56} Kracauer, journal entry of July 7, 1907, reprinted in Belke and Renz, \textit{Siegfried Kracauer}, p. 9.
passed straight through him. Isolation from the fullness of life was taken as one of the pains of cultural struggle, a component of what Simmel called the “tragic conception of culture.”

The early work of Kracauer was informed by this tragic conception. As Dirk Oschmann has demonstrated, his early fictional characters were embedded within this discourse of life. Often they suffer from a surplus of intellect. They are depicted as wanderers in a spiritual and emotional void, loners who search for communal experience or some kind of meaningful connection with life. “O Life (Leben)!” cries out Ludwig Loos, the protagonist of “Grace,” an unpublished short story from 1913. The solitary meanderings of this desperate young man are brought to an end in a melodramatic fashion, by a sexual encounter with a suicidal prostitute. Loos comes to a bridge at night intending to end his own life, but instead he meets a young woman intending to do the same; their chance encounter saves them both. As Kracauer explained to an acquaintance, the world was given such crude and “brutal” form in this story as only such a shocking “contact with the earth” could give his character a “core” from which he could then build his way back into life. The sexual favour or grace with which this tale ended offered an almost pagan conception of the world, one that was not much different from turn of the century decadence. The longed for union with life is a return to origins; the roots of existence are recovered as Loos, through this moment of chance, opens up to the fullness of life that has always surrounded him. The religious dimension of grace (Gnade) is readily apparent. As the sun streams down on the morning after this affair, Ludwig folds his hands as if to give thanks for gifts received. Yet, it is no deity but life itself that receives his offering: “He looked into the blue heaven, full of faith; he caught sight of the blooming pastures and deeply felt his belongingness with every aspect of thousand-fold life.” For Ludwig, the material world becomes metaphysical; he falls before it and reveres its inscrutable contingency. Thus, he confirms his acceptance of the world as he finds it. In contrast, to oppose life with the force of intellect meant a failure to comprehend one’s natural place. As Thomas Mann argued, this was a kind of metaphysical sickness, a sign of “biological insufficiency” – aesthetically compelling, perhaps,

57 Kracauer to Adorno, April 5, 1923, Briefwechsel, 1923-1966, p. 11.
59 Kracauer to Otto Crusius, August 23, 1913, Crusiusana I, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.
60 See the studies by Ralph-Rainer Wuthenow, Muse, Maske, Meduse: Europäischer Ästhetizismus (Frankfurt am Main, 1978); Carl E. Schorske, Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture (New York, 1981); and Matei Calinescu, Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avante-Garde, Decadence, Primitivism, Kitsch (Durham, 1987), pp. 151-224.
but still a sign of decay. Thus, prior to Ludwig’s conversion, he is besieged by omens of death, and in his dreams he goes to houses stricken by the plague and sleeps in his own coffin. His return to life triumphs over this aesthetic morass.

The concept of life expressed in “Grace” had a pagan aspect, but Kracauer also interpreted this concept as a religious one. In a letter to Simmel written near the end of 1917, he spoke of the religious function of Leben:

A single idea draws itself throughout the whole, the idea that it is Life itself, that which fulfills humanity (I cannot do without this downright metaphysical concept), that ever again pushes forward the yearning to live as individuals in a truly religious cultural community.

Thus, the individual would find fulfillment in the religious group, a concept that was not clearly opposed to reason but nonetheless stood in some tension to it. Such statements expressed longing for a supposedly lost religious “ground,” a motive that was important to many German intellectuals (Kafka, Max Brod, Rosenzweig and Löwenthal, for instance). Religion, from this point of view, was fundamental to culture. It was understood not simply as a stable and time-honoured set of moral prescriptions, but rather as an innovation (or an “invented tradition”) in modern life, one that in its more extreme forms wanted to purge Europe of the rational and material dross of the previous century. Such thinking was not unique to German intellectuals, and one could mention here the conversion of Paul Claudel in France, T.S. Eliot’s celebration of the religious writings of Lancelot Andrewes, or Apollinaire’s “Zone” already cited above, where Christianity appeared as an ambiguous harbinger of the return to origins.

64 Kracauer to Simmel, November 30, 1917, Briefe 1912-1918, Jugendbriefe, pp. 880-884.
Drawing general conclusions across this broad spectrum of writers does entail some risk of simplification, but, at the very least, one can note the common thread of revolt against the prior generation that characterized the religious revival. The recovery of lost faith was often portrayed as redemption of venerable traditions that had been pawned off by the parental generation. For Kracauer, this conflict appears relatively muted. There appears to have been little loss of tradition in so far as his family was observant, at least outwardly. Moreover, judging by his account in *Ginster*, there was little sign of open rebellion against his parents, though his father is portrayed as an oppressive presence. Indeed, the death of his own father is portrayed almost as a liberation in his notebooks. Among his contemporaries, however, the conflict was more pronounced. His friend Löwenthal defied his father and chose to live in accordance with Judaic law, a rebelliousness that was augmented by his interest in Marx and Freud. In a well known letter, Franz Kafka, likewise, reproached his father for the loss of ancestral tradition. His discovery of the Yiddish theatre and other manifestations of Jewish culture was, in part, an attempt to reverse this loss. Rosenzweig, on the other hand, reaffirmed his faith in Judaism after eight years of studying history under Friedrich Meinecke, and after an intellectual soul-searching that nearly led to his conversion to Catholicism. He expressed his choice in words that resonated with the trope of recovered origins. The Jew already has a connection with the divine, he wrote to his mother, for “he possesses it by nature, through having been born one of the Chosen people.” Of course, Rosenzweig did not simply forsake secular thought, but he did abandon the academic career in which the older Meinecke had been mentoring him. Religious revival was thus a gesture of resistance; it was a riposte to the previous generation composed of secularists who had abandoned their faith and assimilated to a rational worldview. To return to origins, one had to reach over and beyond this declining generation.

In contrast, Kracauer appears to have kept aloof from religious movements and institutions, and, moreover, he did so in spite of the pressure from his peers. Adorno alluded to this issue many years later in the opening pages of *Jargon of Authenticity*. Kracauer, whom he designates in the

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68 Belke and Renz, *Siegfried Kracauer*, pp. 5-6.

69 See the discussion of Löwenthal's early career in Jacobs, “A most remarkable Sect?” pp. 78-87.


71 Rosenzweig to his mother, October 23, 1913, *Franz Rosenzweig: Der Mensch und sein Werk* 1.1, p. 129.
text only as a friend, had been excluded from a gathering devoted to religious and philosophical questions. He was not considered “authentic” enough by the other participants, having hesitated before the required leap of faith. Those whom Adorno numbered among the genuine were Rosenzweig, Buber, Herrigel and the Catholic philosopher, Eugen Rosenstock-Heussy.\footnote{Adorno, \textit{The Jargon of Authenticity}, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston, 1973), pp. 3-4; see also Adorno to Kracauer, October 28, 1963, \textit{Brieften 1923-1966}, pp. 614-615.} Given the religious heterogeneity of this group, clearly what mattered most was the authentic gesture of religiosity, and not the confession in which this took place.\footnote{See the comments in Graf, “God’s Anti-Liberal Avant-Garde,” pp. 5-10.} Given the pressures of such a milieu and the fact that Kracauer did have an abiding interest in the philosophy of religion, it is perhaps surprising that he did not commit himself in a more substantial way to religious thought.

His resistance appears to have derived from his own suspicions against metaphysical speculation and the confirmation of this aspect of his thought that he found in the work of Georg Simmel.\footnote{Dagmar Barnouw, \textit{Critical Realism}, pp.22-23} In this monograph, completed and partially published in 1920, Kracauer emphasized that Simmel wrote philosophy from the “worm’s point of view” (\textit{Froschperspektive}). He started from the concrete and minutely observed detail and then worked his way outwards, eliciting relationships to wider social and cultural contexts and, only then to a more general theory of culture.\footnote{Kracauer, “George Simmel: Ein Beitrag zur Deutung des geistigen Lebens unserer Zeit,” in \textit{Werke} 9.2, p. 278. On the influence of Simmel, see David Frisby, \textit{Fragments of Modernity}, p. 118-119; and Brodersen, \textit{Siegfried Kracauer}, pp. 36-46.} This entry point, so Kracauer argued, did not lend itself to the declaration of universal truths or systems. The totality of existence was instead perceived from the point of view of the detail, in a kind of “unsystematic systematization.”\footnote{Kracauer, “George Simmel,” in \textit{Werke} 9.2, p. 170.} From Simmel, Kracauer thus derived a tendency to cling to the concrete while simultaneously confirming his resistance to generalized abstractions. In a letter of 1917, he told Simmel that he was so “completely ... focused on the reality that lay before his eyes, so very much bound to consider how the individual detail showed itself, that he almost always could only push towards general principles – that in certain ways were invisible – with a bad conscience.”\footnote{Frisby, \textit{Fragments of Modernity}, p. 118; and Kracauer to Simmel, November 30, 1917, \textit{Brieften1912-1918: Jugendbriefe}, pp. 883-884. The emphasis on the word \textit{Unsichtig} is given in the original text.} This anti-systematizing impulse may, of course, have been inherited from other sources such as Nietzsche or Kierkegaard; the revolt against system building had a number of contemporary outlets. However, in Simmel, Kracauer found this impulse joined to a
critique that relied upon the close observation of everyday phenomena, an expression of the
desire to “return to the things themselves.”

Moreover, Kracauer was also sympathetic to Simmel’s emphasis on the creative function of
form, an aspect of his thought that Kracauer thought distinguished him from the other
philosophers of life, particularly Bergson. The concept of form was used by Simmel in a general
sense that included not only art, but also the intangible forms of sociability and politics – in
essence, the whole range of human action. Both Simmel and Bergson recognized that form
derived from the phenomenal stream that it then, in its own turn, influenced; but for Bergson, so
Kracauer argued, the creation of form was only a residue (Abfallsprodukt) of the action of
thought. This was rapidly dissolved in the forward movement of the élan vital. Simmel, on the
other hand, gave more importance to these emergent forms; they were, according to Kracauer,
the consequence of the irreducible individual drive to “objectify” oneself into the surrounding
world. Form was thus a “gauge” whereby the capacity of thought to channel life’s ebb and flow
was measured. It was the task of life to “condense” from the endless flux of experiences those
forms that were then placed over and above it.78 There is an implied freedom in this process, but
Simmel viewed this “objective culture” in an ambiguous light. For after a form was created, its
original impulses were lost; the form ossified and then acquired a modus operandi of its own. As
a result, the self-sustaining mechanisms of old forms resisted the creation of new ones that would
be more in accord with their environment and, hence, more readily internalized by the individual
subject. Forms, in such cases, oppressed those who lived in their shadow; they acted much like
Ibsen’s ghostly ideas and sentiments, a residue of the past that afflicted the present. This led to
the conflict between objective forms and the subjective desires that created them – a concept that
was essential to Simmel’s general theory of culture. Simmel described this idea of culture as
tragic, for ultimately the conflict that lay at its core was not reconcilable.79

Kracauer resisted the full implications of Simmel’s pessimistic vision, but he was still deeply
influenced by his method.80 According to Simmel, the decisive issues of cultural conflict could

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79 Simmel, “Der Begriff und die Tragödie der Kultur,” Gesamtausgabe 12.1, eds. Rüdiger Kramma and Angela
Rammstedt (Frankfurt am Main, 2001), pp. 194-223. This was first published in Logos (1911/1912).
80 Brodersen, Siegfried Kracauer, pp. 45-46.
be observed in the minutiae of culture just as effectively as in its more deliberate manifestations; thus, door handles and teatime, were just as much the material of philosophy as the “eternal forms” of art. This, of course, did not mean that Simmel dispensed with concepts of “totality” or that he disavowed the search for the spiritual foundations of existence. Such goals, according to Kracauer, were still important to Simmel, but one pursued them in a pointillist fashion, constructing a full picture out of a series of aperçus. One could proceed towards knowledge of the “totality,” but one progressed slowly, almost passively, in a patient step by step fashion that held fast to the stuff of the world. To adopt a phrase of Robert Musil, the method proposed by Simmel seemed to offer that union of “precision and soul” that the protagonist of his unfinished novel thought was missing in most discussions of spiritual life.\(^{81}\) The promise that one could unify spiritual content with an exactness of method was one of the reasons Kracauer and many others were drawn to Simmel before the war.\(^ {82}\)

However, even as Kracauer adopted the “Simmel project” as his own, he was aware that Simmel had failed to overcome the limitations of his approach. One could question the need for metaphysical system building as Simmel had done, but the idea of the totality still lingered as a problem.\(^ {83}\) Could an unsystematic method lead to truths about the whole, and more importantly, without some generally valid premises, how could it avoid the pitfalls of relativism? These concerns raised the larger issue of whether Simmel’s philosophy could reconcile his method with his more general propositions. After 1918, many of Simmel’s former students thought that this was no longer possible. A more radical approach to philosophy was needed, and this demand was accompanied by a surge of interest in mysticism and the irrational. Against this background, Simmel appeared somewhat old fashioned, and his war-time militarism had placed his philosophy in a bad light.\(^ {84}\) In a 1921 feuilleton, his former student and friend Margarete Susman argued that an “abyss” had opened up between the present and the bygone age that had shaped Simmel.\(^ {85}\) His attempts to isolate the decisive “Ideas” or the so-called “essentials of existence” were now exposed as a leftover of idealist and relativist thinking. The significant questions of the

\(^{81}\) Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities* 1, trans. by Sophie Wilkins (New York, 1995), pp. 636-654. Musil was probably more inclined to the rational side of this equation than Kracauer was at this time.

\(^{82}\) Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, p. 118.

\(^{83}\) Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, p. 119-120.

\(^{84}\) Brodersen, *Siegfried Kracauer*, p 41-42; also see the comments on Simmel in David L. Gross, pp. 84-85.

\(^{85}\) Margarete Susman, “Der Exodus aus der Philosophie,” *FZ*, June 17, 1921 (M).
present, she continued, were no longer those that had preoccupied Simmel, questions such as what sustained our ideas and convictions, or what was the nature of our souls? Instead, philosophy had to attend to the burning issues of the present: “what should we do?” Where concrete action was required, Simmel’s patient observation of daily life seemed an unforgivable kind of aestheticism that had no place in a revolutionary age. Her article, entitled “The Exodus from Philosophy,” compared Simmel unfavourably to trends that strived to move beyond him. The promise of rejuvenation was dependent upon the exodus from old ways of thinking, and among the new and vital figures of the post-war period she named Bloch, Rosenzweig, Spengler, Count Keyserling and the lesser known exponent of Eastern philosophy, Leopold Ziegler. It is worth noting that all of these writers were later criticized by Kracauer in the FZ.

However, even if Kracauer disagreed with Susman about the direction philosophy should take, he still would have conceded most of the points in Susman’s critique of Simmel. A relativism of method and a search for the absolute were not reconcilable. The problem resided, according to Kracauer, in his conception of Leben, a position that Kracauer had begun to question by the time he wrote his treatise on Simmel:

> It is simultaneously the stream and the firm shore; it yields to the creations that come from its own womb, and in turn, it liberates itself from their power. Simmel’s conception of life is so broad that even the truths and ideas that govern the course of life fall under its purview... By means of the concept of life, the totality is traced back to a single originary principle.\(^87\)

Yet, having started out from the particular, Simmel could no longer claim this “originary principle” as a foundation. Simmel argued that “only one who possessed absolute values and certainties would be able to frame the manifold, to capture the totality,” but his micrological method would seem to exclude this as a possibility.\(^88\) Hence, his method could not legitimate itself in the face of accusations of relativism, and his philosophy had led to an impasse. The way out of this dilemma, according to Susman, appeared in different guises, sometimes embracing the

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\(^86\) Ibid.
radical affirmation of relativism (Spengler) or the recovery of religious certainties (Rosenzweig). Neither of these options would find a lasting place in Kracauer’s work.

Instead it was Simmel’s emphasis on the detail that excited Kracauer and that proved fruitful to his critique of cultural forms. His project would move beyond Simmel in some respects and break down some of the idealist distinctions that Kracauer argued persisted in Simmel’s work. Even when Kracauer first heard Simmel give a lecture in 1907, he registered his reservations in this respect. In the course of an address given at the Union of Art in Berlin, Simmel had spoken on the problem of artistic style. He drew distinctions between what he called the applied arts guided by the “principle of generality,” and a discreet realm of art that expressed “our inmost feelings.” The former required a measure of stylization, while the latter was determined by a “principle of individuality.” Kracauer was intrigued by this account of the conflict between individual and group aesthetics, but he argued that the conflict had been wrongly stated. The differences were not between art and style; but rather it was a conflict between two kinds of style that was at issue, for individual works of art were stylized just as much as the objects of daily use. His remark suggests that he was already beginning to blur the distinctions between high and low art, between culture for mass consumption and art for subjective contemplation. The critical analysis of culture was to cast a wide net, one that did not respect the distinctions between pure and applied art, a division that Kracauer suspected was derived from the legacy of Idealist philosophy.

This residue of Idealism was one of the reasons that many, like Kracauer, felt the need to break with some of the premises of Simmel’s thought. According to Adorno, the idea of a distinct category of art, isolated from the more general category of “culture,” was “undialectical.” Moreover, his failure to reflect more deeply on the relationship between art and culture had actually short-changed his own philosophical method. His mediation of subjective and objective culture did not penetrate into the sphere of autonomous art as it should, and thus it failed to fully

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89 Susman, “Der Exodus aus der Philosophie,” FZ, June 17, 1921 (M).
90 Kracauer, notebook entry of October 29, 1907. Belke and Renz, Siegfried Kracauer, pp. 11-12.
comprehend either culture or art. In the post-war period, when artistic movements often sought to close the gap between art and life, it was not to someone such as Simmel that one would look, but rather to those who abandoned him.

In spite of these reservations there is little doubt that Simmel was a decisive influence on Kracauer. According to his own testimony, Simmel had read with appreciation one of his early essays completed in 1914 entitled, “On the nature of the Individual.” Though the opening pages of this text name the work of Nietzsche as a starting point, the influence of Simmel is clear. In a sense, the study investigates the premises of Simmel’s tragic conception of culture in light of the conflicts that existed both within the individual, and between him or her and the larger society. The study offers a catalogue of various types of personhood, their respective drives and different capacities, and the numerous hindrances that prevented individuals from “objectifying” themselves into their social setting. On this point, Kracauer referred to Simmel’s tragic conception of culture, and he used it explicitly to counter Nietzsche: the fundamental human drive is not a “will to power,” he argued, but rather a will to objectify oneself as a “full individual.” As will be seen, Kracauer suggests that this conflict is at least in theory resolvable, a conclusion that also derives from Simmel’s valorization of the artistic genius.

In the discourse of cultural crisis, the concept of the individual retained an important role. The word Kracauer used for this idea was Persönlichkeit, a concept that was heavily informed by romanticism. As Harry Liebersohn has argued, Persönlichkeit was often viewed by German sociologists as a last refuge of the soul, a reservoir of inwardness that resisted the depredations of modern society. The individual, in this sense, was distinguished by an insistence on the subjective; according to Max Weber, when compared with the bureaucratic functionary, Persönlichkeiten did not want to bend to social pressures, rather they transcended them.

93 The German title is “Über das Wesen der Persönlichkeit.” I have translated the German word Persönlichkeit as “individual” though this word has connotations that are decidedly at odds with what Kracauer meant by the word. His conception is closer, especially in this work, to the romantic conception of the individual. This will be discussed below.
94 The typescript of this work is in the library of the Free University in Berlin; reprinted in Werke 9.1, pp 7-120.
96 Liebersohn, Fate and Utopia, pp. 48-49 and pp. 108-125.
97 Liebersohn, Fate and Utopia, pp. 68-69 and p. 123.
According to a contemporary study of the concept in its nineteenth-century guise, the word designated:

the unique aspect and particularity of a natural being and, at the same time, the identification of its educational goals and development. The latter instance has a stronger emphasis in the word Persönlichkeit than in “individual.” In contrast, Individuum and also Person signify something subordinate, quantifiable.\footnote{Paul Kluckhohn, *Persönlichkeit und Gemeinschaft: Studien zur Staatsauffassung der deutschen Romantik* (Halle and Saale, 1925), pp. 2-3.}

This conception of the individual was also receptive to religious points of view, for the subjective relationship of the individual to God could preserve itself in this sphere in disregard to the objective measures of reason prevailing in the secular world. Hence, it was fully in accord with a philosophy that wanted to question the constraints of reason.

Thus, there is not much surprise that Kracauer should have turned to this romantic idea of the individual in one of his earliest works. At the other side of this concept, was that of Gemeinschaft that he understood in the sense defined by Ferdinand Tönnies, as an organically evolved whole.\footnote{Kracauer, “Philosophie der Gemeinschaft,” *FZ*, October 30, 1924 (A), Hochschulblatt.} The problem of how to “objectify” the individual into the larger social group was part of the cultural dilemma of modernity, and the shift from the community (Gemeinschaft) to “society” had made this conflict all the more difficult. A full discussion of how Kracauer approached this problem cannot be undertaken here, but a couple points should be emphasized. One, when Kracauer described the individual, he had in mind an entity that would participate with all its capacities and drives in a society that was in some sense religious. When he wrote to Simmel in 1917, he made this connection explicit; the individual emerges in his or her fullness only in a “religious cultural community” (Kulturgemeinschaft).\footnote{See the letter to Simmel discussed on page 49 above.} Only in the Gemeinschaft did the individual participate with all the drives, capacities, and feelings that he or she possessed. This was a level of involvement that extended from the very “core” of the self outwards to the “periphery.” Social and cultural forms must allow the individual full expression; subjectivity should have an open channel from which the core would flow to the periphery.\footnote{Kracauer, *Werke* 9.1, p. 16 and pp. 19-20.}
terminology on this point (*Kern, Peripherie*) was also reminiscent of Simmel. In a 1912 study, Simmel had written that “man is free to the extent that the center of his being determines his periphery.”

102 It was upon this “full individual” that a resolution of the cultural crisis ultimately depended.

A second point concerns the language of Kracauer’s study more generally. His vocabulary was often fraught with conflicting connotations. At one point, he uses a discourse of organicism, comparing the individual to a plant that grows in accordance with natural laws. At other times, the process is one of crystallization. In both cases, the implication is that the individual is the result of natural forces that abstract *ratio* can only disrupt. 103 These images refer back to Kracauer’s paganism discussed above. Moreover, the crystal was a commonly used symbol full of utopian overtones as became apparent in the post-war period: Bauhaus theorists rhapsodized over the crystal Cathedral of architecture that would embrace the whole of society; the radical architect Bruno Taut imagined a fantasy of crystalline structures that would be situated in the mountains far from the spiritual pollution of the metropolis. More disturbingly, the quasi-magical crystal mine in Leni Riefenstahl’s *Blue Light* could be read as a symbol of inviolable spiritual essences. Once these properties were exposed to the corrupting influences of modernity, they disintegrated. 104 Common to all of these symbolic or allegorical uses of the crystal is an uneasy relationship between spiritual essence and the claims of modern society, the latter often conceived of as inimical to the former. This tension is often expressed in Kracauer’s language; his recourse to natural metaphors (crystals, plants, flowing channels and emptying deltas) is in contrast to his, at times, more dispassionate references to the rules governing the “inward economy.”

105 The inscrutability of the spirit sits uneasily next to economic mechanisms, as if he wanted his language to incorporate the conflict that he described in a letter to Susman: “we long to draw near to God ... but iron sociological laws distance us from Him.”


106 Kracauer to Susman, January 11, 1920, SN, DLA.
Therefore, a romantic melancholy clings to these formulations which posit a seemingly indissoluble conflict between individual and society, and hence between the inner core and outer periphery of the individual. This conflict took place at the level of form and resulted in Simmel’s tragic conception of culture already discussed above. Cultural and social evolution was thus burdened with a pessimistic vision that Kracauer by and large accepted. He wrote that, “everything which emerges out of the soul in order to have an effect in the phenomenal world, must be approved by society,” and to accomplish this, “inner desires are granted a form.” These are sanctioned forms of action, or possibilities of self-expression (Handlung- und Bewusstseins-Äußerungsmöglichkeiten); a society that cannot elaborate such forms will atrophy and wither away. Of course, over time such forms were not static; they altered themselves according to altered conditions. However, secularization was of a more disruptive nature, and as a result the religious “complex of forms” that had once ensured continuity had lost its meaning. Provoked by numerous political and social upheavals (he named the French revolution and feminist movements) a situation had emerged wherein the spiritual nature of humanity had become “homeless.”

The cultural aftermath of this crisis was to be found, so Kracauer argued, in the failed search for formal novelty. This drive characterized movements such as Expressionism. He lightly satirized this “dithyrambic lust for existence” that arose from a genuine sense of loss, but which was nonetheless unable to find an answer for it:

> Their poetry is a single hymn ... it expresses the prevailing mood we have towards the world of phenomena. We have learned to love and embrace everything: the unleashed passions, evil in so far as it strengthens us and breaths the air of life; the sweetness of lust, the beauty of factories, the daily life of workers, the big city streets and the high, dark houses, the endless brick walls and tramlines, the mountains where they are near, the shadows and the light, everything, everything! And why? Because we trace life in them, naked reality, and we long for it.

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107 Simmel, Gesamtausgabe 12.1, pp. 197-198 and p. 204.
The problem with such expressions was that in their desire to encounter the multiplicity of life, they affirmed reality “as it is.” Therefore, they precluded every suggestion of an alternate reality, or the possibility of social transformation through form. This potentially critical function was something that the idea of the religious community still preserved. If one compares the Expressionist cityscape that emerges in the passage cited above with Kracauer’s description of Ulm in 1923 during a conference of Catholic academics, this point becomes clear. Against the chaotic juxtapositions of the Expressionist cityscape, the landscape of Ulm was a “world of discrete limits.” At the heart of the town was the old cathedral surrounded by a jumble of medieval streets; however, in this instance the tangle of streets and houses betrayed not chaos, but rather a growth that had been “formed from within.” The town was a genuine Heimat, and even the stranger was surrounded by it in a “gracious fashion.”\textsuperscript{111} Thus, the cityscape in Ulm was formed not simply by a misguided resistance to the chaos of life, but rather by the patient discovery of the correct forms in which its unruly flow must be channelled.\textsuperscript{112} On the other hand, to simply submerge oneself into the chaotic flux of experiences as the Expressionists had done brought one no closer to recognition of the correct forms of life.

For the early Kracauer this is what religion could provide and this explains why his study of the individual concluded with an invocation of the religious saviour and a condemnation of those movements that sought to transform society solely through reason. Monism and Socialism were, according to Kracauer, hindered by their reliance on abstraction. Reason had its uses, he conceded, but rational method should not dictate to the whole of life, for it was unable to reckon with “spiritual events.” Thus, movements such as Monism and Socialism remained rooted “outside of man,” and on questions concerning the “evolution of the soul they were [both] silent.”\textsuperscript{113}

In order to solve the crisis of culture, Kracauer suggested the concept of the artistic or religious genius, for it was the genius, the “full individual” who could create the forms that would restore

\textsuperscript{111} Kracauer, “Die Tagung der katholischen Akademiker I,” FZ, August 24, 1923 (M).
\textsuperscript{112} Compare this to his critique of aesthetics in “Der Künstler in dieser Zeit,” Der verbotene Blick, pp. 130-139 (originally published in Der Morgen in April 1925).
meaning to the world. One model, traditional enough, was Goethe. Kracauer argued that Goethe had possessed what he called “psychic lability,” a mobility of thought that allowed him to recognize valid forms in the unceasing flux of appearances. In the contemporary period, this breadth of vision was lost due to the forces of specialization and the consequent tendency to survey culture from the narrow perspective of one’s own sphere. Still, as a solution to what Kracauer saw as a deep crisis this seems inadequate. Even in intellectual circles, the recommendation that one should become as capable as Goethe was hardly practical.

His second option turned towards religious models, but not before it detoured into a Nietzschian revaluation of all values. He referred to the “originating idea of Christianity” that, in contrast to Socialism or Monism, spoke to the whole person:

Christ strived after the inner transformation of a helpless humanity, he turned to the Individual (Einzelnen), and gave him depth, meaning, value. He raised him above his needs; he gave to humanity new nobility. That Socialism cannot do.

Statements of this sort should not be confused with a genuine slide toward Christianity. His reference to Christ had a more renegade source in Thus Spoke Zarathustra, where Christ was described as the “wheel which rolls itself.” He was, according to Kracauer, “no member of some or another movement, but, on the contrary, something entirely new.” Thus, he emphasized the distance between politics and a true transformation of values. While Kracauer implied that the latter only occurred in a religious framework, it was Christ the cultural revolutionary that mattered more than Christ the Christian. Moreover, he referred to Christ as one of a species of Wundermenschen, a worker of miracles who could regenerate society. He was a genius of sorts, but one akin to the artistic brilliance of figures such as Rembrandt or Goethe.

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114 On this point, Kracauer was probably still influenced by Simmel who had an interest in the artistic individual capable of giving form to chaos, figures such as Goethe, Rembrandt, George, and Nietzsche. See the discussion in Kracauer, “Georg Simmel,” Mass Ornament, pp. 253-257.
On this point, it is unsurprising to find that Kracauer’s critique of popular biographies drew
attention to the fact that after 1918 the genre had turned towards political figures. Consequently,
the biography of the artist or prophet had declined in apparent popularity. According to
Kracauer, this shift allowed for an unreflective reification of history. For whereas the artist or
prophet had sought to give form to experiences and, in a sense, to shape the flow of history, the
figures of political and military biographies were often the mere embodiments of historical
forces. They made history into a primal element, an implacable fate that was represented by the
destinies of great men. Such figures could not, of course, be numbered among the “miracle
workers,” and Kracauer saw this genre of literature (typified by the work of Emil Ludwig) as a
retrograde attempt to give form to history while endowing it with the power of fate and myth.\textsuperscript{118}

The figure of the \textit{Wundermenschen} recurs sporadically throughout Kracauer’s work and I want
to suggest a further reason for his interest in such figures: the Jewish tradition of the 36 \textit{Zaddikim}
(or \textit{Lamedvovniks}).\textsuperscript{119} These were the “just ones,” anonymous individuals whose righteousness
upheld the world. According to legend, every generation had thirty six of them; their labour was
unobserved by society, and their true functions remained unknown, even to each other and
themselves. For Kracauer the legend was rich in meaning, and he referred to it several times in
his life: in an early letter to Löwenthal, later, after the war, in a letter to the historian and
Nietzsche biographer, Daniel Halévy, and in the final chapter of his book on history.\textsuperscript{120} In the
letter to Löwenthal, Kracauer had speculated as to whether or not even Rabbi Nobel may have
belonged to these \textit{Zaddikim}. For him, Nobel had been the “revelation of a genuine religious
individual,” someone who had a vast knowledge of literature, philosophy, and theology, but who
had expressed this more in his daily existence, rather than in published works. He was, according
to Kracauer, a charismatic personality whom he admired for his intellectual and spiritual
leadership (charisma was, according to Weber, the highest form of \textit{Persönlichkeit}).\textsuperscript{121} In a sense,

\textsuperscript{118} Kracauer, “The Biography as an Art Form of the new Bourgeoisie,” \textit{FZ}, June 29, 1930; reprinted in \textit{Mass
Ornament}, pp. 101-105. On this issue, see also Leo Lowenthal, “German Popular Biographies: Culture’s Bargain
(Boston, 1967), pp. 267-283.

\textsuperscript{119} Gershom Scholem, “The Tradition of the Thirty Six Hidden Just Men,” in \textit{The Messianic Idea in Judaism and

\textsuperscript{120} Kracauer to Löwenthal, January 24, 1922, \textit{In steter Freundschaft}, pp. 35-36; Kracauer to Daniel Halévy, October

\textsuperscript{121} Liebersohn, \textit{Fate and Utopia}, p. 109.
Kracauer’s critical project oscillated between the poles represented by these two conceptions of the religious individual: one, the figure who performed the messianic and revolutionary task of revaluation; and two, the relatively invisible but crucial labour of philosophical inquiry that disappeared into the “interstices” of the reality that its labours preserved. However, both of these conceptions, I would suggest, should be understood as part of the realm of these hidden Wundermenschen, a theme that will receive further attention in the following chapters.

During the 1920s, Kracauer’s interest in artistic geniuses or secret workers of miracles would not be expressed with as much enthusiasm as he did in his study of 1914. Nonetheless, they are representative of a theme that persisted in his work: the relationship between culture and religion. On this point, Kracauer probably found some correlation again in the work of Simmel. In an essay of 1916, Simmel had argued that religion was no discrete sphere of knowledge such as economics or politics; on the contrary, religion was paradigmatic, an attitude or point of view that inflected itself across the entire range of knowledge and perception. Religion was above the conflict that existed between objective and subjective culture; it was “always an objectification of the subject and therefore [it had] its place beyond that reality which attached to the object as such or to the subject as such.”\(^{122}\) Such statements threw open the question of religion’s relationship to culture: was it one among many resources of the cultural arsenal, or was it the groundwork of all culture? As will be seen, before the mid-twenties, Kracauer almost always opted for the latter position, and he was often hostile to proponents of cultural progress, what he later called a “faith in culture” (Kulturgläubigkeit) – a quasi-religious belief in the beneficent effects of culture that had found a foothold in the atmosphere of post-war spiritual revival.\(^{123}\)

As the themes of this discussion have suggested, before 1914 Kracauer’s thought was only slightly removed from the currents of cultural pessimism.\(^{124}\) If he did not descend into irrationalism, he did sympathize with the hostile critiques of reason that circulated in the later Kaiserreich. His suspicion of politics and his celebration of the genius readily dovetailed with the enthusiastic Führer cults so common among the youth movements of his day. His


\(^{123}\) See the discussion of Rudolf Maria Holzapfel in Chapter 6, pp. 249-254 below.

engagement with the work of Simmel undoubtedly was a turning point for him, but this did not mean that he discarded the habitual themes of conservative cultural criticism.

Historian David Gross has argued that Simmel represented an important shift in the development of German criticism. Before him, criticism relied primarily on general assertions of moral decay; the vulgarity of mass culture was condemned but there was little attempt made to investigate it. Such sham culture was considered to be unworthy of sustained analysis. Simmel, in contrast, subjected both high and low culture to critical investigation and, in so doing, he bestowed legitimacy on the latter. Simmel was thus part of a movement in critical thinking that had dispensed with moral norms and relied upon the concrete exploration of cultural expression. Since such considerations led to a more positive evaluation of the forms of mass culture, the general drift of cultural criticism, according to Gross, was mostly toward the left. In the Weimar era it bore fruit in the work of writers such as Kracauer, Benjamin, Tucholsky and Willi Haas.

Kracauer, by and large, typifies this trend, but the overlap of pessimistic and progressive traditions still deserves some consideration, for the influence of Simmel after 1907 did not displace his pessimism. In his notebook entries of 1911, he argued that the “will to experience” had all but vanished among his contemporaries. Individuals were shuttered in the narrow mindsets of their professions, and as a result, they gave birth to a host of correspondingly narrow values, judgments and experiences (Kastenmoralen, Kastenwertungen und –erlebnissen). Among his contemporaries, Kracauer grumbled, there were the odd individuals whom one could still admire, but there were no “fixed stars with their own light.” War appeared, if only briefly, as a potential antidote to this state of affairs. The experience of combat, so he mused in 1912, would galvanize those “decadent men who haunt the cafes with their burned out eyes.”

Such statements were by no means exceptional. As Max Rychner, a journalist and editor of the Neue Schweizer Rundschau, observed, anyone educated in the humanities during this time was

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125 David Gross, pp. 76-83
126 David L. Gross, p. 72.
127 Kracauer, notebook entry of 1911, Belke and Renz, Siegfried Kracauer, p. 18.
128 Kracauer, notebook entry of January 22, 1912, Belke and Renz, Siegfried Kracauer, p. 18.
saturated with the discourses of cultural crisis. Simmel may have departed from the moralizing norms of older cultural criticism, but his conception of culture as a fateful struggle between the forms of modernity and tradition was not in every respect incompatible with conservative criticism. Of course, one should not underestimate the fact that Simmel gave a different meaning to this conflict, and he did not valorize tradition over and above the modern; but his description of this struggle as “pathological” was hardly optimistic. As Kracauer later remarked, Simmel’s response to the antinomies of culture was evasive; he simply displaced the conflict into a purely aesthetic realm divorced from its specific historical contexts. Here the conflict was neutralized and, in this fashion, he foreclosed a more far-reaching investigation. Simmel still hoped that the dilemma of modern culture might one day be overcome, but, unfortunately, this led him to see the war as a possible solution – a judgment that did much to discredit him in the eyes of his younger admirers.

The “thunderbolt” of 1914 was undoubtedly a crucial threshold for Kracauer. The capitulation of intellect to the “brute facts” of necessity probably influenced his re-evaluation of the place of intellect, a process that lasted through much of the Republic. Many of the cultural figures who Kracauer had admired prior to 1914 supported the war effort. As mentioned above, Kracauer read the war polemic of Thomas Mann with apparent sympathy and in Mann’s plea for German culture, the work of Simmel also found an ambivalent echo. Mann compared the culture of the nineteenth century to that of the twentieth and found that the good bourgeois sense of acquiescence towards the imperatives of life was being displaced by what he called a modern “spirit in the service of desirability.” This “moral revolt” that vainly opposed the objective contingencies of the “world as it is,” was a sign of weakness and decay that he equated with modern civilisations. There is a correlation here with the moment when in Simmel the culture of the subject revolts against the objective forces of life. However, where Simmel saw the evolution

129 Max Rychner, “Blick auf die zwanziger Jahre,” Zur europäischer Literatur zwischen zwei Weltkriegen (Zurich, 1951), pp. 17-18
130 Frisby, Fragments of Modernity, pp. 102-104.
132 Liebersohn, Fate and Utopia, p. 157. On Bloch’s anger towards Simmel after 1914, see Rabinbach, In the Shadow, pp. 51-52.
133 David L. Gross, p. 83.
134 Mann, Reflections of an Unpolitical Man, pp. 11-12.
of culture as a necessary but tragic form, in Mann this was strengthened into a moral command of fate. For both writers “culture” remains a domain fraught with turmoil in which the subject engages in a tragic struggle with the world as it is. That intellect should acquiesce to the latter was one outcome to this problem, and both writers argued that the decision for war demanded this outcome even if they approached the problem with different perspectives. The dilemma is an old one, and after the war, it would be expressed again in a sensational form that captured the imagination of both Mann and Kracauer, in Spengler’s *Decline of the West*.

Thus far the discussion has situated Kracauer within the cultural currents of his milieu. We have seen that his upbringing was most probably informed by trends in contemporary Judaism, and that he retained a sense of Jewish identity, but was open to secular influences. Here the discourses of the philosophy of life and cultural criticism were important. The latter was also undergoing a shift, as the boundaries of conservative and progressive criticism had not yet hardened into the polarized positions that characterized cultural struggles in the Weimar period. The next chapter will deal with how the war and its aftermath influenced the themes of secularization and religious revival in his work, both during the war and in the early twenties.
Chapter 3
Reading the War and Writing the Religious Revival

The philologist Viktor Klemperer, a friend to Kracauer during his time in Munich, described August 1914 as a sudden rupture. “One stood before the war as an eighteen-year old stands before life,” he wrote in his diary of 1914. All the questions of philosophy and religion that occupied him beforehand were no longer of any use; even to discuss them seemed “entirely out of place.”¹ As a patriotic fever broke out among his contemporaries, Klemperer was often with Kracauer, having met the year before at a party held in Klemperer’s apartments. They maintained a short and, judging from Klemperer’s diary, tepid friendship. Klemperer offers one of the only portraits of Kracauer during these turbulent months. Given what Klemperer knew of his friend, he was surprised by his “sudden conversion to patriotism.” In most of their prior discussions, Klemperer recollected that Kracauer had spoken almost entirely of philosophy and aesthetics, and he had demonstrated very little interest in political affairs.² Yet, the drama of 1914 had deeply unsettled Kracauer. Lonely and isolated, he seemed overwhelmed by the imperative to act, to participate in the course of grand events. According to Klemperer, Kracauer “could not be alone,” and he swung wildly between moments of “analysis and spontaneous outbursts of feeling.” Though Klemperer concedes that he also had succumbed to the surge of nationalist sentiment, he had recoiled in disgust when Kracauer showed him a book by Wilhelm Wundt, The Psychology of Warfaring Nations. To his mind, the book demonstrated that militarism had forced the capitulation of intellect; it was as if an ongoing tension between life and thought had experienced a period of punctuated disequilibrium, and the latter had triumphed decisively over the former.³

The testimony of Klemperer demonstrates that Kracauer was more involved in the patriotism of 1914 than his semi-autobiographical account in Ginster would suggest.⁴ According to Klemperer, Kracauer was almost possessed by the war. Together they often walked into the city and there they witnessed the first announcements of the Austrian attack on Serbia, and then later,

¹ Klemperer, Curriculum Vitae II, p. 173.
² Klemperer, Curriculum Vitae II, pp. 29, 172, and 183.
³ Klemperer, Curriculum Vitae II, p. 357.
⁴ Brodersen, Siegfried Kracauer, pp. 21-22.
the parades of recruits. With blue eyes and blond hair, young soldiers marched in the streets; one in particular caught Klemperer’s attention as he seemed possessed by a glow that “he had never seen before.” Since Kracauer was sensitive to his supposedly “foreign” appearance, the sight of these youths must have increased his own feelings of angst. In the commotion of those days, he had volunteered for duty, but he was turned down on account of his weak constitution.\footnote{Klemperer, Curriculum Vitae II, p. 183. In Ginster the protagonist similarly cuts his hair to avoid looking too foreign (Ginster, in Werke 7, p. 16).}

However, by August 9 his war fervour had all but vanished, though the nervous agitation remained. He had been told by an acquaintance that many recruits only enlisted out of a spirit of adventure and wanderlust, that they had no sense of the “earnestness” of the moment and were not looked upon favourably by regular officers. Another friend, the philologist Ernst Crusius argued, on the contrary, that there was a sense of deep gravitas and angst in the barracks. Perhaps, as a result of these discussions, Kracauer now clung to his own “special life” (Sonderleben) and repudiated his earlier enthusiasm. He would not become like those millions of “atomized masses” who were to supply the machinery of war. Moreover, he was repulsed by the sudden “coming into fashion of the love of God.”\footnote{Klemperer, Curriculum Vitae II, pp. 185-186 and p. 189.} Klemperer (who by this time complained that Kracauer was “getting on his nerves”) sympathized with this judgment. He did not understand how one could find in this communal “bloodbath” the presence of a “God who was friendly to man.” The poets and the elders, he claimed, now cited religion to justify their faith in war; the horrors of the Middle Ages were being revived as intellectuals abdicated all sense of responsibility. To express his lack of sympathy with this trend, he responded with a religious reference from the Talmud:

\begin{quote}
The knife sits upon your throat,  
What are you for a holy soul!  
Vows you take without measure,  
And so it comes that all is forgot.\footnote{Klemperer, Curriculum Vitae II, p. 189.}
\end{quote}

The confused passions of these days left Klemperer “simultaneously enchanted and despairing,” and Kracauer appears to have had similar feelings. What is clear from this account is that his
response was volatile; he embraced the war, but seemed uncertain. He must have overcome his reservations long enough to contribute a piece of patriotic verse as well as a reflection on “the love of Fatherland,” both of which appeared as the war dragged onwards.  

After having avoided service by working in a number of architectural firms, in 1917 Kracauer was finally recruited. He never experienced the frontlines, but he still described his mobilization as a “hard school.” In a letter to Simmel of the same year, he stated that in spite of these hardships, he had garnered valuable experiences, and his desire was that this should drive his philosophy closer to “life” – that he would become “saturated with the real.” Aside from this experience, the war had also given him a glimpse into the ambiguous relationship of religion and the secular world. Both of these themes would preoccupy him over the next decade.

1. Max Scheler on War and Culture

By every account we must expect an extremely religious and vital Age; an age of entirely novel and difficult struggles over religion. However, for this reason it will be an age in which every given positive religion and church, must cease being a cold storage for old truths... For this reason no religious position of the church should allow itself to be content with merely asserting itself; on the contrary, each must labour to preserve and demonstrate its positive worth to the world. That, to be sure, is certainly a new situation.

As the war drew to an end, the philosopher Max Scheler argued that the coming peace would confront European society with a radically different situation. Writing in the pages of the Catholic influenced journal Das Hochland, Scheler also reiterated a theme that Kracauer had emphasized in a short review of Scheler’s earlier work, War and Reconstruction. In this book, he had warned against the capitalist ethos that had spread throughout Europe, replacing the concerns of the spirit (Mariahaft) with those of economic materialism (Marthahafte). The ultimate triumph of this ethos would be a catastrophe, and it was for this reason that Germany

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9 Kracauer to Simmel, November 30, 1917, in Briefe 1918-1923: Jugendbriefe, pp. 880-884.
must continue to fight; defeat by Protestant England would mean a victory for the forces of materialism and the death of spirit.

However, Scheler was not without pan-European sympathies, and he still viewed the struggle between capitalism and culture as a more general European problem. His nationalism emerged primarily in his belief that Germany was to play the leading redemptive role. For Scheler, as for other intellectuals such as Simmel and Sombart, the war was Germany’s existential moment, a moment of national assertion on the global stage. “The state at war,” Scheler declared, “is the state at the highest point of its existence.” Subjected to extreme hardship and sacrifice, a nation drew upon its deepest nature (Wesen) and this was the level upon which the conflict of nations truly mattered. Hence, for Scheler, the war was neither about rival economic interests, nor about great power politics; rather, it was a struggle between the ethos of different nations. It was an ultimate contest fought between essential qualities that arose from the depths of the national essence. Indeed, a conflict that was based only upon economic or political interests could scarcely justify the death and carnage caused by the war. At the end of the struggle, the triumph of German Wesen would be crucial in order to ensure cultural and spiritual stability during the period of post-war reconstruction.

However, as the prospect of a German victory became less probable Scheler’s nationalism was eclipsed by his concern for the common European task of rebuilding from the ruins. The aggressive nationalism of his book of 1915, German War and the Genius of War, (a book that Kracauer later referred to as “sinister”) was largely abandoned before the peace. In its place there was a renewed interest in religion in general, and Catholicism in particular. Universal religion instead of national allegiance was more desirable as a means of social cohesion. For

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13 Scheler, quoted in Lübbe, Politische Philosophie, pp. 221.
15 Kracauer, “Krieg und Aufbau,” Schriften 5.1, p. 27.
16 Kracauer, “Max Scheler,” FZ, May 22, 1928; reprinted in Schriften 5.1, p.112-117. See also the comments in Lübbe, Politische Philosophie, p. 222; and Herbert Spiegelberg, The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction, 3rd ed. (The Hague, 1982), pp. 271-273. Spiegelberg points out that even in The Genius of War there was still a concern for the “spiritual unity of Europe.”
Scheler, the war that had begun as a radical cure for cultural decadence had become itself a “revelation of decadence”; it was evidence of the deep need for a renewed spiritual order.17

Scheler’s discourse on war could be described as a mixed bag, including existential assertions, angst over the crisis of the German spirit, and hopes for reconstruction. To the extent that Kracauer sought to give the war meaning in similar terms, he found in Scheler a compelling representative of the public intellectual in a time of crisis. However, the relationship between him and Scheler is obscure. The rough sketch of Scheler as Professor Caspari in Ginster appears to have distorted their relationship (though the novel was not intended to be autobiography in any case).18 What is known is that the two men met during the war shortly after Scheler gave a public lecture in Frankfurt, later published as The Reasons for the Hatred of Germany.19 By that time, Scheler was a prominent intellectual and a public exponent of the German cause, both at home and abroad.20 After 1918, he emerged as an influential voice on the subject of religious renewal, and, according to Kracauer, his sophisticated theological arguments drew many back into the folds of the church.21 Kracauer himself does not appear to have been persuaded by the Catholic leanings in his thought, but nonetheless Scheler did play a minor role as a mentor to Kracauer. Kracauer sent him a number of his unpublished manuscripts, to which Scheler responded, mostly, with both criticism and encouragement.22 For his part, Kracauer wrote a positive review of Scheler’s War and Reconstruction in Das neue Deutschland in 1915.23

Given what is known of the relationship between Scheler and Kracauer, the unflattering portrait of Scheler in Ginster is of interest for the retrospective distance it places between the protagonist

18 Kracauer identified Scheler as the model for Caspari in a letter to Walter Benjamin; see Kracauer to Benjamin, November 7, 1927, in Benjamin, Briefe an Siegfried Kracauer: Marbacher Magazin 27 (Stuttgart, 1988), pp. 53-54.
20 For the following biographical details on Scheler, see Staude, Max Scheler, pp. 63-95.
21 Scheler, the child of a mixed marriage, had a Jewish mother. For a brief period following his father’s death, both he and his mother lived with his Jewish uncle in an observant household. Scheler later fled and converted to Catholicism. His relationship to the Catholic Church, however, was uneasy. According to Kracauer, he later distanced himself from the church as he thought Catholic dogma was a “hindrance to the development of western metaphysics;” see Kracauer, “Max Scheler,” p. 114-115; and also, Staude, Max Scheler, pp. 1-28.
22 Scheler’s letters to Kracauer between 1916 and 1921 are in KN/DLA. Unfortunately, Kracauer’s side of the correspondence has not been preserved. Though, in general, Kracauer appears to have received some encouragement from Scheler, this was not always the case. Scheler returned Kracauer’s Sociology as Science without comment, a gesture that appears to have offended Kracauer.
23 See page 69, note 11 above.
and Caspari. The general tone of their encounter is one of sceptical indifference. Ginster attends a speech by Caspari, not so much out of interest, but because he feels obliged to have some idea of what the war was about. However, during the lecture he scarcely pays attention to what Caspari says; rather he remarks upon his penetrating stare, and he is often distracted by the comically timed outbursts of a parrot housed in a nearby zoo. What he hears of the speech, however, leaves him dispirited. The insistent repetition of key words and clichés, such as “essence” only demonstrated their emptiness. Afterwards, when the protagonist meets Caspari through a mutual friend, the hypocrisy of his words is exposed, for Caspari readily conceded the war was lost even as he encouraged further struggle. Ginster, who must soon report for duty, must now confront the prospect of dying in a war that can no longer be won. In this episode, there is no hint of the ambivalence reported by Klemperer; rather, the portrait of Ginster is of someone clearly unmoved by the spectacle of war and indifferent to its proponents.

However, on at least one point, Scheler and Kracauer agreed. Both writers were suspicious of the strident patriotism voiced by groups such as the Pan-Germans. Some recognition of this appears in the encounter between Ginster and Caspari; Ginster remarks, for instance, upon the absence of bellicose rhetoric in Caspari’s speech. Indeed, he is surprised to find that the speaker manages to carry on for well over an hour without once glorifying the fatherland (Scheler had, in fact, pointedly criticized Pan-German excesses). Similarly, Kracauer, in a 1915 essay, suggested that not every expression of patriotic fervour derived from true patriotism. He described “love of fatherland” as a “deep comprehension of the particular riches of the Fatherland, of its history, of its present situation and hopes for the future, and the painful suffering over all the errors that one recognizes in the constitution and daily customs of the Volk.” Such sentiments were, of course, a staple of patriotic fare, but were not nearly as extreme as what Scheler had called the “Wagnerian-heroic romanticism” of the Pan-Germans.
For both Kracauer and Scheler there was a question of authenticity at stake. They both suspected that behind the conventional expressions of patriotic belligerence there was often an inner emptiness or a simple lust for adventure. Kracauer readily conceded that one could not plumb the depths of such sentiments among a large and diverse population.\footnote{Kracauer, “Vom Erleben des Kriegs,” \textit{Schriften} 5.1, pp. 14-20.} Nonetheless, he argued that these sentiments could be grouped into categories that would enable one to identify some aspects of patriotic sentiment. To Kracauer, the majority of Germans had a superficial sense of this, one that did not engage the “full and undivided soul.”\footnote{Ibid, p. 14.} The conventional patriotic discourse, he argued, encompassed a wide range of emotions, thoughts, and opinions, most of which lacked the stamp of authenticity. He had, of course, expressed similar misgivings during the first days of war when he was in Munich with Klemperer. These early suspicions do not appear to have been shaken by his later experiences. Scheler, for his part, warmly applauded Kracauer’s essay when he received it from him later that year. Given the present state of affairs, he wrote, the analysis had an obvious “pedagogical value.”\footnote{Belke and Renz, \textit{Siegfried Kracauer}, p. 27.}

On the question of religious revival, the sympathy of interests between Scheler and Kracauer was less clear. In 1921, Kracauer’s sharply worded critique of Scheler’s \textit{On the Eternal in Man} demonstrated the distance between them on religious issues; yet, when and how this rift emerged is difficult to answer due to the paucity of sources from these years. Kracauer turned against nationalism in the post-war era, as did Scheler, and nationalist sentiments are mostly absent in his writings of the twenties. Kracauer also became more interested in religion as both a social bond between individuals and as a means of giving value to a meaningless world. A letter to Susman from early 1920 even spoke of Christ as if Kracauer had experienced some kind of inner conversion.\footnote{Kracauer to Susman, July 26, 1920, and February 21, 1920, SN, DLA. See the comments on the second letter in Belke, “Siegfried Kracauer als Beobachter,” pp. 23-24.} In \textit{Georg}, the protagonist does, in fact, take some hesitant steps towards the Catholic Church, though this was rapidly abandoned.\footnote{Kracauer, \textit{Georg}, in \textit{Werke} 7, pp. 324-327. This scene will be discussed in more detail below.} Outside of this scene, there is little to suggest that Kracauer ever entertained such a move himself, and he probably only intended to dramatize the dubious search for religious certainty that he criticized elsewhere in his work. Still, given the lack of sources for these years, such a move cannot be excluded outright. In general,
however, Kracauer followed a proximal path to Scheler only in so far as he felt that the present crisis was not solely a political or nationalist question, but rather one of culture and religion. Their attempts to respond to this problem, however, were very different. He gave some indications of his divergences from Scheler in a letter to Susman in 1921:

I agree with him when he says that metaphysics and religion represent intentions that are essentially different in their relationships to the divine nature; in contrast to him, I deny that metaphysical intentions actually achieve their goal. On the contrary, I question the dependence of metaphysics on religion.36

This was no simple repudiation of religion. On the contrary, it suggests that even as he was formulating his polemic against Scheler, he was still thinking in terms of religious concepts. Moreover, the close linkage of metaphysics and religion meant that the conditions of metaphysical discourse could not be detached from religion so easily. Both religion and metaphysics had to be understood in relation to what he saw as the secularized conditions of modern societies.

However, if Kracauer dissented from Scheler in terms of the religious content of his work, he nonetheless responded positively to Scheler’s phenomenological method. As Adorno stated later, here the influence of Scheler “bore fruit in Kracauer as in few others.”37 Kracauer concluded his reflections on patriotism by stating that, “the more deeply the German soul longed after the invisible, the more solidly it rooted itself in the earthbound.”38 The phenomenological method that Kracauer admired in the work of Scheler was a means of exploring precisely these solid connections to material reality.

Scheler combined methodological innovation with an impulse to explore spheres of existence supposedly unaccounted for by the sciences. The contemporary philosopher Nicolai Hartmann claimed that it was Scheler who turned phenomenology into a “spiritual” movement combined

36 Kracauer to Susman, April 2, 1921, SN, DLA.
with a deep concern for social issues. Margaret Susman, who was generally inclined towards mysticism, argued that phenomenology was part of an “exodus from philosophy.” With this phrase she rebuked those sciences that had not recognized that “there were more things between heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our schoolhouse philosophy.” For Susman, phenomenology cleared the way for an investigation of those realms of life left untouched by the empirical sciences. Even Adorno spoke of phenomenology as a program for those who had no desire to be “dazzled [...] by the façade of something subject merely to empirical verification.” Thus, phenomenology appeared to some intellectuals to have a synergy with the ends of religious revival; the things of the spirit became concrete under its gaze, and they were more directly connected to the world of daily experience.

Kracauer was probably drawn to phenomenology for similar reasons, but by 1920 his attitude became more ambivalent. Considerations of the “invisible” gave way to an approach rooted more “solidly in the earthbound.” This meant a repudiation of phenomenological claims to support the work of religious revival and a greater emphasis on its role in rethinking the distance between reason and reality. Scheler, for his part, claimed that phenomenology was an “experiential traffic with the world itself (Erlebnisverkehr);” he even went so far as to describe it as “the most radical kind of positivism.” Most probably, Kracauer would not have expressed it in these terms, but the conjunction of a materialist means of investigating religious or spiritual phenomena matches well with his later assertions that the way to the sacred lay through the profane. As Adorno stated “the program of Wesensschau, the intuition of essence and especially the so-called phenomenology of images” were suited to Kracauer’s “long-suffering gaze” that refused to be beguiled by ideology or empiricism.

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40 See Margaret Susman, “Geist der Utopie” *FZ*, January 12, 1919; reprinted in Margaret Susman, *Das Nah- und Fernsein des Fremden: Essays und Briefe*, ed. Ingeborg Nordmann (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), p. 27; and “Die Exodus der Philosophie” *FZ*, June 17, 1921 (M).
44 Adorno, “The Curious Realist,” p. 163. I have translated part of the German that was left in place in the English translation of this article.
Still, Scheler’s influence should not be overstated. Kracauer’s brief infatuation with phenomenology was significant primarily as it confirmed his belief that the profane world was the proper site of critical investigation. However, the more ambitious program of uniting phenomenology with religious insight was another matter, and Kracauer rapidly became sceptical about the problems of this approach. His reservations were expressed even in the work that was most directly influenced by phenomenology: *Sociology as Science*. Here he argued that phenomenology could only grasp its object in a “world filled with meaning,” in a totality such as the one posited by Lukács in his *Theory of the Novel*. In contrast, in a world where a chasm had opened up between the individual subject and a meaningless world, one could not reckon with metaphysical objects with any certainty. Hence, the use of phenomenology to triumph over relativism was bound to fail. This position was clearly stated in his critique of phenomenology in his review of Scheler, “Catholicism and Relativism,” published in late 1921.

Scheler, so Kracauer claimed, had tried to legitimate Augustinian Catholicism by arguing that phenomenology had a special affinity for Catholic dogma. Kracauer responded by pointing out that phenomenology could not, by way of its own devices, support any religion more than another; nor could it validate the idea of a “natural” or “originary” religion without the insertion of value judgments. Having allowed these judgements to creep into his analysis, Scheler had overstepped the bounds of his method, and thus he arrived at a predetermined judgment of religious truth. His position, he told Susman, was nothing more than “disguised Catholicism.”

Yet the failed attempt to unite phenomenology and religious truth was in some respects a fruitful one. In Adorno’s inaugural lecture in front of the philosophy faculty of the University of Frankfurt, he argued that Scheler had pushed phenomenology to its limits, and his efforts had

45 See the discussion in Gertrud Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer*, pp. 11-15. In contrast to Adorno, Koch gives more emphasis to Husserl rather than Scheler as a source of his phenomenological interests. Husserl and Kracauer were acquainted and Kracauer stated that Husserl had written warmly of his early work on sociology and journalism; see Kracauer to Adorno, April 13, 1939, *Briefwechsel, 1923-1966*, pp. 424-425. Two letters from Husserl to Kracauer, dating from 1922 and 1934, are preserved in the Kracauer Nachlaß (DLA).


48 Ibid., pp. 205-207.

49 Kracauer to Susman, September 17, 1921, SN, DLA.
exposed the gap between “eternal ideas and reality.” Moreover, his impulse towards materialism remained an important point of orientation for philosophy. If the attempt to analyze religious or metaphysical contents had failed, then one had to focus critical efforts elsewhere, in the material sphere. This was the direction that Kracauer took, but this was not a refutation of religion, but rather a refutation of specific discourses about it. He had in fact sought and, so he claimed, received support for his views on Scheler from two prominent Catholic intellectuals before the article was submitted for publication: Ernst Michel, a theologian and editor of the Catholic Rhein-Mainische Volkszeitung; and Joseph Weiger, a leading figure amongst the “new Catholics.”50 Thus, Kracauer still wanted to argue his case within a framework not fundamentally opposed to religious points of view. In a sense, it could be said, he wanted to turn the materialist impulses of phenomenology against what he saw as its excesses. Thus, he set himself against the “booming philosophies of eternity with their anti-historical gestures” – precisely those trends that Scheler had argued would define religiosity in the post-war period.51

2. Bloch to Brod: Strategies of Containment

To speak of religious revival at the close of the war, as Scheler had done, was in some sense a way of linking the crisis of Europe with the crisis of religion. That centuries of European history had led to 1914 was an indictment of its culture, a culture that had, so it was thought, become more secular since the French revolution. Secularization and crisis, thus, became fused in a common discourse, for if modernity was viewable as a series of crises, then secularization was implicated in this turn of events. The calamity of war had to provoke a rethinking of the relationship between the sacred and the profane: was secular modernity predicated upon destruction, the result of a fall from faith? Mass death and destruction overshadowed these

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50 In his letter to Susman on September 17, 1921, he said he that the article had been read by both Weiger and Michel, and that both had expressed their agreement (SN, DLA). Ernst Michel was a radical voice among Frankfurt Catholics – a supporter of socialism and a member of the “Academy of Labour” in Frankfurt, founded by Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy. Among his acquaintances in Frankfurt were Adorno, Buber, Tillich and Hendrik de Man; see Bruno Lowitsch, Der Kreis um die Rhein-Mainische Volkszeitung (Wiesbaden and Frankfurt, 1980), pp. 36-39. In contrast to Michel, Josef Weiger was more within the mainstream of Catholicism. He was a close associate of Romano Guardini, an exponent of the influential Liturgy movement that grew out of the nearby abbey of Maria Laach. Both of these individuals will be discussed further in Chapter Six.

questions just as, to adopt a line from T.G. Masaryk, the graveyard had overshadowed the mood of post-war experimentation.

Such is the impression given by the protagonist of Kracauer’s second novel, *Georg*, the story of a young man adrift in the post-war years who finds work on the staff of a left-liberal newspaper. “The war would never end,” he laments, in the course of investigating a mysterious fire that destroyed an old theatre in the Ruhr. The fire had broken out while the zone was still under French occupation. As Georg steps over the gutted stage and seats, he broods over the post-war transformation – never again, he thinks, will he sit in a theatre and allow himself to be beguiled by fairy tales. He even regrets that the fire did not consume everything. His professional lust for a story is frustrated when he discovers that the destruction was not a new provocation by the occupation authorities; the French, he is assured by the theatre director, had not caused the fire and, in fact, they had made every effort to put it out. When Georg tries to provoke the director by remarking that he saw no great tragedy in the theatre’s demise, the director readily concedes the point; the fire was a blessing in disguise. The theatre was much past its prime and no longer suited modern needs. Reconstruction would follow, allowing for a modern cultural agenda. Thus, the war worked its way insidiously into post-war society; the advance of the new was contingent upon the destruction of the old – a belief that was echoed in the words of the popular author, Count Keyserling: “the death of the old is already the birth of the new.”

The close proximity of cultural progress and material destruction is a much discussed theme in the history of Weimar and modernism, one that finds concise expression in Benjamin’s well-known “Theses on History.” Some of his contemporaries were more voluble, and in the years following the war Kracauer read and wrote about numerous books that continued the struggle for and over culture during the Weimar years. An investigation of his reception of these “war books” offers an overview of how Kracauer conceived of the relationship between religion, culture, and politics in light of the war and its aftermath: what role should religion have in a situation of deep political and cultural upheaval? What place did it occupy within culture, or, on the contrary, did

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53 Ibid., p. 306.
54 Ibid., p. 307.
it lie beyond culture as its precondition? And how did such questions relate to the political agendas of the present? Kracauer’s approach to these questions demonstrates that the border between sacred and profane was ill-defined and vigourously contested. The precedence of religion over secular culture was no longer assured; rather, religion had to define itself anew in its shifting relationship to the secular.

Some word is needed in regards to how this study uses the term “war books.” Generally, it does not refer only to those books for which war constituted the primary subject, or to books that were intended, according to their authors, as an overt response to it. Of course, the books discussed here do conform to these criteria, but the category needs to be extended in order to include those books whose reception was shaped by the contexts of their publication on the eve of, during, or after the war. Spengler’s *Decline of the West* is an obvious example, but on the fringes of this category one might also include Theodor Haecker’s translations of Kierkegaard that appeared in *Der Brenner* in July of 1914. Its publication, so Haecker stated, was intended as a calculated intervention in the cultural and social crisis of the present. Kierkegaard had written his polemic on the eve of the revolutions of 1848, and Haecker argued that the malaise of that age bore a resemblance to his own. As a result of his efforts, Kierkegaard was probably read more often with one eye open to the contemporary crisis. He thus emerged as both a prescient critic of modernity and its potential antidote.

A further dimension of the war books to be considered here is their combative and oppositional stance. They were intended as a deliberate continuation of the cultural struggles that the war had brought to the surface, and they meant to ensure that the post-war status quo would not go unchallenged. They proposed alternative visions to a “merely existing” present, whether this vision was one of pessimistic decline or of radical Utopia. Thus, when in 1923 Rosenzweig reviewed Max Brod’s *Paganism, Christianity, Judaism*, he readily conceded the value of the

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59 Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe*, pp. 30-32.
book, even as he dismissed its conception of Jewish thought.\footnote{Rosenzweig, “Apologetic Thinking,” Philosophical and Theological Writings, pp. 95-108.} The book was bad theology, but it still had value as a “war book” in so far as Brod had entered Judaism into the struggle against “the spirit of the present.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 102.} Its contrarian position lent it a measure of authenticity as such books were instruments of struggle in an ongoing campaign of spiritual agitation. As Kracauer wrote in a symptomatic formulation, “it was not without good reason that one has compared the artist to the good soldier.”\footnote{Kracauer, “Vom Erleben des Kriegs,” Schriften 5.1, p. 19. Graf also speaks of a Frontgeneration among the religious revival; see “God’s Anti-Liberal Avant-Garde,” pp. 5-10.}

This combativeness suited the contemporary background of revolutionary unrest, but Kracauer did not take sides readily. His encounter with the war literature occurred at a point when he seemed uncertain what side to take. Indeed, in this period he could be viewed as a “nomadic intellectual” in search of both an agenda and a job.\footnote{This expression is used by Enzo Traverso in his study, Siegfried Kracauer (Paris, 1994).} His lack of a position appears to have expressed itself in his contradictory disdain for intellectual labour.\footnote{Kracauer to Susman, July 26, 1920, SN, DLA.} In a sense he was, as Musil wrote, among those intellectuals who seek to repudiate themselves, who resemble an “apple tree which would love to bear all manner of fruit, but ... no apples.”\footnote{Musil, “Literature and Literati,” Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses (Chicago and London, 1990), p. 70.} However, his encounter with the “war books” began a reassessment of this attitude, and by the end of the Republic the reversal is striking. In his public dispute with Alfred Döblin, he warned intellectuals not to repudiate those talents indigenous to their calling, in other words, the use of intellect.\footnote{Kracauer, “Minimal Forderungen an die Intellektuellen,” Die Neue Rundschau (July, 1931); reprinted in Kracauer, Der verbotene Blick, pp. 247-251.} Over this period the faculties of reason acquired more legitimacy in his writing, though he drew a distinction between instrumental and reflective forms of reason. Nonetheless, rationalism begins to have a place in his discourse, competing with the vocabularies of Lebensphilosophie and cultural pessimism.\footnote{Of course, he distinguishes between the instrumental reason of ratio and one that is oriented toward humanity; see “The Mass Ornament,” Mass Ornament, pp. 80-81; and the discussion in Koch, Siegfried Kracauer, pp. 34-35.} Some of this competition can be traced in his response to the Jewish messianic tradition.

Historians Michael Löwy and Anson Rabinbach have described the characteristics of this somewhat imprecise area of post-war Jewish thought, and they have traced its increased
resonance in Central Europe after 1918. Miriam Hansen has also argued that Kracauer was influenced by this tradition.\textsuperscript{68} To be sure, at the beginning of the twenties Kracauer does manifest signs of a messianic temperament. In 1921, he wrote to Susman that given the dearth of substance in contemporary religion, he had set “his entire hope upon a new religious formation in which we could all go under. One day, to be sure, the form of a founder will once again die the sacrificial death on which new myths attach themselves.”\textsuperscript{69} This letter is puzzling as though Kracauer declares himself against “existing religions,” he appears to welcome some kind of new faith, even new myths. “We need myths,” so he continued, “philosophy is already long dead, but scarce knows it. Perhaps, I will write the obituary in the form of a book.” This suggests that the invocation of the Nietzschean saviour with which he concluded his study of the individual did not disappear too rapidly.\textsuperscript{70} However, by 1922, the year he published his polemic against Ernst Bloch, he had become much more sceptical of the messianic tendency, and a positive valuation of myth, such as he voiced in his letter to Susman, is no longer conceivable.

Kracauer was not alone in having conflicted opinions regarding the work of Bloch. In general, \textit{The Spirit of Utopia} provoked divergent judgments, even in the same reader.\textsuperscript{71} Published near the end of the war, the book was written in a highly wrought style and punctuated with feverish calls for revolution. Some readers found the book totally incoherent. According to one study of Bloch, the wartime censor who reviewed the work found it so devoid of practical content for revolutionaries that he saw no harm in allowing it to go to print. Still, the book fascinated many intellectuals, and Rabinbach remarks that with its publication Bloch became the “theologian of the German revolution.”\textsuperscript{72} In her review written for the \textit{FZ}, Margaret Susman described the book’s publication in almost rapturous tones as a “lone light” appearing before wayfarers in a storm: “a peculiar, glowing light that has arisen in the dark, severe, stormy night of the war years – a new German metaphysics.”\textsuperscript{73} Others were much less enthused; they condemned Bloch for his faulty musicology, for his arcane language, and for his “indiscriminate” religiosity. The latter

\textsuperscript{69} Kracauer to Susman, February 10, 1921, SN, DLA.
\textsuperscript{71} Rabinbach, \textit{In the Shadow}, pp. 54-57. For the account involving the German censer, see Peter Zudeick, \textit{Der Hintern des Teufels: Ernst Bloch, Leben und Werk} (Moos, 1985), p. 69.
\textsuperscript{72} Rabinbach, \textit{In the Shadow}, p. 53.
\textsuperscript{73} Susman, “Geist der Utopie,” in “Das Nah- und Fernsein des Fremden,” p. 22.
point prompted Gustav Landauer to compare him with Rudolf Steiner, the leader of German anthroposophy.\textsuperscript{74} Walter Benjamin also expressed his disappointment with the work, yet he added the mitigating remark that Bloch was much “better than his book.”\textsuperscript{75} Kracauer, by and large, shared this opinion: “We need men such as Bloch, but nonetheless the way towards healing the chasm that has opened up within a godless society, does not lead through or from Bloch.”\textsuperscript{76} Most of his objections appeared in his review of \textit{Thomas Münzer: Theologian of the Revolution} and in his letters to Susman and Löwenthal, both of whom were much more appreciative of the general tenor of Bloch’s work.\textsuperscript{77} From these sources, it is clear that Kracauer had become hostile toward Bloch well before the appearance of the \textit{Münzer} book in 1922, and thus, to some extent, one can generalize the content of the \textit{Münzer} review as it was meant to be a sweeping polemic against the so-called Bloch phenomena.

Both of Bloch’s works were deeply influenced by the disillusionment that had been provoked by the war. He had been shocked by what he saw as the wholesale capitulation of European culture; that even his mentor, Georg Simmel, had supported the war had shocked him. Simmel’s engagement with French culture, his disparaging comparisons of the \textit{Kaiser} to the catastrophe of the Thirty Years War – all of this, so Bloch argued, had been buried by a surge of “pan-German” patriotism. Bloch wrote to Simmel and accused him of having accepted an ersatz metaphysics in order to justify the trenches and gloss over his own failed search for the Absolute.\textsuperscript{78} The repudiation of his mentor, however, pushed his own thought in defiantly different directions.\textsuperscript{79} In both \textit{Spirit of Utopia} and \textit{Münzer}, he tried to identify the traces of utopian longing embedded in history and culture. These traces were signposts to the future (utopia was always connected in his mind to the “not-yet-arrived”) and from these signs the present generation could orient themselves to the coming order. If there was a sense to the war, it was here in this hope for a revived humanity.\textsuperscript{80} In this respect, the destruction of the old order

\begin{footnotes}
\item[74] Landauer quoted in Rabinbach, \textit{In the Shadow}, p. 226, note 159.
\item[75] Benjamin quoted in, Rabinbach, \textit{In the Shadow}, p. 54.
\item[76] Kracauer to Susman, April 9, 1921, SN, DLA.
\item[77] Kracauer, “Prophetentum,” \textit{Schriften} 5.1, p. 196.
\item[78] Rabinbach, \textit{In the Shadow}, pp. 51-52. See also the account of Simmel in 1914 in Lübbe, \textit{Politische Philosophie}, pp. 217-219.
\end{footnotes}
during the war was a positive good according to Bloch; a German triumph would have meant the end of whatever remained of European culture. In an essay published during the war, he had even argued that Germany must be defeated so that the “deeply buried currents of beclouded piety” might come to light. Though Münzer was written a few years later, Bloch claimed that it too originated during the years of post-war revolt: “in the midst of the movements of 1918, in the midst of deprivation.” It represented, so he continued, the “obligatory gestures” of an “insufficient private person ... to put things into order.” In the current situation of revolutionary turmoil, Bloch suggested that the decaying order of the present should be confronted with the glimmer of utopian impulses buried in the past. These were timeless and recoverable. If one could only identify these historical moments of redemptive promise, they could serve as talismans for the present as it moved towards its messianic destiny.

However much some may have sympathized with Bloch’s intentions, his method provoked a good deal of resistance. This was not surprising as his radical utopianism was matched by a radicalism of style that was intended to disorient the reader. This was clear from the first lines of Spirit of Utopia in which Bloch tried to distance himself from older cultural forms. “I am by my self (Ich bin an mir),” he wrote, “That I move, that I speak: is not there.” Language, according to Bloch, did not serve a merely discursive function; rather, it was an instrument for the recovery of “lost cultural experience,” for “actualizing” redemption. Thus, words were wrested from their normal patterns of usage in order to engender in his reader a creative form of alienation, one that would direct him or her to the missing utopian dimension. To some extent, a reader had to accept the premises of this language, and, in his rebuttal to Kracauer, Bloch argued that he had simply misunderstood his intentions; had he read his “logic of language” (Sprachlogik) the matter could have been easily resolved. This was an optimistic view, for as will be discussed below, Kracauer’s objections were not simply stylistic; rather he repudiated in principle the idea that language could work the kind of magic that Bloch ascribed to it.

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81 Bloch quoted in Rabinbach, In the Shadow, p. 52.
83 Zipes, p. xxxv.
85 See the comments on “language-work” in Rabinbach, In the Shadow, p. 45-46; and Jack Zipes, p. xv.
86 Bloch to Kracauer, September 1, 1922, Briefe 1, p. 266. Bloch was evidently referring to a study of language that he had written in the previous years and that has not been preserved.
Concomitant with Bloch’s experimental language was the eclecticism of his subject matter. He drew together subjects and motifs from a wide array of cultural, religious and philosophical traditions and then fashioned them anew; the legends of Mithra, Kant, Christology, messianic Judaism, the history of music, and Marxism were all juxtaposed and fused together in a manner that some critics found spurious and unconvincing. The collected material was then ransacked for what Bloch called Vor-Schein: the anticipatory signposts of utopia, bits of the “new Jerusalem” scattered in fragments throughout the past and present. According to Bloch, “everything that is has a utopian star in its blood, and philosophy would be nothing if it did not form the ideational solution for this crystalline heaven of renewed reality.” Kant and Hegel, for instance, were enlisted as failed attempts to shape the question that addressed final ends, what he called the “inconstruable question” that could only be answered when the “not yet” of utopian longing becomes actual.

The use of this eclectic cultural baggage as a means of identifying the stepping stones to Utopia endowed Bloch’s thought with a teleological impulse. The historical movements of aesthetics and culture were glued together with revelatory tradition, and as a result, the end of time appeared to be a product of historical processes. Hegel and Kant thus represented stages on the way to utopia. In the concluding chapter of the book, entitled “Karl Marx, the Apocalypse and Death,” mysticism mingled with hecatombs, and revolution with the task of redemption. The guiding star of Utopia flashed amidst the catastrophe and to the just among humankind was given the task of speaking the name that would usher in the New Jerusalem:

God exists through them, and into their hands is given the consecration of the Name, the very appointment of God, who moves and stirs in us, the pre-sensed gateway, darkest question, exuberant interior that is no factum but a problem, given as a prayer into the hands of our God-summoning philosophy and of truth.

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87 See the comments of Salomo Friedländer quoted in Rabinbach, In the Shadow, p. 56.
88 Bloch, Spirit of Utopia, p. 171. For a passage that illustrates the formidable eclecticism of this work, see pp. 168-173.
89 Bloch, Spirit of Utopia, pp. 165-229; the passages on Kant and Hegel are on pp. 173-187.
90 Bloch, Spirit of Utopia, p. 278.
Both the teleological dimension of Bloch’s work and his eclecticism were criticized by Kracauer in his review of *Thomas Münzer* in 1921, but his antipathy towards Bloch, towards the *Spirit of Utopia*, and towards the general idea of a “theoretical system of the Messianic” was already evident before this time. He wrote to Löwenthal of the bad opinion he had formed of the *Utopia* book, a view which he claimed was also shared by Adorno.\(^9^1\) A month later, he told Löwenthal of his “hatred” for Bloch and spoke of his most strenuous objections to his work – arguing that the very idea of a theory of the messianic was pure “nonsense.”\(^9^2\) Any such theory meant an illegitimate conflation of history and revelation.

In his review for the *FZ* published in the autumn of 1922, he attacked Bloch on precisely this point where politics assumed the role of revelation. Yet his attack was not simply a repudiation of the chiliastic tradition, rather he wanted to show that such a fusion travestied the very idea of a messianic realm, reducing it to a mere result of human action:

> The miracle becomes regulated, the leap [of faith] becomes process, and one is blissfully referred to the dialectics of history according to Marx and Hegel. [However], since the one who waits for the apocalypse does not in any way think in such historical categories, since his pathos is placed entirely elsewhere, and since the inner-historical and supra-historical are not to be seamlessly united, these constructions simply fail, as they must in the eyes of every genuinely religious individual.\(^9^3\)

By conflating radical politics with religion, Bloch suggested that the appearance of the messiah was somehow contingent upon historical events, rather than being an event that transcended all history. Moreover, Kracauer claimed that Bloch, in his pursuit of the divine, had forsaken the real sphere of existence within which figures such as Münzer actually lived and acted. “The

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\(^9^1\) Kracauer to Löwenthal, November 17, 1921, *In steter Freundschaft*, pp. 27-30.

\(^9^2\) Kracauer to Löwenthal, December 16, 1921, LLA, A 481/ 84-87, Leo Löwenthal Archiv, Johannes Senckenberg Bibliothek, Frankfurt am Main.

world in its entirety,” he told Löwenthal in 1921, was left untouched by Bloch. By conjoining the messianic with the historical he ignored the specific qualities of both.94

Kracauer wanted his critique to be understood within a religious framework, that is, not as an assault on religious tradition, but rather as an attack on the “blasphemous.”95 To Susman he defended his position by pointing out that he was not simply hostile to religion or to contemporary uses of the revelatory tradition. On the contrary, he had sought the opinion of others who approached the subject of chiliasm with a religious perspective.96 His essay, he pointed out, had been read by Alfons Paquet, a convert to Quakerism whom Kracauer described as a “thoroughly religious man” and who had agreed with his argument on all points. He could also have pointed to the response of Benjamin whose “Theological-Political Fragment” was informed by his reading of the Spirit of Utopia sometime around 1920. “The divine realm,” so Benjamin stated, “is not the telos of the historical dynamic; it cannot be set as a goal... Therefore the order of the profane cannot be built up on the idea of the Divine Kingdom.”97 If the chiliastic tradition was to retain its meaning then it had to be understood as an “eruption” into history, not as a “terminus” of its continuous flow.98

If Kracauer and Benjamin held a common position against Bloch on the question of revelation and history, Kracauer added a further grievance. Bloch, he argued, was too wedded to secular concepts and modes of expression. His persistent references to esoteric, occultist subjects and the self-aggrandizement of Bloch’s verbal contortions all attested to a style that was, so he argued, clearly wedded to the profane sphere.99 Kracauer did not credit Bloch’s attempt to break language in order to extract new meaning; on the contrary, he interpreted the neologisms and deliberate contortions as evidence of Bloch’s egoism. In general, Kracauer was unsympathetic to

94 Kracauer to Löwenthal, December 4, 1921, In steter Freundschaft, p. 31.
95 He used this word to describe Bloch’s work in a letter to Löwenthal in 1921; see the letter of January 14, 1921, In steter Freundschaft, pp. 19-20.
96 Kracauer to Susman, July 21, 1922, SN, DLA.
97 Benjamin, “Theological-Political Fragment,” Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York, 1986), p. 312. As Rabinbach points out, the positive reference to Bloch that Benjamin places in this essay is highly ambiguous and it can be readily read as an objection to the general thrust of Bloch’s thought; see Rabinbach, In the Shadow, p. 59; see also Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky, “Walter Benjamin’s Theological-Political Fragment as a response to Ernst Bloch’s Spirit of Utopia,” Yearbook of the Leo Baeck Institute XLVII (2002): pp. 3-19.
98 Ibid., p. 200.
99 Ibid., p. 200 and p. 203.
such “effects of language.” In an unpublished essay from 1929, he argued that this gnostic view of language only feigned a discourse of religiosi

100 ty and, in fact, concealed a lack of religious conviction. This led to a failure to think through the meaning of religious concepts in a secularized world. It is also led Kracauer to question Bloch’s intentions. “Does he really believe in the thousand-year millennial Reich?” Kracauer asked in a letter to Löwenthal, “is that totally concrete and real to [him], or only an as-if-Ideal?” “With Bloch,” he continued, “his style derives from a lack of sincerity ... a burning self-aggrandizement into ecstasy – all the same whether it is genuine or made up.” Such rhetoric, he argued, had little to do with the utopian realms it purported to illuminate. On the contrary, they were the signs of the self-conscious writer, a deliberate flaunting of education mixed with a peculiar “wantonness” that betrayed its profane origin. 101

However, as fundamental as these disagreements were, they should not completely overshadow the common motives shared by Bloch and Kracauer. This affinity, however minor, allowed for their reconciliation four years after the Münzer affair. In May of 1926, Bloch wrote to Kracauer to express his agreement with his essay on the Buber and Rosenzweig Bible translation. 102 This review, so Bloch argued, demonstrated that they were both pursuing similar lines of critique, and in light of this he now described their dispute over Münzer as a misunderstanding. This he thought was evident in their shared concept of totality, a concept that for both men led back to the work of Lukács:

I could not see from your criticism that you meant precisely the narrow way, the seemingly superficial, practical and tawdry way that is precisely that of Marxism; that for you as well, every truth proves itself against the turbulence and destitute nature of actual existence, and it must acquire, unassisted, its piece of totality in the sense meant by Lukács. 103

100 Kracauer, “Zwei Arten der Mitteilung,” Der verbotene Blick, pp. 219-227, esp. 223.
102 Mülder-Bach has discussed the importance of these letters as evidence of Kracauer’s engagement with Marxism in the mid-twenties; see Siegfried Kracauer—Grenzgänger, pp. 57-60. For an account of these letters that stresses the disagreements between Bloch and Kracauer, see Dagmar Barnouw, Critical Realism, pp. 36-43.
103 Bloch to Kracauer, May 20, 1926, Briebe 1, pp. 269-271.
However, Bloch defined totality in terms that were considerably wider than most Marxists would have allowed, and also wider than the definition that Lukács would have accepted after 1924.\textsuperscript{104} For Bloch, totality meant more than just the economic sphere, and for this reason he was opposed to the “vulgar” Marxism that reduced all human action to an effect of the material base. On the contrary, for Bloch it referred to the whole of existence, to the sacred and the profane, or, in his own words, the “entire flux of the Absolute.”\textsuperscript{105} Within this flux, religious concepts had some priority. As Martin Jay has argued, Bloch believed fundamentally that theological ideas such as “the soul, the Messiah, and the apocalypse” constituted an “\textit{a priori} of all culture and politics.”\textsuperscript{106}

In allowing religious and cultural concepts a measure of precedence over the material base, Bloch was working in a direction that was akin to Kracauer. Still the claims he made for culture were much too bold for Kracauer who insisted on the differences between himself and Bloch. Certainly, Kracauer retained his interest in the early writing of Lukács, but argued that his turn to Marxism had been accompanied by a “bad abstract intellectualism,” and because of this Kracauer argued that Lukács remained mired in idealist thought.\textsuperscript{107} Kracauer believed that he and Bloch stood together against this tendency in Lukács, and that they both wanted to advance the cause of revolutionary theory; yet Kracauer argued that a “third way” was needed, one that would circumvent Lukács’ idealist totality. Instead, it would involve a genuine “wandering and transformation” of those truths buried within theology; it would require their absorption into the “course of historical processes” and a removal of the “mythological shell” that cloaked their “truth contents.”\textsuperscript{108}

However, just how this would occur, and what happens to religious concepts when transplanted into a profane setting, was not clearly stated in Kracauer’s work. His remarks that Marxist theory needed to be more open to theological “states of affairs” and that there needed to be a “disassociation of Marxism towards and into reality” does not fill out this picture in much

\textsuperscript{104} On the subject of Bloch and the concept of totality, see Martin Jay, \textit{Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas} (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 174-195.
\textsuperscript{105} Bloch to Kracauer, May 20, 1926, \textit{Briefe} 1, p. 269.
\textsuperscript{107} Kracauer to Bloch, May 27, 1926, \textit{Briefe} 1, pp. 272-275.
\textsuperscript{108} Kracauer to Bloch, May 27, 1926, \textit{Briefe} 1, p. 274; Mülder, \textit{Siegfried Kracauer—Grenzgänger}, p. 60.
Indeed, it seems vaguely reminiscent of a statement from a lecture by Thomas Mann that Kracauer had attended in 1922. Mann had then claimed that “our socialism, which has all too long allowed its spiritual life to languish in the shallows of a crude economic materialism ... will not truly rise to the height of its national task until ... Karl Marx has read Friedrich Hölderlin.”

To some degree, the issue of recognizing and recovering the truths that lay hidden within the profane world turned upon the question of whether or not religion was a component of culture, or the other way around. The definition of totality was a touchstone to this question which is why it mattered to Kracauer even after his enthusiasm for Lukács had waned. For a theologically derived or secularized variant of totality implied that culture was something to be understood within a larger matrix that transcended it. This was why Kracauer would later argue against the “faith in culture” (Kulturgläubigkeit) of some of his contemporaries. However, whether to his mind this matrix consisted of a kind of negative religiosity or a secularized version of it is not clear, because most often Kracauer chose to speak around this issue rather than directly to it. This may have been for tactical reasons, as the blunt tone of his letters to Bloch is mostly absent from his public statements. To Bloch he was far more direct: “The formulations of the Bible are not final (die letzten), the Messianic is still conceived of in images that cling to nature ... One must rob religion and leave the plundered behind to their fate.”

Given this attitude to religion, Kracauer’s interest in the early work of Lukács, especially the concept of totality, is in some respects peculiar. Lukács’ classic statement of totality appeared in his *Theory of the Novel* wherein he described it in terms redolent of a romanticized “golden age,” a time when individuals felt no gap between themselves and their world. Such an age existed, Lukács claimed, during the Homeric period as was evident by the fact that the human form still

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110 Thomas Mann, “Goethe and Tolstoy,” *Three Essays* (New York, 1929), p. 136. Kracauer heard Mann give this speech in connection with the *Frankfurter Goethe-Woche* in 1922; his article on the lecture appeared in the *FZ* on March 1, 1922 (M).
112 Kracauer, “Zwei Arten der Mitteilung,” *Der verbotene Blick*, p. 222. In this unpublished text of 1929 he wrote, “one must turn away from theology in the interest of theology itself.”
113 Kracauer to Bloch, May 27, 1926, *Briefe* 1, p. 274.
sufficed to represent the divine.\textsuperscript{114} In this age there was no gap between humankind and the gods, between subject and object, between form and content. By contrast, he described the modern age as a time of “perfect sinfulness,” an age of decline that had long fallen away from this primal unity. If in the Homeric past all the infinite parts of reality were imbued with meaning through a consciousness of the whole, now they existed as a multitude of atoms, randomly circulating in their aimless independence from one another. In Kracauer’s review of the book published in 1921, he sympathized with Lukács’ vision of a fallen modernity; Kracauer described the present as a chaos that ensued after the “all-encompassing church had been dismantled piece by piece.”\textsuperscript{115} Later, Kracauer turned against this conception, recognizing that it posited the lost whole in an idealized fashion; but even then, he argued that it retained some value as a means of critiquing the present. The flaws of the sinful age could still be exposed by measuring them against the concept of a truly “fulfilled age” (\textit{sinnerf"ullte Zeit}) as a kind of ideal-type.\textsuperscript{116} In this way, the religious concept of totality could be secularized and become part of a critical apparatus for investigating modern society.\textsuperscript{117}

However, Kracauer and Bloch felt that the concept of totality required more open-endedness and nuance if it was to be fruitful. In a 1924 review of Lukács’ \textit{History and Class Consciousness}, Bloch argued that the concept of totality needed to be “complicated with the concept of the sphere.”\textsuperscript{118} This, he argued, would eliminate the homogenous nature of the whole that results when it is understood in purely socio-economic terms. It would allow, in Bloch’s language, for the expression of “various levels of subject-object relations,” and it was a consequence of “the laboriousness of founding the Kingdom that expresses itself in the temporal process as well as spatially in the creation of spheres.” To Bloch and Kracauer, the Marxist reduction of reality to the economic and social realms could not reckon with the complexities of everyday experience. As Martin Jay argues, Bloch saw reality as possessing an “unfinished quality;” it was in the rough, crude, and still to be completed surfaces of the real (or in Kracauer’s language, “the holes

\textsuperscript{114} Martin Jay, \textit{Marxism and Totality}, p. 93.
\textsuperscript{115} Kracauer, “Georg von Lukács’ Romantheorie,” \textit{Der verbotene Blick}, pp. 82-83.
\textsuperscript{116} Kracauer to Löwenthal, January 14, 1921, and March 9, 1922, \textit{In steter Freundschaft}, p. 14 and p. 42.
\textsuperscript{117} Kracauer to Bloch, May 27, 1926, \textit{Briefe} 1, p. 274. Bloch argued that Lukács’ concept of totality was closer to his own and Kracauer’s than Kracauer in fact recognized; see his letter to Kracauer, June 6 1926, pp. 275-278.
\textsuperscript{118} Ernst Bloch, “Aktualität und Utopie: Zu Lukács Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein,” in \textit{Philosophische Aufsätze zur objektiven Phantasie: Gesamtausgabe} 10 (Frankfurt am Main, 1969), p. 619. See also the discussion of this point in Martin Jay, \textit{Marxism and Totality}, p. 182. I have followed Jay’s translation in the passages quoted here.

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and tears”) that the truth was to be found. The concept of spheres was thus adopted, as it would preserve this dimension of the real and prevent the model of totality from becoming homogeneous and exclusive.

Kracauer was familiar with Bloch’s essay, and its content appears to have influenced him in multiple directions. In a letter written to Bloch in June of 1926, he stated that the closing remarks of this piece had “thoroughly enlightened” him. Moreover, the spatial metaphor of the spheres must have been sympathetic as it occurs often in his work of the early twenties. He confided to Susman his intentions to write a large “Sphere-theory,” and the metaphor also figures prominently in his study, The Detective Novel. This work will be discussed in more depth below, but at this point I want to emphasize that this spatial metaphor was a crucial part of a refashioned concept of totality that allowed Kracauer a more flexible model of social reality. The spatial imagination of Kracauer the architect here overlapped with a metaphor that, to a reader of Kierkegaard, had definite theological implications.

Kracauer’s response to Bloch’s radical utopianism had two sides: on the one hand, he was critical of Bloch’s conflation of politics with the messianic tradition, and on the other, he was not entirely hostile to the premises that lay behind this conflation. One could describe his response as a strategy of containment, a desire to coerce the unruly discourse of the messianic into different channels, leading to what he assumed would be a more fruitful engagement with contemporary realities. Also, as his subsequent rapprochement with Bloch demonstrates, he was not simply repudiating the utopian furies; on the contrary, he wanted to theorize a path by which its positive contents could be mediated into a modern setting.

In this respect, works inspired by religious and messianic traditions were not always as unpalatable to Kracauer as was the work of Bloch. His enthusiasm for Max Brod’s theological polemic, Paganism, Christianity, Judaism (1921) elicited an altogether different response from

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119 Martin Jay, Marxism and Totality, p. 183.
120 Kracauer to Bloch, June 29, 1926, Briefe 1, p. 281.
121 Kracauer to Susman, June 22, 1922, SN, DLA; and Kracauer to Löwenthal, October 8, 1924, In steter Freundschaft, pp. 63-64.
122 Mülter-Bach, Siegfried Kracauer—Grenzgänger, p. 61.
Kracauer. His positive judgment of Brod’s “book of confession” strikes an odd chord today. Neither as a philosopher of religion nor as a writer has Brod stimulated as much critical interest as, for instance, Rosenzweig and Bloch; even his admirers have been slightly reserved in their assessment of his work. To Kracauer, however, the book was compelling on account of its “unconditional truthfulness, its religious intensity and its hesitant enthusiasm.” He recommended the book to Löwenthal as a model of how to write about “holy things” and he claimed that he found in it “a confirmation of his own nature.” Why Kracauer was so enthusiastic about this book deserves some attention, as Brod’s overt engagement with Judaism would seem at odds with the position on religion that Kracauer had struck in his essay of early 1922, “Those Who Wait.” Unfortunately, Kracauer did not put many of his comments regarding the book into print. Outside of his recommendations to Löwenthal and a positive reference to the work in his review of Thomas Münzer, there are no other sources where he addresses the book. Nonetheless, some consideration of the its themes and also the circumstances of its origin may elucidate why this sustained polemic on behalf of Judaism would have attracted Kracauer’s interest in the early twenties.

Brod has been described as “a spokesman for a confused generation,” and his book can be understood as an attempt to restore meaning in a world of social and political chaos. His primary motives were to offer a critique of both Christianity and, to a lesser extent, Judaism in the wake of their alleged complicity during the war. He also intended to render a new

123 Heidentum, Christentum, Judentum: Ein Bekenntnisbuch, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1921), translated into English as Paganism, Christianity, Judaism: A Confession of Faith, trans. William Wolf (University, 1970). In general, I have used the English edition, but have checked all citations to the original. In some cases – noted in the text – I have revised the translation. In his preface to the edition of 1970, Brod noted that the translation, while faithful to the argument and spirit of the original, removed some of the more extreme expressions that he said derived from the period in which it was written.
125 Kracauer to Löwenthal, January 14, 1921, In steter Freundschaft, p. 19; and December 13, 1921, LLA 481/91-92, Leo Löwenthal Archiv, Johannes Senckenberg Bibliothek, Frankfurt am Main. The italicized words were underlined in the original. Thomas Mann also referred warmly, although briefly, to this work in a review of contemporary fiction appearing in the literary pages of the FZ on April 17, 1927; reprinted in Franz Kafka: Kritik und Rezeption, 1924-1938, ed. Jürgen Born (Frankfurt, 1983), pp. 168-169.
127 Weltsch, pp. 4-5.
interpretation of Judaism that would maintain the ungraspable character of the messianic realm without repudiating political commitments in the “world of the here and now” (Diesseitswelt).\textsuperscript{128}

Brod was one of many young Jewish intellectuals who resented their fathers’ generation for having abandoned Judaic tradition and the sense of rootedness that they felt it had once provided. In 1909, Brod heard Martin Buber speak in Prague, and he was impressed by Buber’s call for a return to Judaism, a message that was all the more urgent given the nationality conflicts of the late Habsburg Empire and the rise of anti-Semitism. By the time war had broken out Brod had not only returned to the Jewish faith, he was also active in the Zionist movement.

Yet, his admiration for Buber did not lead him to follow Buber and support the war. On the contrary, Brod believed that opposition to the war was the only possible response for anyone who took the redemptive core of religion seriously. Hence, he was shaken when he saw numerous intellectuals, both Christian and Jewish, many of whom he previously admired, express their support for the war. Among them were Scheler and Buber, the latter of whom described the war as the “grace of rebirth.”\textsuperscript{129} Moreover, he felt that it was not simply a matter of the institutional churches; he also blamed that “unofficial, inward, entirely honourable Christianity that through its indifference towards the worldly order, has in many ways enthroned every force of evil as the legal ruler of the here and now.”\textsuperscript{130}

Paganism was, on the one hand, a response to this alleged failure on the part of intellectuals and religious leaders; but it was also part of an argument about the role of intellectuals in general. In Paganism, Brod was engaged in a debate that derived from his earlier plea for a more direct political engagement within the framework of religious belief. This dispute emerged in a clash of views between himself and his friend, the poet Franz Werfel. In 1917, Werfel had published a polemic in the Neue Rundschau explicitly repudiating the idea that religious redemption had

\textsuperscript{128} On Brod as an interpreter of Judaism, see the contemporary critique of Paganism, Christendom, Judaism, written by Franz Rosenzweig, “Apologetic Thinking,” Philosophical and Theological Writings, pp. 95-108. For further discussions of this work, see Claus-Ekkehard Bärsch, Max Brod im Kampf um das Judentum: Zum Leben und Werk eines Deutsch-Jüdischen Dichters aus Prag (Vienna, 1992); and Anton Magnus Dorn, Leiden als Gottesproblem: Eine Untersuchung zum Werk von Max Brod (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1981).

\textsuperscript{129} Bärsch, p. 53.

\textsuperscript{130} Brod quoted in Bärsch, p. 55.
anything to do with worldly affairs. In his essay, “The Christian Mission,” he argued that redemption had, on the contrary, no meaning within a “purely empirical society”; therefore, there was no point to intellectual engagement in politics. To Brod this was a heretical position based on a misunderstanding of redemption’s meaning, and his book was intended, in part, as a rebuttal to Werfel. There he argued that personal salvation could not be held apart from a commitment to secular affairs, an argument that he tried to show rested on clear theological grounds. Engagement with material reality, so he argued, was mandated by religious belief, even if it was true that one could not equate the one with the other. Brod wanted to demonstrate a connection between the spheres of secular politics and religious tradition, but he argued this point by stressing the decisive nature of contingent realities. One could not leap past the everyday into a revelatory sphere, and this was an approach that Kracauer appears to have found sympathetic. Moreover, Brod was careful to stress that human action could in no way bring about the messianic realm; thus, he avoided the conflation of chiliasm and history that had troubled Kracauer in regards to Bloch.

That Kracauer was impressed by *Paganism* becomes more readily explainable when one compares the common themes that exist between the book and Kracauer’s later work. There is a shared interest in Kierkegaard, part of a general wave of enthusiasm for the Danish theologian that will be discussed at more length below. Some of the themes of Kracauer’s later writings are also anticipated in *Paganism*. Brod discusses the music of Jacques Offenbach, for instance, as a “typically Jewish critic of the prolongation of visible ethics into invisible ones.” He also refers to the problematic situation of the white-collar workers who he thought suffered both from their economic condition and from an ideology that conceals it from them. Kracauer addressed these themes some years later in *The Salaried Masses* (1929) and *Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of his Time* (1937). Even Brod’s censure of the voluntary ethos that prevailed in the war-time military hospitals is similar to the description of this institution found in *Ginster* – both writers suggest that the zeal of civilian volunteers was misplaced because it allowed individuals to feel

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131 Weltsch, p. 17; and Bärsch, p. 55.
134 Brod, *Paganism*, pp. 13-25
they were serving a higher moral purpose without forcing them to confront the war as a serious moral dilemma.\textsuperscript{136} Aside from these areas of clear affinity, Brod also avoided Brod’s excessive literary posturing which Kracauer claimed drew too much attention to the writer’s subjectivity, precisely where such egoism should be overcome.\textsuperscript{137}

More significantly Brod argued a position that conceptualized the messianic within a materialist worldview that included practical politics. Judaism, he stated, viewed the secular world as essentially removed from that of the messianic, that is, human action could in no way bring about redemption for this was the sphere of God alone.\textsuperscript{138} The suffering that humankind endured under this state of affairs he called “noble misfortune.” This was an inescapable suffering that derived from the fundamental conditions of human existence – mortality, frailty, and so forth. This was to be contrasted with “ignoble misfortune” which resulted from the baseness of human desires and hence could be avoided. One must accept “noble misfortune,” but was obliged to resist the “ignoble.” This was because the human sphere, though distant from the messianic, nonetheless appeared to us “under the sign of the messiah or miracle (\textit{Wunder}).” As a result, the world was transfigured in the light of redemptive promise.\textsuperscript{139} Even if redemption could not be initiated or even anticipated by human action, this did not then mean that one could resign oneself to a political or religious quietism. In opposition to such views, Brod referred repeatedly to the story of Rabbi Simon bar Yochai whose recognition of the messianic miracle compelled him towards practical works. “A miracle has been performed for our sake,” declared the Rabbi, “therefore I shall establish a useful institution.” For Brod, this teaching was the “distillation of Judaism”; moreover, it confirmed his belief that a truly religious world view meant commitment to the secular world.\textsuperscript{140}

\textsuperscript{136} Brod, \textit{Paganism}, p. 22; compare to Kracauer, \textit{Ginster, Werke} 7, pp. 54-56.
\textsuperscript{137} Kracauer to Löwenthal, January 14, 1921, \textit{In steter Freundschaft}, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{138} Brod, \textit{Paganism}, p. 75.
\textsuperscript{139} Brod, \textit{Paganism}, p. 7 and pp. 110-111. It should be mentioned here that this model of the relation between creator and the created was not accepted by other Jewish writers and philosophers. Franz Rosenzweig, in particular, repudiated Brod’s conception of Judaism. See his review entitled “Apologetic Thinking,” (\textit{Philosophical and Theological Writings}, pp. 103-104), and also his diary entry of June 21, 1922. In the latter, he states that through ignorance of the law Brod had in fact “falsified Judaism” (\textit{Franz Rosenzweig: Der Mensch und Sein Werk}, 1.2, p. 800).
\textsuperscript{140} Brod, \textit{Paganism}, pp. 98-99.
However, the implications of Brod’s position were complicated by his insistence that good acts only arise from the inspiration of God. To Brod, divine grace (Gnade) meant that one was permitted “to obey one’s desire in freedom, and to be of such a nature that one can yield to oneself while being in full agreement with the good.”\(^{141}\) In this way the individual comes into accord with the religious Gemeinschaft, at least ideally, because only grace could compel the individuals to love God and, in so doing, accept their own “noble misfortune.” Similarly, without experiencing the world under the sign of the miracle, one could not aspire to the highest acts of goodness in the profane world. Thus, in spite of freedom of the will, to act against “ignoble misfortune” still required divine intervention: “the highest attainments were not possible through simple moral freedom.”\(^{142}\) Nonetheless, individuals untouched by the “breath of God” were obliged to act in accordance with their understanding of moral obligation. The imperative to act against unnecessary suffering could not, in any case, be avoided.\(^{143}\)

However, the question of how an individual was to know if he inhabited a state of grace, and thus was acting with total freedom, was not entirely clear. The above account does simplify Brod’s argument, but even this truncated description makes apparent the problem of determining whether or not one’s actions are undertaken at the behest of providence, or out of a sense of moral obligation undertaken as one awaited divine intervention. Given the tenor of Brod’s general argument, this indeterminacy seemed to be a matter of design; for when God and religion “appear on the scene,” he warns, “disorder enters the junkyard of our knowledge. Concepts are turned upside down, and all human things become nonsense, inessential, impure, evil.”\(^{144}\) What Kracauer thought of this argument is a matter of speculation; but if one takes into account his response to other contemporary works that theorized the relationship between the secular and

\(^{141}\) Brod, Paganism, p. 75.

\(^{142}\) Brod, Heidentum I, p. 225. The translation is my own.

\(^{143}\) Brod, Heidentum I, pp. 235-236; Brod, Paganism, p. 7 and pp. 110-111. It should be mentioned here that this model of the relation between creator and the created was not accepted by other Jewish writers and philosophers. Franz Rosenzweig, in particular, repudiated Brod’s conception of Judaism. See his review entitled “Apologetic Thinking,” (Philosophical and Theological Writings, pp. 103-104), and also his diary entry of June 21, 1922. In the latter, he states that through ignorance of the law Brod had in fact “falsified Judaism” (Franz Rosenzweig: Der Mensch und Sein Werk, I, p. 800).

\(^{144}\) Brod, Paganism, pp. 43-44.
profane worlds, one suspects that he would not have been convinced by Brod’s argument on this point. In his review of Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, for instance, he agreed with Buber’s contention that the sphere of religion and reality mingled more often than was recognized; but he still argued that Buber had offered little to nothing in terms of how an individual could come to recognize this: how did one know when and where one spoke to the world as *Du* (as a creation of God) and when as *es* (as one particle to another). In general, Kracauer argued that Buber had set the bar between the secular and the profane “too high.” Moreover, he could not see why the occasional appearances of order that Buber argued were “bridges” leading away from humankind and into the “Thou” relation with God were not simply signs of cultural stagnation (*Erstarrungsphänomen*). To his mind they were symptomatic of a rigidity that no longer responded to subjective needs (he was still loyal to Simmel in this regard). Similarly, the recognition of grace remains mysterious in Brod’s account, yet if Kracauer thought the bar was too high in *I and Thou*, he may have found Brod’s emphasis on material contingencies a more promising way of conceptualizing this problem. Engagement with the real is encouraged, but a “theoretical system of Messianism” is avoided.

Aside from being more compatible with Kracauer’s moderate scepticism, there are some further dimensions of Brod’s argument that should be emphasized as they concerned Kracauer throughout the Weimar period. The world experienced under the sign of the redemption meant for Brod that personal redemption had to give way to social redemption; the messianic promise was one made to all. Thus, recognition of the miracle was an imperative that demanded participation in worldly affairs, and this imperative, Brod claimed, was all the more clear to him in the aftermath of the war:

Beneath the bloody and hazy August sun of the first days of war, the idea, long anticipated, strengthened within me: that we poets and writers had done too little, had bothered ourselves too little with the powers of reality... for that reason I made a sharp distinction between the redemption of the world and that of the

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146 Ibid., pp. 240-241.
self, and I took a decisive position against “egocentrism” in which I could see nothing other than a refined egoism.\textsuperscript{147}

Thus, the alleged quietism of intellectuals had to end. To be sure, he recognized that the solitary individual could lead a holy life and through reflection contribute to the collective good; but such a course risked falling into a problematic fusion between paganism and religion.\textsuperscript{148} This was a tendency that he perceived in modern Christianity and, more generally, in late nineteenth century culture. It was typified by a desire to find redemption exclusively in the here and now – a collapsing of the messianic into the material that deified the world as it was. He placed virtually the entirety of culture and social theory within this category: Darwinism, Nietzsche, Manchesterism, Socialism, Monism, the work of Treitschke and Scheler – the list goes on.\textsuperscript{149} The latter two thinkers were of particular significance, as Brod believed that their work marked an abandonment of the traditional Christian renunciation of the world that had the virtue of preserving the distance between the religious and human spheres. By arguing that God was to be found in the world itself, they had veered dangerously towards paganism. Buber too was guilty of this error when he suggested that redemption could be equated with the material existence of the religious community.\textsuperscript{150} Brod thus wanted to establish a boundary between worthy actions performed in recognition of the messianic and those actions undertaken in light of the mistaken belief that they pioneered the way towards redemption.

The problem with the allegedly neo-pagan ideas of a Scheler or a Treitschke was that they erased the tension between the secular and divine spheres – a tension that Brod insisted had to be maintained. Thus, the desire for personal redemption was not to be disparaged in so far as it was a response to the messianic promise; but it had to emerge within a paradox that placed religiosity in conflict with secular action. This paradox was deepened by the recognition that on the one hand, political engagement precluded the necessary space for individual reflection that led to a consciousness of God and, on the other, that such engagement was indispensable to a true recognition of the messianic. Hence, the individual was caught in an insoluble dilemma: either to wait passively and attend to his or her inwardness; or to pursue, in the words of Rabbi bar

\textsuperscript{147} Brod, \textit{Heidentum} I, pp. 184-185; the translation is my own.
\textsuperscript{148} Brod, \textit{Heidentum} I, pp. 278-279.
\textsuperscript{149} Brod, \textit{Paganism}, p. 5 and pp. 9-10.
\textsuperscript{150} Brod, \textit{Paganism}, p. 37.
Yochai, the “establishment of useful institutions.” Brod called this quandary the “incompatibility of that which belonged together.” By arguing that all good deeds were, in fact, due to the intervention of God, he appears to have thought he had found a way out of this problem – a position that probably would not have satisfied all parties.151

It should be noted that this dilemma had a wide cultural resonance. Max Weber’s study of ancient Judaism had discussed a similar conflict between passivity and utopian enthusiasm which he believed was central to the Jewish worldview in antiquity.152 Kracauer read this work, albeit with some reservations, shortly before he published his feuilleton “Those Who Wait,” an essay that was in many respects a response to the problems raised by Brod and Weber.153 The genesis of this essay will be discussed below, but here it should be mentioned that it was a polemical argument for an explicit position of waiting, a position that claimed that there was a middle way between the messianic fever of utopian politics and a nihilist scepticism. In a similar vein, Ulrich, the protagonist of Musil’s Man without Qualities is described as in a state of waiting.154 He has no clear profession and no clear direction in the world; rather he seems to inhabit certain talents or experiences as if he were trapped in an anteroom, suspended between a belief in the need to act, and a conviction that there was, in fact, no concrete basis for action.

Waiting was connected to this idea of living in paradoxical situation. Brod suggested that one had to recognize and accept paradox as a condition of life; one should not seek to resolve it, but rather had to persist within it. For Brod, this had consequences in other spheres as well. It caused him to revamp his understanding of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. His reflections on aesthetic experience, I would argue, anticipated Kracauer’s approach to similar issues, especially in his study of detective fiction. Brod argued that the messianic promise transfigured the world in a dual fashion; reality was undermined by a sense of “futility,” but it was also punctuated by an “undeserved grace.”155 This dualism became a linchpin to his understanding of aesthetic experience:

151 Brod, Paganism, p. 77.
152 Hans Liebeschütz, “Max Weber’s Historical Interpretation of Judaism,” Yearbook of the Leo Baeck Institute 9 (1964): pp. 41-68; and Rabinbach, In the Shadow, p. 44.
153 Kracauer to Susman, May 2, 1920, SN, DLA.
154 Musil, Man without Qualities, p. 276.
155 Brod, Paganism, pp. 100-101.
With this knowledge I renounced an earlier stage in which I was always astonished by the lacking parallelism between the aesthetic and the ethical. Here I saw the freedom of the Act; there I saw the unbidden nature of inspiration. Here lay “decency,” so to say, in the street; everyone had the ability, but also the cursed obligation to be a good person. On the other hand there was no path for the citizen to follow, only for a few of the lonely chosen ones. Today I see that this “out in the street” decency was not to be equated with aesthetic dilettantism, but rather ... with honourable accomplishments, long worthy of attention, perhaps, even here and there with flashes of grace ... however, over them vaulted the realm of grace ... it is the same sky that is over a Goethe poem, a Mahler symphony.\(^\text{156}\)

Aesthetics thus appears to him as a kind of veil that conceals an ethical realm close to religious experience. That he found the latter “in the street” is suggestive of Kracauer’s later argument that the way to the sacred passes through the profane; it is not in the old aesthetic forms that the path to the divine is found, but rather in the cultural ephemera of daily life. However, this connection must be stated with some caution, as Brod collapses the aesthetic into the moment of grace in a fashion that Kracauer would probably have found unconvincing. As Gertrud Koch has argued, Kracauer believed that access to the religious sphere was blocked; hence, his mode of reading the urban landscape emphasized the themes of disfigurement and negativity as a means of reading this blockage.\(^\text{157}\) Nonetheless, in Brod there is a model for interpreting the cultural and social landscape, an attempt to cultivate an aesthetic sensitivity as a means of recognizing religious truth contents in the contemporary landscape. In *Paganism*, however, Brod did not extend his analysis very far into the profane world; instead he devoted himself to interpretations of religious figures who anticipated his views, such as Kierkegaard and Dante, and to the elicitation of new

\(^{156}\) Brod, *Heidentum*, p. 225; the translation is my own. As a recent study of the “Prague Circle” by Scott Spector has pointed out, the view of Brod as a writer who abandoned aesthetic dilettantism when he discovered religious commitment, a trajectory that is implied by this quotation, should not be accepted without some reservations. Spector points out that his earlier aestheticism was in some respects a response to the politics of national identity in the late Habsburg Empire. Moreover, the relationship between aesthetics, ethics, and religion that is posited here does not necessarily imply an abandonment of his early aestheticism, but rather a different interpretation of it; see Scott Spector, *Prague Territories*, pp. 60-64.

meanings from traditional religious texts. He criticized broad swaths of secular culture and contemporary religion, but few of these cultural manifestations were subjected to close scrutiny. Kracauer would, in contrast, turn decisively towards an analysis of the profane world.

For this reason, the connection to Brod can only be stated tenuously and it should be conceded that positive statements regarding religion such as are common in Paganism are very rare in Kracauer’s writings. Yet, before 1925 there are indications that this messianic sphere persisted in a shrouded form in his writing. As he stated in the opening pages of The Detective Novel, however distant the lower sphere of humankind may be from the higher one of religion, the presence of the latter (Befunde) is still “unshakeably in force” in the former. The spheres relate to one another, but not in a way that is immediately accessible to human knowledge. Moreover, even those “flashes of grace” that punctuate the secular world are not entirely foreign to his journalism. Between the positions of Bloch and Brod, a tentative sketch of what Inka Mülder-Bach called his “struggle on two frontiers” begins to become clear: on the one hand, a social and cultural critique with theological underpinnings and, on the other, a repudiation of the imputed excesses of religious renewal. Between these frontiers Kracauer tried to define a space for criticism, stuck between the sacred and the profane.

The concept of totality was a means of investigating this relationship and on this point Kracauer was influenced by Lukács’ Theory of the Novel, though he preferred the concept in its original metaphysical sense, rather than the Marxist variant that Lukács later proposed. Though Kracauer would also become committed to an idiosyncratic brand of Marxist theory, his understanding of totality never acquired an emphatic Marxist inflection as it did for Lukács. On the contrary, he resisted this move and suggested that Lukács had carelessly abandoned what was potentially useful in the concept. It was, he wrote to Susman, as if the “aesthetic man from Kierkegaard’s Either/Or [had] become a communist.” Neither side of this equation could benefit; the utopian

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158 Kracauer, Der Detektiv-Roman, p. 11.
159 See Chapter Six, pp. 249-254 below.
160 Mülder-Bach, Siegfried Kracauer—Grenzgänger, p. 45.
dimension of totality was lost by the exclusion of culture and theology, while Lukács, as
Kracauer correctly argued, failed to appease the more doctrinaire members of the party. 161

In spite of these reservations concerning the direction of Lukács’ later work, in the years
immediately following the war Kracauer found the Theory of the Novel to be a close match to his
own gloomy diagnoses of post-war Germany. 162 According to a preface that Lukács wrote for the
1968 edition, the book had been written during the first years of the war “in a mood of
permanent despair.” 163 Originally, the book was to have consisted of a number of dialogues
among a group of friends who had retreat to the country in order to escape the “war psychosis.”
There they would discuss the problems of cultural evolution as an indirect means of addressing
the present crisis. Dropping this frame for the study did not in any way mute the political
contexts; in their respective reviews, both Kracauer and Susman were quick to point out the
contemporary relevance of the work. Kracauer stated that Lukács “looked into our historical-
philosophical condition with an unheard of insightfulness.” 164

Kracauer welcomed this impulse behind Theory of the Novel, what he saw as an attempt to
integrate culture within a larger social and political framework. Through the concept of totality,
Lukács offered an analytical model that saw the evolution of form in terms of changing “historic-
philosophical realities.” As Lukács later observed, this was in accord with the rising Hegelian
influence in cultural criticism and philosophy. 165 In spite of the fact that his work was
sympathetic to contemporary trends, it is still somewhat surprising, and indicative of the post-
war intellectual climate, that even Kracauer, with his stated resistance to metaphysical systems,
overlooked the seemingly obvious weaknesses of Lukács’ concept of totality. 166 Its romanticism
has already been discussed, but its teleological assumptions should also be mentioned. The
present was perceived as an age of decay. From the “closed totality of life” in the Homeric

161 Kracauer to Susman, August 11, 1922, SN, DLA. Kracauer told Bloch that he spoken with Karl Korsch in the
Reichstag, and that Korsch had expressed the same reservations towards Lukács as did Kracauer, but chose not to
voice these as he did not wish to weaken Lukács’ position in his struggle with the party. See his letter of June 29,
162 Oschmann, Auszug aus der Innerlichkeit, pp. 81-89.
163 Lukács, Theory of the Novel, p. 12.
164 Kracauer, “Georg von Lukács’ Romantheorie,” Der verbotene Blick, p. 83. Also, see Susman, “Die Theorie des
Romans,” FZ, August 16, 1921 (M).
165 Lukács, Theory of the Novel, p. 56 and pp. 15-16.
166 Martin Jay, Marxism and Totality, pp. 86-98.
period, society had entered a world of “absolute sinfulness,” a phrase he had borrowed from Fichte.⁶⁷ The novel was the representative form of this fallen world; its preponderant use of irony was symptomatic of the negativity of modern art, as if it could only expose the breadth of what had been lost. As Kracauer stated in his review, “irony is the self-correction of the fragmentary; it is the highest freedom that is possible in a world without God.” “Not without reason,” he continued, had Lukács called irony the “negative mysticism of a godless age.”⁶⁸ The evolution of culture had thus led to a point where the novel could, at most, perform its critical function in terms of negative aesthetics. This recognized the distance from the “reality-become-song” of a closed culture and emerged as a “sorrowful lightness,” as in the work of Cervantes, for instance, a ghostly reminder of the epic age.⁶⁹ Later, when Kracauer referred to a “light sorrow” in a review of Joseph Roth’s Flight without End, he was almost certainly referring to this concept.⁷⁰

In a sense this leads back to the “tragedy of culture” discussed by Simmel. The gap between form and content, between subjective and objective culture, was expressed anew in the alleged impossibility of a “closed” cultural form; instead culture was given a negative function that alluded to its own shortcomings in a persistently minor key.⁷¹ Simmel, of course, had also influenced the younger Lukács, and his pessimistic strand of Lebensphilosophie appears as a kind of residue of this. However, even though Lukács did not point to an easy way out of the cultural-historical dilemma, he did indicate potential signs of renewal, in particular, the novels of Dostoevsky. In these works the world is “drawn for the first time simply as a seen reality,” whereas in general the novel reflected the fact that “the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given … the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem.”⁷²

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⁷² Lukács, Theory of the Novel, p. 56 and p. 152.
The cultural prestige awarded to Dostoevsky was not uncommon. As one contemporary observed, “the red Piper editions of his novels glared on every writing desk.” Writing in the middle of the 1930s, Kracauer offered a sceptical portrayal of the post-war “Dostoevsky cult” among the intelligentsia. In a scene from Georg, the protagonist attends a party full of bourgeois socialists and aspiring revolutionaries. He finds among the heavy furniture and glass vitrines a copy of the Brothers Karamazov sitting ostentatiously on a table, bound in a garish red cover strikingly at odds with its sober surroundings. The very appearance of the book in this setting acts as a form of provocation; the reading of Dostoevsky was practically a declaration of revolutionary faith and a testament of one’s opposition to secularism. Just before the party ends and Georg departs, the lights that have been out on account of an ongoing worker’s strike come on again, and a woman begins to sing: “The messiah can dwell within us every hour.” The chiliastic tradition thus blends with the pseudo-revolution while the work of Dostoevsky “glares” from the dining room tables.

As this scene suggests, Kracauer believed that revolutionary mysticism was a specialty of the so-called “revolutionary culturists.” The close proximity of these two traditions found expression in the work of Thomas Mann, especially in the figure of the fearsome Jesuit, Naphta, a character supposedly modelled on Lukács. For Kracauer too, at least until 1925, the theorization of culture could not be separated from theological concepts. On the one hand, this was a means of guarding culture from deterministic arguments that reduced it to mere superstructure; on the other, it would curb an excessive belief in the ability of culture in and of itself to perfect human existence. Religion constituted a challenge to both of these threats, hence Kracauer’s reluctance to dispense with religious concepts entirely and his desire to find their modern and secular guise. Like the protagonist in Somerset Maugham’s Of Human Bondage, Kracauer is caught in the act of thanking God for the foundations of his disbelief. In a sense then, the

174 Kracauer, Georg, Werke 7, pp. 267-268; the woman singing is Frau Bonnet who in some respects resembles his friend Margaret Susman. See also the comments in Jay, Marxism and Totality, pp. 97-98; and Emmet Kennedy, Secularism and its Opponents from Augustine to Solzhenitsyn (London, 2006), pp. 183-202.
strategy of containment described above is again evident, barring the way to the extremes of disbelief and religious renewal. If Kracauer believed that religion could no longer function as a unifying force, this did not give unlimited license to culture to step into the void that religion left behind. The way to the sacred was through the profane, but this meant that the profane had to avoid all attempts at sacralisation.

3. The Siren-Song of Decline: Cultural Despair and Religious Revival

Utopian and messianic literature formed one of the poles of the post-war discourse on culture; the opposing pole was the literature of cultural decline. An element of this was certainly inherent in the work of Lukács, but its most sensational exponent was Oswald Spengler. Several studies have demonstrated the wide interest generated by Spengler’s *Decline of the West*, particularly, but by no means only, among intellectuals. As the large number of contemporary publications devoted to attacking, defending, or simply commenting on Spengler suggest, *Decline* was big news; one scholar of his work described 1919, with some exaggeration perhaps, as the “Spengler year.” In Germany, the twin catastrophes of defeat and revolution readily lent credence to the thesis of downfall; the events of those years, moreover, seemed to confirm the dreary prognoses of cultural pessimism that circulated during the last years of the *Kaiserreich* and with which Spengler’s work shared some affinities. However, responses to *Decline* were not limited to those critics who specialized in a rhetoric of crisis. Scientists entered the fray, commenting on how Spengler’s thesis measured up to the current state of research; mathematicians joined in, as did of course, historians, sociologists and theologians. Among the prominent intellectuals who were impressed by Spengler’s work were Count Keyserling, Thomas Mann, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hans Jonas and Gottfried Benn; a volume of the philosophy periodical *Logos* was devoted to a discussion of *Decline*, and Theodor Heuss remarked on the intense interest it had stirred in the

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public.\footnote{For general discussions of the reception of Spengler, see Hughes, *Oswald Spengler*, and more recently, Besslich, “Kulturtheoretische Irritationen.” Adorno’s recollections of the Spengler controversy are also of interest; see “Spengler after the Decline,” in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 51-72.} Among Kracauer’s contemporaries in Frankfurt, even Rosenzweig responded positively, at least at first. He wrote to his friend Rudolf Ehrenberg that he had been considerably impressed by *Decline*, which he called the “greatest work of historical philosophy to appear since Hegel.”\footnote{Rosenzweig to Rudolf Ehrenberg, May 5, 1919, *Franz Rosenzweig: Der Mensch und Sein Werk*, 1.1, p. 629. See also Rosenzweig to Eva Ehrenberg, January 19, 1925, wherein he referred to Spengler as one of his enemies (*Franz Rosenzweig: Der Mensch und Sein Werk*, 1.2, p. 1019).}

Given the wide interest and controversy incited by Spengler, there is little surprise that opinions on his work diverged widely. However, even some of his detractors felt obliged to admit that in spite of his many failings he had provoked a wide-ranging and potentially useful discussion. At a public lecture at Frankfurt University sponsored by the German Historical Society and the Prussian Association of Philologists, Kracauer observed that most speakers admitted that the public debate occasioned by *Decline* might yield “new insights into the intellectual framework of world history.”\footnote{Kracauer, “Aussprache—Abend über Spengler,” *FZ*, February 10, 1921 (M2).} Due to his obligations as a local reporter, Kracauer became well acquainted with the public debate over *Decline*. He wrote on Spengler no less than seven times after joining the *FZ*, and it should be noted that the many of the public lectures he attended and publications he reviewed emerged at least two years after the high water mark of the “Spengler year” in 1919.\footnote{Kracauer, “Aussprache—Abend über Spengler,” *FZ*, February 10, 1921 (M2); “Die Struktur der Weltgeschichte,” *FZ*, April 27, 1921 (Literaturblatt); “Ausspracheabend über Spengler,” *FZ*, June 2, 1921 (M); “Christentum und Spengler,” *FZ*, November 15, 1921 (M); “Spengleriana,” *FZ*, December 7, 1921 (Literaturblatt); and “Spengler und das Judentum,” *FZ*, December 29, 1923 (M2).} At least in Frankfurt, the Spengler phenomenon continued to fascinate, and that his rapid disappearance from media attention did not mean that he was entirely “old hat.” Whether the book was widely read or not, his argument was widely known and as a result it could not be ignored.

As was the case with many of his contemporaries, Kracauer read Spengler with curiosity, but also with unease. In general, he was unconvinced by the thesis of inevitable cultural decay, but he was not immune to the curiosity that the Spengler phenomenon generated. In his study of Simmel, he refers to *Decline* as a “profound” accomplishment, and he appears to have been
impressed by the breadth of the Spenglerian project. Moreover, as the classical historian Eduard Meyer argued, Spengler struck a chord among those who were “oppressed by the feeling that [they were] decadents, and Kracauer, as we have seen, was susceptible to similar misgivings.” Spengler thus provoked a re-consideration of some of his earlier musings on the “decadent” young men of the coffee houses, and the theme of *Decline* became an important reference point in his work of the early twenties. Yet, it was more the reception of *Decline* that excited his interest, rather than an evaluation of its argument. The outcry it provoked and the excitement it awakened were just as important as an understanding of its central theses, for the idea of downfall could have its uses as a tool of both cultural criticism and religious revival. The gloomy harbingers of the coming catastrophe, he argued, existed in a necessary tension with the prophets of religious revival; they were, in fact, two sides of the same coin. They both thrived in a mood of uncertainty that excited awe and mystery – one towards the vast riddle posed by the depths of historical time, the other towards the inscrutable nature of the divine.

Thus, his critique of Spengler’s thesis was preceded by an assessment of the public discourse that circulated around it. Writing in early 1921, he pointed out that Spengler’s opponents failed to direct their attack towards the core issues at stake in his work. Such critiques, he argued, “remained on the surface” because they did not recognize that a work such as *Decline*, a work of broad synthesis, could not be dismantled by expert analyses that did not stray from the restricted confines of a specific discipline. Having observed its subject matter “from a distance,” *Decline* required an equally ambitious work of synthesis in order to refute it. That Spengler’s work included some errors of factual detail did not fatally damage his reputation so long as these points of attack were never integrated into an argument that would rival Spengler’s model of world history. Moreover, he argued that many critics hostile to the relativist implications of *Decline* thought that it sufficed merely to expose its relativist premises; they did not recognize that in order to overcome relativism, they needed to go further than this and secure their own premises from which they attacked Spengler (a project that Kracauer at one time had also hoped

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186 Meyer quoted in Hughes, *Oswald Spengler*, pp. 93-94.
to achieve). As a result, rather than exposing the weaknesses of Spengler’s thought, his critics had only demonstrated the narrowness of their own thinking. Representative of this response to Spengler was a special issue of the academic journal *Logos* devoted to countering the effects of the *Decline*. Adorno later recollected that this anthology of fastidious critiques written in a pedantic tone did nothing to diminish the aura that hung over Spengler and his book. Indeed, the narrow points of view they represented seemed to only confirm the strength of his hypothesis; knowledge had decayed and fragmented, and the intensive specialization of the natural and human sciences, often on display in the criticism of Spengler, were signs of this.

For Kracauer, trying to match the Spenglerian synthesis meant paying attention to the general framework offered by the relationship of religion to culture. In the course of his discussion of Spengler, there is a noticeable shift in his thinking on this question. In December 1921, he had contended that the Spengler thesis required a comprehensive refutation, one that only a religious or metaphysical rebuttal could provide:

> In order to root out his work and to see it for what it in truth is – a godless testimony of a godless age … it needs the norms of a metaphysically oriented and positive image of the world (*Weltbild*) the existence of which first offers the possibility of dissolving and annihilating [Spengler’s] position.

He did not himself offer such an alternative, but he was certainly aware of this as a potential response. In the fall of 1921, Kracauer also reported on a lecture that suggested religion could fill precisely this role. The lecture, entitled “Christianity and Spengler,” was given by the Protestant theologian Willy Lütte and sponsored by the *Deutsch-evangelischen Volksvereinigung*. Lütte argued that there was a visible historical development towards intellectual and spiritual unity that found its highest expression in religion, and since this had prevailed in numerous cultures, it could not be subject to the cyclical patterns of rise and fall described by Spengler. Therefore, it

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189 Kracauer to Susman, April 13, 1920, and undated (probably June, 1920), SN, DLA.
190 Adorno, “Spengler after the Decline,” p. 54. According to Hughes, the appearance of *Preussen und Sozialismus* in 1920, before the second volume of *Decline*, may, on account of its pompous and reactionary tone, have done more damage to his reputation than any of his critics; see Hughes, *Oswald Spengler*, p. 110.
was possible to speak of religion as a force that transcended individual cultures. On the other hand, Lüttge agreed with Spengler in so far as he believed that *Decline* had undermined the “modern idols of progress.” Overall, Kracauer’s discussion of Lüttge is brief and neutral in tone; he neither affirms nor explicitly disagrees with Lüttge’s efforts to displace Spengler’s conception of world history with a Christian one. However, given his conviction that Spengler could only be refuted by way of a comprehensive and metaphysical argument, it is probable that he at least thought Lüttge was proceeding in the right direction.

However, by 1923 Kracauer had abandoned this position. He now argued that a comprehensively metaphysical or religious conception of the world was actually part of the problem, rather than a solution to the reigning cultural crisis. This amounted to a repudiation of the idea of the “closed culture” that was idealized in the early work of Lukács. His article “Downfall?” that appeared in the *FZ* in October 1923, suggested that both Spengler’s *Decline* and the totalizing visions of his opponents were guilty of the same errors. Common to all such philosophical-historical interpretations was the “birds-eye point of view” (*Vogelschau*); they reckoned with the whole of world history, and in so doing they abandoned their historical contingency. As he stated: “the viewpoint of world history opens itself to them precisely in the moment in which they abandon their viewpoint over actual life.” This meant that they had blinded themselves to any consideration of their own position in the historical process; as a result, their interpretations lost all validity. On this point, Kracauer was not siding with Spengler’s academic critics; instead he was insisting on the “worm’s point of view” that he admired in the work of Simmel. This perspective situated itself in the “actual (wirklich) entirety of human relations,” something that, according to Kracauer, both the rational means of scientific method and the abstract viewpoint of Spenglerian world history failed to do. If the sciences had abandoned the real through rationalist abstraction, Spengler had committed no less an error by believing he could stand over world history without reflecting on “his own connectedness to a quite concretely defined situation.”

Genuine historical knowledge, he suggested, could not be derived solely from abstraction, rather it must be confronted and tested against historical contingencies. This theme persisted.

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194 Max Brod explicitly condemned this kind of perspective; see *Heidentum*, p. 279.
195 Kracauer, “Untergang?”, *Schriften 5.1*, p. 245.
196 Ibid., p. 243 and p. 245.
throughout Kracauer’s work and appeared again in his posthumous book, *History*, as a critique of macro-historical perspectives. This type of history, he argued, yielded well-constructed arguments of cause and effect, but not an account of what these events meant for living individuals.\(^{197}\)

There was also a theological aspect to Kracauer’s critique. Indeed, he argued, it may happen that Germany does one day perish, however, “the question of decline, in so far as it is understood as a necessary historical event, is falsely put and must … remain without answer.”\(^{198}\) By attempting to respond to this question, Spengler had misappropriated the divine point of view, for only a God could witness history in its entirety. Therefore, judgments concerning the purpose of the world-historical process were simply outside the scope of human agency. On this point, Kracauer quoted from Kierkegaard, arguing that God alone bore witness to the “ethical development” of “existing spirit,” and only a God could exist as both spectator and participant. Individuals, on the other hand, could only observe life from the stage itself; all their theories and conclusions were of necessity limited by this fact.\(^{199}\)

If anything, Kracauer argued, the world-historical perspective was itself a symptom of decline. It was no matter whether or not such perspectives were used to encourage the present to accept its fate with steely resolution (Spengler), or whether it sought to build heaven on earth as in the religious revival (Bloch). In the religious currents of the present, one often saw the death of culture as a warning blast of the apocalyptic trumpet preceding the birth of the new: the light in the darkness that Margaret Susman, for instance, saw in the arrival of a new metaphysics.\(^{200}\) This was a gesture that appeared in many guises, and Kracauer believed it was manifested in the incessant demands for the “new man, the new society, the new art, the new religion.” The discourse of decline undermined and condemned the present; it demanded the replacement of a sham decadent culture with one devoted to the untrammelled spirit, to historical reality, or to a

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197 Kracauer, *History*, pp. 118-120.
199 Ibid., p. 245.
200 Margaret Susman, “Geist der Utopie,” in *Das Nah- und Fernsein des Fremden*, p. 22.
unity with God. As the fears stemming from the “spooks of downfall” continued to “creep in,” Kracauer argued, so the fervent calls for spiritual renewal became ever more strident.201

For Kracauer, this represented a kind of psychic cluttering of the public sphere. The twin discourses of cultural decay and religious renewal did not, so he believed, enrich the debate on social reality. Instead of provoking reflection, they choked the public sphere with dubious words of religious authenticity that received their force and validity from the constant lamentations over the coming end of culture. Since this “sphere of world-historical prophecy” was without roots in the real, it could only become a hindrance to meaningful engagement in the present and, indeed, also to the vision of a revived religion that it claimed as its goal. Instead, these discourses leapt over such realities or “chattered them away.”202 Judaism and Christianity, in so far as they welcomed this flight from the real, could thus be counted among the “vagabond religions” of the post-war period, religions that attracted what Kracauer uncharitably called the “short-circuit person,” people who sought immediate refuge from the present age by way of religion.203 Yet, in spite of these judgments, it should be noted that Kracauer was not ready to repudiate religion entirely. To Susman he claimed that he was only a “pagan in the sense intended by Goethe.”204 Against utopian excess and revivalist impulses, he sought instead a “holy sobriety,” a religion that made no claims for itself as religion. At the conclusion of his essay on the discourse of decline, it was to Goethe he gave the last word:

The hard tasks of daily preservation
Usually require no revelation.205

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201 Kracauer, “Untergang?” Schriften 5.1, p. 244 and p. 246.
202 Kracauer, “Untergang?” The reference to “chatter” (zerschwaten) recalls Kierkegaard’s condemnation of the popular press. “Chatter” – the feuilleton was the worst offender in this respect – had a malignant social influence, reducing inward reflection to inconsequential chitchat. See Allen Janik, “Haecker, Kierkegaard and the early Brenner,” p. 211. For an extensive study of this subject, see Peter Fenves, “Chatter”: Language and History in Kierkegaard (Stanford, 1993).
204 Kracauer to Susman, May 2, 1920, SN, DLA.
From a consideration of Kracauer’s reading of these post-war texts, it becomes evident that he was trying to define a median course for his critical project. This position lay somewhere between the discourses of utopian imagination and historical relativism, between the messianic and the materialist, between late imperial cultural criticism and the radical impulses of the first years of the republic. This is very much a negative position that speaks most often of method and avoids positive statements regarding the truth or untruth of religious or metaphysical propositions. As he later wrote to Löwenthal, the “positive word is not ours.”\textsuperscript{206} However, that was in 1924, and in the years immediately following the war there is reason to think he was uncertain how much one could or could not say in regards to this question – hence, his enthusiasm for the work of Max Brod. Aside from this, it is not clear that his ambivalence towards religion amounts to a convinced atheism. In the following chapters, I argue further that Kracauer needed to work past this ambivalence and conceptualize the place of religion in such a way that he would be free to turn to secular culture without reservations; once religion was, in a sense, isolated the secular could become his main area of concern. The war books were important as they facilitated a confrontation between the intellectual baggage he had acquired prior to 1914, \textit{(Lebensphilosophie and Kulturpessimismus)} and a dramatically transformed political and social reality.

An important theme that emerges out of this confrontation is that the displacement of theological themes in his work by the mid-twenties was a shift that was not motivated by a blanket repudiation of religion.\textsuperscript{207} As we have seen, when he criticized Scheler and Bloch, he justified his position to Susman by stressing the acceptability of his critique to others with a religious point of view. Given that he was, of course, aware of Susman’s religious sentiments, it is not improbable that he did this in order to avoid causing offense.\textsuperscript{208} However, an unpublished essay of 1929 suggests that his strategy was one of deliberate design that had a definite pedagogical function. The essay was a discussion of Max Picard’s \textit{The Face of Man} and it contained a rare direct statement of Kracauer’s intentions as a critic. Part of the essay consisted of a letter he addressed

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\item \textsuperscript{206} Kracauer to Löwenthal, April 12, 1924, \textit{In steter Freundschaft}, p. 54.
\item \textsuperscript{207} Mülder-Bach, \textit{Siegfried Kracauer—Grenzgänger}, p. 18; and Haenlein, p. 133.
\item \textsuperscript{208} However, he did not shy away from causing offense on religious questions with Susman, and he did speak openly on their differences of opinion. See Kracauer to Susman, April 22, 1922, SN, DLA.
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to Picard wherein he tried to justify his attitude towards theological discourse. He argued that the more emotive language of theology had to be avoided, though he stressed that he did not deny its existence. Still, such language excited the passions of belief, and those who respond to such language would, upon hearing it, “feel themselves ... stirred in their souls and hold themselves to be saved.” They would confuse their fervour with religious truth and, as a result, they would forgo the work of thinking through the premises and consequences of their position as a thinking and believing individual in a particular context. Hence, Kracauer decided to discuss theology only by means of “negative constellations” – a kind of “bracketing off” of religious questions. Such an approach, he believed, was the only legitimate mode of religious discourse, as it corresponded to the limitations placed upon it by a largely secularized society. As he wrote to Löwenthal, what in the present was often labelled religious was to his mind “blasphemous,” a language that overextended itself to the point of illegitimacy.

Thus, his writing on religion should not be perceived simply as anti-religious or stamped by spiritual nihilism, even if he was hostile to the idea of religious revival. Religious concepts were never explicitly repudiated, though he did assume that alterations were inescapable given the secularized nature of modern societies. Yet, theological concepts remained near at hand, and this is so even in conjunction with his increased interest in Marxism during the mid-twenties.

According to the sociologist Gottfried Salomon-Delatour, a childhood friend of Kracauer who later taught at the University of Frankfurt, Kracauer had returned home from a visit to Berlin in 1926 enthralled by his reading of Marx. Influenced by Karl Grünberg, Kracauer had embarked on a study of Marxism and the “Judaic-Christian roots of materialism.” Hence, his critiques of religion need to be understood in light of his belief that the truth contents of religion must undergo a material transformation, or a period of “wandering” within modern society. Religion would in effect become secular, but he refused the easy equation of religion with either the

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210 Kracauer to Löwenthal, January 14, 1921, In steter Freundschaft, p. 19.
212 Gottfried Salomon-Delatour to Walter Benjamin, March 5, 1926, Gottfried Salomon-Delatour papers, 1110/8, International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam (the carbon copy of this letter is mistakenly filed with letters to the Austrian sociologist, Ottmar Spann). It was to Salomon-Delatour that Kracauer dedicated his unpublished study “Das Leiden unter dem Wissen und die Sehnsucht nach der Tat.” The letter to Benjamin continues: “In the past there had been monasteries for such things, today the FZ ... God help us all!”
national community or the socialist revolution. In refusing to speak the “positive word” upon religious questions, he was not, it should be added, defining a particularly innovative theological position and some of his critics belittled his work as a pale imitation of negative theology.\textsuperscript{213}

In conjunction with the project of secularizing religious concepts there was a vaguely formulated argument that concerned the relationship of culture and religion. According to Marx, all criticism was criticism of religion and this was a position with which Kracauer would probably have agreed.\textsuperscript{214} The very existence of cultural criticism presupposed a new orientation towards religion and not just towards religious institutions, but also towards the ideas and concepts found within religious texts and traditions. This was part of his so-called “middle way.” In his early discussion of Spengler he had suggested that what was needed was a metaphysical “concept of culture” that could effectively counter the Laplacean demon released in the nineteenth century. Religion could offer this and, thus, it should be seen as the foundation of culture. By 1926, however, he no longer accepts this position; but, nonetheless, he does not allow culture to simply fill the shoes of religion or metaphysics. The idea of a unified or “closed culture” was no longer to be sought for, and, paradoxically, it was now the concepts derived from religion that prevented culture from arrogating religious functions to itself. Religious ideas, such as redemption or grace, preserved the negative capacity of culture, and they drew attention to its incompleteness. This was a revolutionary function as it allowed one to resist the “merely existent,” and to not allow empirical facts to take an absolute hold over thought.

In this respect, perhaps what Kracauer had in mind when he spoke of secularized theology emerged later in a critique of Spengler that his friend Adorno published in 1950.\textsuperscript{215} According to Adorno, Spengler defined culture in far too narrow a fashion and had relegated it to a mere adjunct of the material conditions of life. Thus, Spengler turned culture into something that happened only \textit{after} the material needs of society were met. For Adorno, however, culture was there from the beginning; it was intertwined within every aspect of human relations, defining the nature of our material needs and interrogating them through a conjuring up of alternative states.

\textsuperscript{213} See Chapter Six, p. 221 below.
of affairs. Hence, Spengler’s separation of culture from the material struggles of life was false, and rather than truly investigating the capacity of thought, he simply excluded it from the core processes that influenced his vision of world history. However, for Adorno and Kracauer the capacity to conceive of a different reality comes to serve a utopian function; it becomes a kind of unknowable absolute that confronted the contingencies of individual existence, a zone of moral and philosophical command that called the world as it was into question.

Yet, what was a culture that was based upon the truths of a secularized religion supposed to look like? His reading of the war books suggests a negative answer to this question. He was not, for instance, in step with the search for a culture founded upon an originary or natural religion. The modernist quest for a “return to origins” was not a part of his agenda and, thus, he attacked this position when it arose in the work of Scheler. To be sure, Kracauer imagined that religion would survive in some form in a secular world, but this was something distant from a religion that remained perpetually new and was able to continually regenerate its originary force. This position was closer to the closed cultural systems that Kracauer argued had to be abandoned. In some respects then, he is comfortable with a negative culture that forever postpones certain meaning – a position that does anticipate postmodernist thought. Hence, his subsequent position against the religious revival was directed primarily at the idea of religion as a positively identified origin. To those inclined to this latter point of view, religion could possess a synergy with modernity in so far as it represented a spiritual challenge to the allegedly decrepit materialism of the nineteenth century. Thus, it was not to be confused solely with romantic yearning for the lost whole or for a return to medieval unity.

Thus, religion did not transport us back to the ideal religious communities of medieval Europe or the world of epic, but rather it was a spiritual force that broke with our narrow understanding of time. As John Milbank has emphasized, early conceptions of the saeculum were temporal rather than spatial. The secular sphere is not so much a space materially removed from the sacred, but a place that is defined by its absolute finitude. By insisting that the chiliastic tradition meant

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216 Ibid., p. 69.
217 This dimension of Kracauer’s work has been explored most recently by Gerhard Richter in, Thought-Images: Frankfurt School Writers’ Reflections from a Damaged Life (Stanford, 2007), pp. 107-146. Also, see Kracauer to Bloch, June 29, 1926, Brie fe 1, p. 280.
218 Milbank quoted in Pecora, p. 2.
the rupture into time rather than the conclusion of its process, Kracauer was insisting on this
distinction.\textsuperscript{219} In the course of the twenties, ideas of the messianic that somehow existed in time
became anathema to him. In such a guise, religion was identified with some idea of
indestructible spiritual essence, a force that if recovered could lead us out of the endless conflict
between the traditional and the modern. The finite bounds that contained every human life would
vanish into the continuous existence of the creative spirit, forever new and forever renewing
itself (the affinity towards \textit{Lebensphilosophie} is readily clear).

Most of the works discussed in this chapter tend to blend modernity with tradition in a similar
search for an essence that at least approximated the hard ground of truth. The recovery of the
past secrets would regenerate the present. As Michael Brenner has argued in respect to the
Jewish renaissance, the recovery of religion is at least one part “modernist innovation,” a partial
refashioning of religious tradition.\textsuperscript{220} After 1918, such re-fashioning seemed justified as religions
had to speak for a century that began with visions of infinite progress and then lapsed into
sudden catastrophe.

Yet, catastrophe could be incorporated into visions of the new order. The modernist penchant for
violence and destruction is a constant thread among the discourses discussed here. Kracauer too
participated in this discourse, though in a muted fashion. As Michael Schröter noted in his
pioneering essay on Kracauer, tropes of violence are strikingly prevalent in his writing.\textsuperscript{221} In
\textit{Ginster}, individuals are imagined in a state of dismemberment as the violence of the war
penetrated into the consciousness of the home front. A visit to a baroque palace in Würzburg
provokes anger in Ginster towards the cultural relics of the past, and he longs to see the archaic
facades blown apart and smashed into rubble.\textsuperscript{222} In \textit{Georg}, as discussed above, the protagonist
entertained repressed desires of violence as he visited the burned out theatre. Schröter comments
that these desires for destruction are often connected with a desire for root and branch
reconstruction; hence, they are the necessary precursor to a new order. In this respect, he is in
accord with some of the apocalyptic visions of his friends, Bloch and Benjamin, both of whom

\textsuperscript{220} Brenner, \textit{The Renaissance of Jewish Culture}, p. 5; and Gordon, \textit{Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy} (Berkeley, 2005), pp. 238-248.
\textsuperscript{222} Kracauer, \textit{Ginster}, Werke 7, pp. 42-43.
recognized that violence was necessarily present at the foundation of a new order.\textsuperscript{223} However, Kracauer is somewhat more ambivalent, and in \textit{Georg}, as we have seen, there is only a grudging acceptance of the modern. There may be no tragedy in the loss of the old, but the coming victory of the “new sobriety” is hardly to be celebrated. In the mid-twenties, his articles by and large integrated this dual process of destruction and rebuilding into a sustained critique – what \textit{ratio} has torn asunder is, however, not gathered together in the form of a new totality, rather the fragments are decoded, the indeterminate nature of human relations are exposed, and the rethinking of the world becomes possible.\textsuperscript{224} This was a process suffused with a melancholy that lacked the vigorous acceptance of Bloch’s calls for armed revolt.

Yet, in contrast to Kracauer, Brod, Bloch and Lukács all opposed the war, even if one should not equate the repudiation of the war with pacifism. As Lukács stated, he would have welcomed the war as a means of bringing the old order to its knees; what he feared was that the wrong side might win. This would mean that “nothing could then save us from western civilization itself.”\textsuperscript{225} Bloch, of course, in his discussion of apocalypse peppered his rhetoric with images of violence. “Death’s accomplishment,” he intoned, “is thus to furnish a journeyman’s test of ourselves.”\textsuperscript{226} In a fashion that looked back to the work of Georges Sorel, revolutionary violence conferred meaning on life; it deepened it in an existential fashion. In his 1923 revision of \textit{Spirit of Utopia}, he wrote of the need for “the categorical imperative with a revolver in its hand.”\textsuperscript{227} That the rhetoric of these writers was meant to extend beyond the philosophical and the aesthetic is clear; their efforts were not intended to remain within a ghetto far removed from political and social events. Lukács himself was involved in revolutionary violence, while Bloch would later gloss over some of the bloodier episodes of the Russian revolution. The suppression of the Kronstadt


\textsuperscript{224} Hansen, “Decentric Perspectives,” pp. 54-56.

\textsuperscript{225} Lukács, \textit{Theory of the Novel}, p. 11.


\textsuperscript{227} Ibid., p. 242.
sailors, for instance, was seen by him as a necessary step against elements opposing the coming utopia.  

The political implications to be drawn from their work assumed an altered point of view towards the world “as it is.” As Leo Löwenthal later remarked, his reading of Lukács as a young man had incited his hatred towards the “infamy of the existent.” One should not accept the world as it was, but constantly set the utopian vision above and against it. The present became a condition of oppression, a hindrance to be overcome by the revolutionary spirit. He later described some of his own activities at the time, studying in the experimental institute run by Erich Fromm, as a kind of revolutionary cult with a strong admixture of Freud and Marx.  

Such views did not, of course, lend themselves to a pacifist mood. Kracauer, likewise, distinguished his protagonist in Georg by his scepticism towards the pacifism common to the intellectual circles he inhabited. However, if Kracauer was unwilling to embrace pacifism, it is not so easy to connect him with the radical aggression found in, for instance, the work of Bloch. Much of the violence that appears is only imagined, or it is random and without intention. This could be read as a means of representing a mental state of anxious passivity, a possibility Schröter also suggests. Still, even if the choice of figurative language is symptomatic, it does not necessarily constitute a call to arms. This ambiguity matches well with what Joseph Roth stated in his review of Ginster: that the book would please neither militarists nor pacifists. Violence and the vulnerability to violence become leitmotifs in his work, but they are integrated into a discourse of threatened subjectivity, an exposed inwardness at the mercy of implacable forces of rationalization. Hence, violence is mostly the imposition of an external force, more oppressive than liberating, and rarely is it celebrated as healing purgative.

230 Jacobs, “A most remarkable sect?” p. 84.
232 Roth, review of Ginster, quoted in Belke and Renz, Siegfried Kracauer, p. 53.
233 See his essay “Two Planes” of 1926. In this Denkbild the design of the city itself has a sinister component that exposes the “soft parts of the dream” to judgment “without mercy” (“Two Planes” FZ, September 26, 1926; reprinted in, Mass Ornament, pp. 37-39).
If one compares this post-war ambiguity with Kracauer’s initial enthusiasm towards the work of Scheler in 1916, the degree to which he distanced himself from violent passions is clear. Scheler drew a distinction between a German militarism that reflected the cultural ethos of the national Gemeinschaft, and the militarism of the allies that reflected rationally defined interests. Scheler, as Kracauer recognized, feared the spread of the capitalist ethic across Europe at the expense of culture; German militarism, as a force for the latter, was thus valorized as a resistance to the rational ethos. When the defence of culture in Scheler’s work is considered, he was not as far from the views of Bloch or Lukács as may at first appear; the primary difference is that whereas Scheler believed that the triumph of the Kaiserreich would further the cause of culture, Bloch and Lukács saw it as the triumph of civilization. As one French observer remarked, the prospect of a German victory meant that, “unbiased culture has had its day... The German factory is absorbing the world.”

For neither side of this question, however, was violence to be repudiated when it served the long-term interests of culture. Kracauer, on the other hand, by distancing himself from Scheler, from the radical visions of Bloch and the cruder variants of Marxist theory, demonstrated a fundamental ambivalence towards the violence that accrued around these projects. In the post-war period, given over to a wide array of radical imaginings, coups and revolutions, he argued for a passive attitude towards the present, a position that he felt was truly radical in a period that glorified dynamism for its own sake. In his journalism of these years, he investigated religious currents for signs that confirmed or opposed this belief. This, as will be discussed next, was manifest in the form his work took, as well as its content.

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Chapter 4
Article or Essay? Conceptions of the Feuilleton and Kracauer’s Idea of Criticism

The sense of effort seemed to me the thing to be sought, and I saw no value in those lucky finds that are no more than the natural fruits of our native powers. That is, results in general ... were much less important to me than the workman’s energy, the substance of things he hopes for. This shows that theology is to be found almost everywhere.¹

Indeed even the newspaper feuilleton, however shrunk to fit the capacities of the breakfast hour, has something of the blessed oral power to banish this curse of literature: its timelessness.²

Penury can turn every man into a journalist...³

As a journalist, Kracauer had a unique vantage point upon the borders of the sacred and the profane, one that was far from neutral. The newspaper figures prominently in accounts of secularization, and it is perceived as one of its more important agents, a force independent of the churches, confronting and diminishing religious authority.⁴ Undoubtedly, Kracauer would have reflected on this position; his review of a work by the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies remarked upon the zero-sum game that existed between the institutions of public opinion and religion.⁵ Thriving upon the innovations in print technology and the spread of mass literacy, the press seemed to be an icon of modernity. Before the Vatican recognized the press as an instrument to be used for its own ends, it tried to restrict the circulation of newspapers in the Papal States.⁶ Critics of the mass media have long sat on the cusp of this dilemma, using the press to bemoan the levelling effects of the modern newspaper while simultaneously relying upon it to disseminate their own words. Søren Kierkegaard, for instance, condemned the influence of the

⁵ Kracauer, “Kritik der Oeffentlichen Meinung,” FZ, November 24, 1922, (A) Literaturblatt.
press in *Two Ages*; the feuilleton in particular, he argued, was a force of intellectual and spiritual decay; the writer of feuilletons only substituted empty “chatter” in place of the experience of inwardness. Silence was to be preferred to the popular discourses of the press that ignored the religious and existential bases of life. “Together with the passionlessness and reflectivelessness of the age,” Kierkegaard wrote, “the abstractions of the press ... give rise to the abstraction’s phantom, the ‘public’ which is the real leveller.”⁷ To enter the journalistic profession was then to enter the belly of the beast; yet, Kierkegaard was still a participant in the culture of the feuilleton.⁸ When Kracauer began his career in journalism, he too expressed misgivings about his situation: “what one must do in order to earn money,” he complained to Susman in 1921.⁹

Kracauer’s lamentations aside, his career in journalism probably caused a substantial shift in his opinions. There is good reason to speak of a post-war re-fashioning of his identity, a process that saw him abandon his faltering career as an architect and turn towards writing. His reading of the war books was part of this process that was motivated by both material and intellectual motives. In some respects, Kracauer was representative of the potential for re-fashioning that accompanied the ongoing sense of crisis that distinguished the “classical modernity” of Weimar. The hardships caused by the economic and political disruptions of the Republic were, of course, a hindrance; but still the Republic was both threat and promise. In a climate of social and cultural flux, the individual could “go under” or reinvent oneself in a hurry. Figures of the latter sort populated the novels of Kracauer’s friend, Joseph Roth, characters such as Frances Tunda in *The Flight without End* or Nikolai Brandeis in *Right and Left*. Of Tunda, a former soldier who disappears into revolutionary Russia and then returns to Germany and becomes a writer, the narrator states:

> He acted mostly out of a mood, sometimes out of conviction, that is: always out of necessity. He possessed more force of life than the revolution needed at the moment; he possessed more autonomy than a theory that seeks to match life could ever need ... In order to fill his days, he needed complicated situations. He needed the atmosphere of confusing deceptions, false ideals, seeming vitality, lasting decay, he needed spooks

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⁹ Kracauer to Susman, January 25, 1921, SN, DLA.
daubed in red, the atmosphere of a graveyard that appears like a ballroom, or like a factory, or like castles, schools and salons. He needed the nearness of skyscrapers whose ability to stand up is doubted by all, but which, in spite of everything, will remain stable for centuries. He was a modern man.\textsuperscript{10}

Kracauer was by no means as adventurous as the fictional Francis Tunda, for instance, but he does have a kinship to such characters. The crisis forced him to relinquish what promised to be a mediocre career in architecture, and to become one of the more interesting critical voices in the Weimar press. This move responded to both inclination and need. He had a demonstrable interest in literature and had even published a short article with the \textit{FZ} when he was just seventeen years of age; architecture, on the contrary, was only a means of income (\textit{Brotheruf}).\textsuperscript{11} This remained a pressing problem for the Kracauer household for much of this period, and the low ebb of construction after 1918 meant that architectural work was scarce. He even entertained the idea of a move to Amsterdam in a bid to find work, before he landed a position at the \textit{FZ}. Thus, though he benefitted from the crisis in one sense, it should not obscure the fact that his financial position also compelled him to search for options. He may have availed himself of the radical “opportunity to choose” that historian Henry Pachter remembered as one of the distinctive aspects of the Weimar period, but he had concrete reasons for doing so.\textsuperscript{12} His situation probably resembled that of many Germans in this period of flux; political allegiances, work, religious and cultural identity all were subject to the vicissitudes of daily life in the republic. The emergence of new political parties, radical art movements, and veteran groups were only some of the numerous organizations in which the redefinition of the self could take place. Such associations competed aggressively for individual loyalties, and they worked to integrate their members in a variety of social and cultural networks.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{10} Such characters figure prominently in novels by Roth; see, for instance, Francis Tunda in \textit{Die Flucht ohne Ende: Ein Bericht}, reprinted in, \textit{Joseph Roth: Romane 1} (Köln, 1975). Also, see the character of Nikolai Brandeis in \textit{Right and Left} (New York and Woodstock, 1992).


According to one of Kracauer's contemporaries, the change in his career was accompanied by a “modernization” of his outlook. Leonie Meyerhof-Hildeck, a journalist on the FZ Stadtblatt and probably an earlier acquaintance from Munich, later reported to Viktor Klemperer that Kracauer was outwardly transformed: “he is supposed to be totally modern, totally intellectual and totally exalted over the fact.” To Klemperer, it must have seemed that Kracauer had given up his past wanderings in the deserts of aesthetic musing and cultural pessimism in order to embrace the whirl of the modern. Having noted Kracauer's general disinterest in politics, Klemperer may have been bemused by this choice of profession. Whereas before Kracauer had voiced his scorn for intellectual circles, and even for the FZ itself, he now was a public intellectual eager to contribute to the cacophony of the daily Weimar press. Instead of the turgid prose of his unpublished philosophical manuscripts, written mostly during the war, he now devoted himself to the feuilleton written for the fleeting moment. By entering the fray of what Peter Fritzsche has called the “word-city,” a numinous play of texts that overlaid and influenced perceptions of the modern metropolis, Kracauer had entered into the “public sphere that he had sought for so long.”

Yet, modernization for Kracauer should not be equated with a decisive repudiation of his convictions prior to the war. To be sure he grew disenchanted with Bergson and phenomenology, and there are the odd comments that suggest a more critical position towards Lebensphilosophie in general. However, his passage into journalism suggests a degree of uncertainty, a degree of hesitancy as he adjusted earlier views to different circumstances. Some of his judgments seem equivocal and inconsistent; thus, he dismissed the pursuit of party politics, but declared himself for a middling position in line with the paper’s support of the Democratic

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15 Kracauer, letter to Susman, 26 July 1920, SN, DLA: “I hate the literati and all that goes under the name of Geistiger und Intellektueller. That there are men such as Kasimir Edschmidt! The Frankfurter Zeitung is truly in decline.” Edschmidt (1890-1966), a German writer and early defender of expressionism, was an occasional contributor to the FZ.

16 Peter Fritzsche, Reading Berlin 1900 (Cambridge, 1998); and Kracauer, Georg, Werke 7, p. 320.

17 Oschmann, Auszug aus der Innerlichkeit, pp. 20-38.

18 In his letter to Simmel of November 30, 1917 he had already begun to speak critically of the work of Bergson, for instance; see Simmel, Briefe 1912-1918: Jugendbriefe, pp. 884.
There is a grain of truth, perhaps, in Bloch’s description of Kracauer as a wayward intellectual in search of an agenda, or in Bloch’s words, an ersatz Kierkegaard in search of his Hegel. Kracauer himself had an interest in this type of individual, those who were mentally restless and inclined to second-guess even their innermost thoughts:

...they mistrust the genuineness and origins of their [own] sentiments and harbour feelings of resentment against the kinds of instinctual life that shoot up all around them. Their thoughts, feelings and actions are not in harmony with one another.

After the war, he himself was still given to periods of comparable uncertainty, at one moment, stating his desire to “pack his bags” and find work in the Soviet Union, and then denying the practicality of such plans in the next. “One must have a position,” declares the protagonist of Georg, and as with Kracauer himself, a position was not easily found. Moreover, Kracauer felt disadvantaged by his weak background in philosophy, and as a result, so he thought, he was hindered from finding those prospects that would have allowed him the public role that he wanted. He bemoaned the fact that many of his friends and acquaintances had surpassed him and found rewarding work, whereas he had become “ancient” and fatigued by his “eternally improvised existence.” Joining the staff of the FZ mitigated this situation, but before 1924, when he became a full editor, his independence was constrained. Moreover, he was obliged to cover myriad local affairs and this infringed upon his time for his own projects. A deluge of proposals for philosophical and sociological studies appear in his letters to Susman, most of which were probably never completed. He was, thus, more or less a writer for hire and not without an eye for a potential weakness did Bloch belittle him as a hack writer, philosophically incompetent, and untouched by even “a breath of the metaphysics and suffering of existence.”

19 Brodersen, Siegfried Kracauer, pp. 31-33.
20 Ernst Bloch, Durch die Wüste, (Berlin, 1923), quoted in Belke and Renz, Siegfried Kracauer, p. 40.
23 Kracauer, Georg, Werke 7, p. 321
24 Kracauer to Susman, June 16, 1920, SN, DLA.
25 Kracauer to Susman, May 28, 1920, reprinted in Belke and Renz, Siegfried Kracauer, p. 34.
26 See, for instance, his letters to Susman of July 26, 1920 and January 4, 1921, SN, DLA.
27 Bloch, see p. 120, note 20 above. By the time Durch die Wüste was published Kracauer was more established in his career and could respond in kind. The “journalistic compromise” was not so bad, he wrote to Löwenthal,
Journalism was an intellectual outlet for Kracauer, but it was one that was compromised by his need to make money and after the death of his father and in lieu of the coming retirement of his uncle this was imperative. Kracauer and his mother even decided to share a residence with his uncle and aunt in Frankfurt North (not as fashionable a district then as it is today) just to cut living expenses.

Yet, journalism was a profession that had a number of negative connotations attached, of which Kracauer was undoubtedly aware. Reputed to be one of the lowest forms of writing, journalism was condemned by many intellectuals. Kierkegaard’s criticism of the press was revisited in the writings of Karl Kraus and Theodor Haecker. The press, according to these writers, served and perpetuated a mediocre readership, lacking in judgment. Kracauer expressed similar misgivings concerning the question of the so-called “average reader” during a confrontation between himself and the feuilleton editors of the FZ in 1920 over one of his essays. The so-called “average reader” was a “dubious abstraction,” he complained to Susman. Moreover, if one was dealing with a complex subject (in this case, the Austrian philosopher, Rudolf Kassner) then one needed to use difficult formulations. The editors of the feuilleton, Rudolf Geck and Bernhard Diebold, disagreed, and the essay in question was never published and has since been lost. However, Kracauer appears to have relented on this question during his time as writer and editor. When Adorno experienced a similar problem publishing in the FZ, Kracauer reminded him that his language was not without its difficulties, and if one took risks in terms of expression, than one had to accept that the experiment could fail. A writer could push against the bounds of the average reader, but one could only push where the audience could follow. Though this suggests a compromise on Kracauer’s part, it was not altogether incongruous with some of his later statements on the limitations of language. Language, in general, was a contested territory in the confrontation between secularism and religious revival, as will be discussed below.

Before considering some arguments over theological or metaphysical status of language, some attention should be given to the debate over whether the essay or feuilleton was a forum for any

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whereas the “life of compromise” of someone such as Bloch was much more severe: “you could see this in the facts of his life” (Kracauer to Löwenthal, October 16, 1923, In steter Freundschaft, p. 49).


29 Kracauer to Susman, January 20, 1920, SN, DLA.

substantial subject at all. Could the feuilleton even be equated with the essay? In general, Kracauer only contributed to this dispute in an indirect fashion, but a defence of the feuilleton as a forum for serious critique underpinned his critical vocation during the twenties and thirties. Arguments for the opposite came from any number of quarters, and Kracauer parodied the issue in Georg. When the protagonist is glorying in his first newspaper publication, he tries when speaking with the paper’s editor, to insist on the term “essay” (Aufsatz), whereas the editor pointedly keeps referring to his “article”– Georg felt the latter term was not “substantial enough.” However, since Georg does not want to alienate the editor, he eventually relents and accepts the more pedestrian terminology. The entrance into literature does not come easily for the writer of feuilletons.

The outlines of this dispute over the feuilleton’s status have been discussed extensively, so only a few instances of the “anti-feuilleton” polemic, drawn from among Kracauer’s contemporaries, will be discussed here. The prejudice against the journalist and the feuilleton writer had deep roots and, according to Golo Mann, even after 1918 a minor lecturer still “would think himself superior to a Maximilian Harden or even a Heinrich Heine.” Even a newspaper of some prestige, such as the FZ, could not readily overcome this prejudice. During the 1920s, the FZ feuilleton maintained a high quality of writing that included contributions as diverse as the contemporary novels of Joseph Roth, the letters of Schopenhauer, essays by André Gide, and the poetry of Langston Hughes; even so, for the staff writers there was still the taint of journalism. From within the academy, the journalist and essayist represented a lower intellectual order, and a figure such as Simmel was practically guilty of a professional misdemeanour when he chose to write for the press. Kracauer’s friend, Klemperer, was also dismissive of the press and upon hearing that Kracauer had become an editor with the FZ, he wrote that “he thanked his maker that he had never had to address the unsightly audience of the daily newspaper.” The symptomatic mingling of the “private and the public” that distinguished journalism was, he

32 Kracauer, Georg, Werke 7, p.286.
33 Golo Mann quoted in Mendes-Flohr, Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity (Detroit, 1991), pp. 36-37.
insinuated, the sign of an illegitimate compromise.\textsuperscript{35} Such accusations, so the argument went, were confirmed by the apparent randomness of content found in the newspaper; a critique, whatever literary or aesthetic merit it might possess, would still appear alongside tales of crime and sensation, or amidst “stock-market swings and the death of a prostitute,” as Stefan Zweig tactfully wrote in a private letter to Kracauer in 1930.\textsuperscript{36}

Moreover, the journalist was compromised by a lack of independence, always being subject to the potential constraints of an editorial line. In this respect, Lukács saw the feuilleton writer as especially representative of the compromise needed to survive under capitalism. Writing in \textit{History and Class Consciousness} (a work that Kracauer had read) Lukács claimed that the process of reification reached its zenith in the newspaperman:

> Here it is precisely subjectivity itself, knowledge, temperament and powers of expression that are reduced to an abstract mechanism functioning autonomously and divorced both from the personality of their “owner” and from the material and concrete nature of the subject matter in hand.\textsuperscript{37}

Such accusations implied that daily newspapers inevitably lowered the standards of those who wrote for and read them. From this point of view, the press was a bastion of reactionary tendencies.

Given the limitations of the newspaper as a public forum, some believed that the “responsible” critic had to adopt a kind of critical relativism. In a letter to Kracauer, Stefan Zweig argued that without such a “relativism of values” he could see nothing beneficial coming out of criticism in the daily press; substantial work of any kind could not be discussed adequately by underpaid writers who must choose their words in accordance with the meagre amount of space given to the average newspaper article.\textsuperscript{38} Hence, writers like Kracauer who wanted to undertake serious critique, be it social, political or cultural, were in effect overstepping the bounds of journalism.

\textsuperscript{35} Klemperer, \textit{Leben sammeln} II, p. 887.
\textsuperscript{36} Stefan Zweig to Kracauer, August 26, 1930, KN, DLA.
\textsuperscript{38} Stefan Zweig to Kracauer, September 27, 1930, KN, DLA.
Criticism of this sort was bound to misfire as it either confused readers by stretching the bounds of comprehension, or it lapsed into empty polemics that lacked the needed column space to justify the views expressed.

Such criticism was even more hazardous when it came to writing on works with a religious intent. Kracauer was reproached on this issue in early 1926 by Susman, shortly after he had written a sarcastic notice concerning the forthcoming publication of the Buber and Rosenzweig Bible translation. Her letter conceded the differences that lay between them on religious questions, and upon these differences she wanted to make no claims. However, she argued that he was obliged to forgo negative criticism when he was writing for a newspaper audience as such an audience was in no position to assess the work in question or the critic’s judgment of it. Moreover, religious language, she continued, required a different kind of critical method:

Criticisms, above all negative criticism, always stand in discord with creative accomplishment. Negative criticism only has value in the sense in which the Romantics practiced it: as a creative afterlife of the work, even up to its destruction from its own premises. This I hold as possible, even in regards to the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible, if one speaks a creative language, and to be sure a creative language out of a religious starting point.

Her concept of creative language (sprachschöpferisch) was meant to distinguish between different levels of discourse, and there was a clearly implied hierarchy in this distinction. Writing in a newspaper, Kracauer could not pretend to be approaching a level of criticism that was of the same creative order as that staked out in the work of Rosenzweig and Buber. It followed from this that his critique could only distort such work, and, for this reason, Susman felt he was obliged to forgo negative criticism, at least in this forum. Thus, the language of religion, in this case biblical translation, was not to be viewed as everyday language. As Rosenzweig argued, religious messengers were not “postmen bringing yesterday’s news”; on the contrary, their

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39 Susman to Kracauer, March 22, 1926, KN, DLA.
40 Susman to Kracauer, March 22, 1926, KN, DLA. As Susman’s letter to Kracauer was written before his review had appeared, it is possible that he may have shown her the essay prior to publication as he had done with his essay on Scheler. However, their friendship appears to have soured in the interim. See Kracauer to Adorno, April 16, 1925, *Briefwechsel, 1923-1966*, p. 49.
language was a potential vessel for divine “presence” and this presence was the only source that could legitimate or invalidate the use of such language.\footnote{Franz Rosenzweig, “Scripture and Word: On the new Bible Translation,” \textit{Scripture and Translation}, pp. 40-46, esp. p. 42.}

Such remarks were, of course, not without some barbs that drew upon the general disparagement of journalism and, hence, the alleged intellectual inferiority of Kracauer’s position. This was all the more pointed, as only in 1924 did Kracauer gain a significant degree of autonomy in terms of choosing his subject matter; before this time he was subject to the whim of his superiors and could not pursue his interests at will. Also, with only a number of feuilletons and a forgotten volume of sociology in print how could he presume to criticize the works of eminent and learned individuals such as Scheler, Buber or Rosenzweig? Through her friendship with Kracauer, Susman would have been quite aware of his often stunted ambitions, as well as some of his frustrations regarding the \textit{FZ}. She had been a confidant for a number of years, and she knew firsthand of his various plans and projects that had failed to materialize.

Thus, having failed to address himself to an academic audience, Kracauer had to turn towards the motley public. Compared to the discourse of religious revival, this was indeed a debased forum of address; for the journalist had no specific audience that compelled one to write, only a paymaster and a deadline. As Rosenzweig wrote to Kracauer’s newspaper colleague, Hermann Herrigel, he could never “understand how one could write without a definite conception of an addressee,” for he “had never let a single word escape without a definite idea of its intended audience.”\footnote{Rosenzweig to Herrigel, January 9, 1925, \textit{Franz Rosenzweig: Der Mensch und Sein Werk. Briefe} 1.2, pp. 1014-1015.} For Rosenzweig, a language that was addressed to the “last things” could not be strewn about pell-mell as was the case in a newspaper. When he and Buber addressed the critics of their Bible translation, they made reference to this point; journalism, they claimed, was a “devalued human discourse,” both “unsystematic” and “uncompelled.”\footnote{Rosenzweig and Buber, “Concerning a Translation and a Review,” \textit{Scripture and Translation}, p. 165. In this essay Buber and Rosenzweig responded to a review written by Richard Koch, also a contributor to the \textit{FZ} who was affiliated with the Free Jewish School.} It was a fallen language that spoke only to those who lived a restricted existence in a secular world view, and it said nothing to those who were oriented towards the religious sphere. In Buber’s terms, this language could only speak to the “It” relationship that prevailed in a materialist conception of the
world, but not to the "Thou" relation that presumed a true understanding of the connections between humankind, God and world.44

Thus, the claim that the essay was a serious means of criticism was considered by some intellectuals to be a provocation in and of itself.45 However, there was a significant counter-discourse that tried to correct this position. As Helmut Stalder has pointed out in his study of Kracauer's journalism, the general disenchantment with philosophical system-builders (Kant and Hegel foremost among them) had led towards a surge of interest in the "essayistic" approach, a form that was well within the limitations imposed on contemporary journalism. The diminutive form, so it was argued, should not be identified with diminutive intentions or inessential content. Thus, Robert Musil argued that the essay was not simply "science with slippers," but rather a different mode of analysis with a different set of criteria by which its effectiveness should be measured.46 Even Kraus and Haecker, in spite of their wide-ranging condemnation of the daily press, deployed the essay form and, according to Allen Janik, they recognized its validity when it was charged with a satirical content that "clothed the inward person's spirituality."47 Hence, the "small form" could aspire to legitimacy; though, both Haecker and Kraus had a much greater degree of independence than the average feuilleton writer of the daily press.48

Kracauer's attempt to reserve for the feuilleton a critical function was assisted by the fact that when he joined the FZ, the feuilleton section was in a transitional period, shifting towards a more analytical position and away from the concept of the feuilleton as intellectual diversion.49 The latter position was associated with the editorial leadership of Geck and Diebold who, by and large, viewed it as a forum of intellectual stimulation, but not one that should embrace serious political content or be too mentally strenuous. This should not obscure the fact that the FZ had

44 Kracauer reviewed Buber's work in Die Tat in 1923; see "Martin Buber," Schriften 5.1, pp. 236-242.
48 The term kleine Form was coined by Alfred Polgar in his defense of the essay; see Stalder, Siegfried Kracauer: Das journalistische Werk, pp. 203-204.
49 Stalder, Siegfried Kracauer: Das journalistische Werk, pp. 90-95; and Wolfgang Schivelbusch, Intellektuellendämmerung, pp. 63-67.
historically adopted some strikingly oppositional stances, as during the *Kulturkampf* and the persecution of Social Democracy – a tendency that was mandated by the testament of its founder, Leopold Sonnemann.\(^{50}\) Moreover, the feuilleton under Geck and Diebold had given space to more radical voices, such as Joseph Roth. Roth, for his part, condemned the idea that the feuilleton should be reduced to a mere appendage of the newspaper, a kind of “edifying dessert” (*Bildungsdessert*) to be consumed after having gnawed one’s way through the meat of politics and the economy.\(^{51}\) This openness probably explains why there were cordial relations between the “old guard” of the feuilleton and the younger members such as Kracauer and Benno Reifenberg. Indeed, in conversation Kracauer and Diebold even used the *Du*-form of address, a practice that was supposedly uncommon even among long-time colleagues in the *FZ* offices.\(^{52}\) This open editorial environment appears to have encouraged and anticipated the intellectual breadth of the paper during the mid- and late twenties.

In any case, the appointment of Reifenberg to the editorship of the feuilleton in 1924 allowed more latitude for radically critical voices in the area of culture. For Kracauer, Reifenberg’s rise meant greater opportunity for his own critical ambitions. Stalder has argued that Reifenberg, in conjunction with Kracauer, and with the contributing influence of Joseph Roth, led the *FZ* feuilleton towards a position that was more critical of Weimar society.\(^{53}\) The feuilleton was, according to Roth, no longer to play a subsidiary role, but rather was to assume a leading interpretive function – an idea that was decidedly sympathetic to Kracauer. The political section, Roth implied rather dismissively, simply reported facts; but the interpretation of these facts, and their synthesis with other spheres of experience was the task of the feuilleton writer. As Roth wrote to Reifenberg in 1926, “*I show the face of the times.* That is the task of the large newspaper. I am a journalist, not a writer of reports; I am a writer, not a scribbler of lead articles.”\(^{54}\) The feuilleton thus had a disruptive function; its goal was to upset the hierarchy of the


\(^{51}\) The expression is from “Feuilleton” by Joseph Roth, *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, October 4, 1921; quoted in Stalder, *Siegfried Kracauer: Das journalistische Werk*, p. 78. On the feuilleton editors also see, Gillessen, pp. 64-68.


\(^{53}\) Ibid., pp. 90-93 and pp. 102-103.

\(^{54}\) Stalder, *Siegfried Kracauer: Das journalistische Werk* pp. 94-96; and Roth to Benno Reifenberg, April 22, 1926, *Joseph Roth: Briefe*, pp. 87-89. The italicization is in the original text.
paper. According to Stalder, this was deliberate, and it found expression in the seemingly indiscriminate blending of subject matter celebrated by Roth. Thus, the higher spheres of politics, theatre, and religion, were juxtaposed to film, dancers, and vignettes of the urban landscape.\footnote{Stalder, \textit{Siegfried Kracauer: Das journalistische Werk}, pp. 94-95.}

Aside from disrupting the conventional hierarchies in the newspaper, the feuilleton also sought to inject a different method of criticism. It was not only the systematizing tendencies of philosophical discourse that was challenged by defenders of the feuilleton, but also the alleged reliance of these systems on abstraction. The essayist sought to break with this heritage as he worked directly with everyday experience. On account of this closer relationship with the quotidian, the “truth contents” that the essay yielded had greater validity than those obtained by way of idealist abstraction. Instead of system and logic, there was a purported sensitivity to material existence, and more nuance in terms of the qualities of these experiences.\footnote{For a philosophical defence of the essay form see Theodor Adorno, “Essay as Form,” \textit{Notes to Literature} 1, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York, 1991), pp. 3-23; and Robert Musil, \textit{Man without Qualities}, pp. 267-277.} The journalist was, as a result, the prototypical representative of this kind of analysis as his obligations to the present moment kept them in close contact with the stuff of everyday life. The detail, the fragmentary glimpses that filtered through the kaleidoscope of mass culture were less prone to escape their eye; academic philosophy, on the other hand, tended to steer clear of these subjects. Hence, Ernst Bloch in a discussion of Benjamin’s \textit{One-way Street}, coined the phrase, the “revue form in philosophy,” an almost “surrealistic philosophizing” that he characterized as “public process, as dialectical experiment-figures of process.”\footnote{Bloch, “Revue Form in Philosophy,” \textit{Heritage of our Times} (Berkeley, 1991), pp. 336-337; also, see the discussion in Stalder, \textit{Siegfried Kracauer: Das journalistische Werk}, p. 15.}

In order to uphold the validity of the feuilleton as a form that matched “the tensions and need of the time,” some of its proponents insisted on a distinction between it and mere journalism.\footnote{Alfred Polgar, “The Small Form,” \textit{The Vienna Coffeehouse Wits, 1890-1938}, ed. and trans. Harold B. Segel (West Lafayette, 1995), pp. 279-281; and Stalder, \textit{Siegfried Kracauer: Das journalistische Werk}, p. 203.} In 1925, Hugo von Hofmannsthal had argued for a distinction between the essay and feuilleton that legitimated the essay as a serious form, but tried to separate it from its practitioners in the daily press. The latter, he wrote, was a product “of the day that vanishes and is forgotten.”\footnote{Hofmannsthal quoted in Stalder, \textit{Siegfried Kracauer: Das journalistische Werk}, p. 93.}
Hofmannsthal, the essay should be a means of restoring tradition, a rediscovery of form, and not an aesthetic medium to be taken over by journalists wanting to display their own psychological sensitivities. The danger of psychologism had also been warned against by one of the feuilleton’s early proponents, Theodor Herzl. The feuilleton writer, Herzl wrote, had a propensity “to [fall] in love with his spirit, and thus [lose] any standard of judging himself or others.”60 Haecker also identified this danger when he stated that the feuilleton was simply a venue for an erroneous confusion of subjective and objective accounts of reality.61

Defences of the feuilleton did not strictly oppose this accusation of subjectivity. Lukács argued that the essay generated “within itself all the preconditions for the effectiveness and validity of its vision.” Thus, he confirmed the reliance upon subjectivity that characterized the essay form, and, as a result, exposed it to further reproach from its critics.62 One could argue that the essay created laws to which it then must conform, but without clearly defined measures of these laws it was not clear how this allowed it to escape from the trap of subjectivism.63 Moreover, references to the “laws” governing essay form were sometimes stated in an elusive fashion. In Robert Musil’s Man without Qualities, the narrator insists that the essay should not be confused with, “the irresponsible and half-baked quality of thought known as subjectivism.” However, he continued, “terms like true and false, wise and unwise are equally inapplicable ... the essay is subject to laws that are no less strict for appearing to be delicate and ineffable.”64 Yet, what were these laws and how was this supposed to allow the essay’s self-generated criteria to become more concrete?

One way around this question was to place the emphasis on method, or what Wuthenow has called the “process character” of the essay. This was sometimes considered to be more significant than any instructive value offered by its conclusions.65 For the essay’s intention was

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60 Herzl quoted in Carl Schorske, Fin-de-Siècle Vienna, p. 9.
61 Janik, “Haecker, Kierkegaard and the early Brenner,” p. 211.
63 On this problem see the brief discussion by Peter Bürger, “Über den Essay: Ein Brief an Malte Fues,” in Das Denken des Herrn: Bataille zwischen Hegel und dem Surrealismus, Essays (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), pp. 7-14.
64 Musil, Man without Qualities, p. 273.
to actualize a mode of thought in language, an analytic method that rendered its own operations transparent and, thus, in some way drew itself nearer to the object of inquiry. The inchoate world of modernity would be preserved as such, and the confrontation between formless experience and form-giving consciousness would manifest itself in the essay’s formal character. As a result, the essay writer did not search out insights that could then be shaped into well-crafted sentences; instead the encounter between writer and world was embodied within the form itself. This then yielded what Musil called a “total insight,” derived from “the unique and unalterable form assumed by a man’s inner life in a decisive thought.”

Thus, the truth that an essay contained was not to be found in the writer’s attempt to gain hold and penetrate into the core of his or her object, but rather was something found in the process itself. In Lukács’ words, just as Saul went out in search of his father’s donkey and then found a kingdom, the essayist never reached his or her intended goal, but instead found a richer reward, life itself.

The essayist then was not shying away from the claim that he or she could advance towards truth. The “utopian intentions” that Adorno later claimed for the essay, were already implied by its defenders in the twenties. Such claims placed the object of essayistic writing in a liminal zone, sometimes described in theological terms. In a chapter of Man without Qualities that explicitly referred to the “utopia of essayism,” Musil described the essay’s proper object of investigation as an undefined region, located somewhere between “religion and knowledge ... between amor intellectualis and poetry.” It was a region that eluded easy classification and that existed in a mediated area between truth and subjective experience:

Examples of what lies in between can be found in every moral precept, such as the well-known and simple: Thou shalt not kill. One sees right off that that is neither a fact nor a subjective experience. We know that we adhere to it strictly in some respects, while allowing for a great many, if sharply defined exceptions; but in a very large number of cases of a third kind, involving imagination, desires, drama, or the enjoyment of a news story, we vacillate erratically between aversion and attraction.

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66 Musil, Man without Qualities, p. 273-274.
69 Musil, Man without Qualities, p. 273.
70 Musil, Man without Qualities, p. 274; the italics are my own.
This “third case” then constituted his vague object of inquiry, one that hovered between sacred and profane. The career of Musil’s protagonist, Ulrich, to some degree paralleled the essay’s pursuit of truth; he abandons the more conventional paths of science and military service and then gravitates towards an undefined career as a kind of consultant in public relations for the royal house. This distinctively modern and vaguely defined occupation leaves him in a position of intellectual limbo; the narrator describes him as one “deliberately doing nothing: he was waiting.”

The claim to avoid subjectivism was manifest in the narrator’s dismissive gesture towards aestheticism. This, we are told, was more suspect as it burdened experience with a self-contrived system of values that rejected any experience outside of itself. Thus, the impositions of an artistic sensibility are closer to the exaggerated subjectivity of the mere journalist whose psychologising instincts became the primary contents in the bad variants of the essay. According to Musil’s narrator, the devotee of science was actually more open to the potential for revelation than the aesthete. For when and if revelation presented itself in a framework that made it absolutely recognizable, the scientist would accept it; the aesthete, however, was more inclined to reject the messianic as unoriginal, un-aesthetic or “not sufficiently intelligible.” Between the “truths” of science and those of revelation the essayist had to remain suspended. Aesthetic reconciliation should not be the goal as it threatened a false resolution of the suspended condition.

The critic then was one who waited in the liminal space between the real and the metaphysical. According to Lukács, the critic was a “precursor” or watchman whose role was to wait, observe and assist in the creation of the forms that would further the “destined” evolution of culture. This was a labour that was scarcely perceptible, but crucial nonetheless. As he wrote in his defence of the essay, if one were to imagine the variety of literary genres as a ray of sunlight the essay would be constituted by “ultra-violet rays.” Moreover, this hidden task of the critic was also a quasi-theological one that he described as a species of aesthetic redemption:

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71 Musil, Man without Qualities, p. 276
72 Musil, Man without Qualities, p. 276.
73 Lukács “Platonism, Poetry and Form,” Soul and Form, pp. 19-27.
...it is not the [the critic] who awakens [aesthetic judgments] to life and action: the one who whispers them into his ear is the great value-definer of aesthetics, the one who is always about to arrive, the one who is never quite there, the only one who has been called judge. The essayist is a Schopenhauer who writes his Parerga while waiting for the arrival of ... The World as Will and Idea; he is a John the Baptist who goes out to preach in the wilderness about another who is still to come.  

Thus, Lukács’ conception of the critic arrives at a position similar to that of Musil; the critic or essayist is the one who waits – a gesture that Lukács deliberately expressed in theological language. The critic, they suggest, is the precursor of a different order, and the essay is the form that matches this function.

The gesture of waiting, however, is ill adapted to the requirements of writing for a newspaper, driven as it is by deadlines and the need to reckon with what is considered current. Without doubt this meant some adjustments and difficulties for Kracauer, in spite of his assurances to Löwenthal that the compromises involved were “not of the worst sort.”  

One contemporary described the feuilleton section of the FZ as having a “knave’s freedom” (Narrenfreiheit) akin to that enjoyed by an autonomous republic in the old Habsburg Empire – that is, autonomous only under the condition that it did not transgress the line dictated by the political and economic departments. Kracauer encountered interference from this quarter when he sought to publish the series of articles that comprised The Salaried Employees in 1929. Though this episode occurred in the later years of the Republic, there appear to have been good reasons for Joseph Roth’s general complaint that Kracauer’s work underwent a “peculiar wandering through the Eschenheimer Landstrasse” before it saw the light of day. To his friend and editorial colleague, Bernhard Guttmann, he conceded that it was sometimes difficult to print everything that required expression:

The situation of the newspaper, personal questions, the German situation, as one has to treat this in the newspaper and so forth – these are all

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76 Kracauer to Löwenthal, October 16, 1923, In steter Freundschaft, p. 49.
78 Joseph Roth to Kracauer, May 6, 1926, KN, DLA. The Eschenheimer Landstrasse was where the main offices of the FZ were located.
questions that demand expression. You will certainly have noticed in my article ... that much has remained unsaid. I desire only that the background should nonetheless show through, and that what cannot appear openly in daylight should become transparent to the attentive reader. 79

As the concluding sentence suggests, one means of responding to this difficulty was to work with an indirect mode of expression.

To be sure, towards the end of the Republic, politics had a considerable influence on editorial tactics, yet this was hardly exceptional for a newspaper, and even in the early 20s Kracauer had begun to formulate an indirect mode of address that wanted to elicit a deeper response from his readership. Indeed, the more critical the subject matter, the more desirable it was to avoid an overtly polemical approach. 80 Silence, distortion, disfigurement all emerged in his writing as a means of emphasizing the indirect mode of reading and communication. 81 In this context, the question of address was crucial. On the one hand, some of the hindrances of the newspaper could be vaulted over if one could establish an indirect channel between the writer and reader; yet, to the journalist the reader remained an obscure entity. “But for whom does one write? Do you know an answer?” Kracauer asked Benjamin in 1927. 82 In contrast, as noted above, Rosenzweig had argued that he never wrote without a clear idea of whom he sought to address. In spite of this contrast it should be noted that Kracauer did receive a number of letters from readers that seemed to confirm his approach. On the other hand, Rosenzweig later felt obliged to publish an essay of explanation to accompany his notoriously difficult work, The Star of Redemption. 83 Yet, the problems of interpretation should not be blurred by this comparison; the different situation and venues in which they published, to say nothing of the complexity of Rosenzweig’s work, presupposed very different problems.

However, attempts at self-clarification are not common among Kracauer’s writings. Hence, a sense of how he conceived of his role as a critic, how he approached the problems of addressing a mass audience, and what means to use, only emerges in fragments from a number of scattered

79 Kracauer to Guttmann, March 16, 1931, KN, DLA.
80 Stalder, Siegfried Kracauer: Das journalistische Werk, pp. 106-110.
81 Koch, Siegfried Kracauer, pp. 17-20.
remarks and the few essays that touched directly upon these subjects. Given what has been discussed in the paragraphs above, it is probably not without significance that two of the essays that deal with these issues most overtly were written for journals other than the FZ: “The Artist in Our Time” was published in Der Morgen, a periodical edited by his former professor in philosophy, Julius Goldstein; and “Two Kinds of Communication” was intended for Max Rychner’s Neue Schweizer Rundschau but remained unpublished in his lifetime. In conjunction with these essays, further contributions on dialogue, on film criticism and intellectuals, both from the FZ and elsewhere, allow one to flesh out his conception of the critical vocation. What emerges is not a comprehensive attempt to define the task of criticism, but rather a group of themes that offer a partial description of his critical vocation.

In spite of these limitations, some themes are articulated with regularity. One, Kracauer’s vision of modernity as a secularized age bereft of meaning required a critical mode that sought to address his readers in a different way. Thus, he preferred to work in what he referred to as “negative constellations,” a form that crystallized into the “thought-images” (Denkbilder) for which he became reasonably well known. 84 Second, behind this position were a number of ideas about language that drew from widespread interest in concepts of negativity that distinguished post-war philosophy. There was an impulse to discover and plunder the depths of the “negative” in the 1920s: negative theology, the negation of language, the void and the “nothingness” of Heidegger all attest to this interest, though in vastly different ways, of course. Through his work on the feuilleton and literary pages, Kracauer was well informed of these trends and they are often refracted through his writing, though he rarely adopts any idea whole cloth. Finally, by refusing to temper his criticism in accordance with the alleged limitations of the newspaper, Kracauer maintained that the press was a legitimate forum in which modernity could be interpreted for a multifaceted readership. 85

85 Stalder, Siegfried Kracauer: Das journalistische Werk, pp. 110-111.
Who then was the “average reader” that Kracauer sought to address? The FZ had a distinct character among the mass circulation press. Reputed to be of a high intellectual calibre, the paper sought to address an educated public that, in practice, largely consisted of readers in business and the professions. A non-professional reader was probably rare and the circulation numbers attest to this; the paper peaked in circulation during World War I at around 100 000 subscribers, but most often the number was fewer. At the very least Kracauer could assume that he addressed someone who was educated and expected from the FZ a level of intellectual engagement that was not common to all papers.

Still, the relationship between author and reader remained nebulous, a situation that, I would argue, Kracauer tried to compensate for by attempting to preserve, in as much as was possible, the conditions of an ideal form of dialogue. As Kracauer once told Susman, the platonic dialogues, not the Old Testament, were his Bible. Hence, he tried to address the “general reader” not as an abstraction, but rather as a potential discussion partner. This meant transferring his ideas of the purposes and conditions of dialogue, as a kind of ideal type, into the real milieu of journalism. A description of this “ideal type” was to be found in his essay of 1923 entitled, “Creative Discourse” and which he published in the FZ. Kracauer was concerned primarily with dialogues that had as their object the search for “last things,” or in other words, religious and philosophical truth. The relationship was not to be one of instruction with one party furnishing wisdom to the other, but rather it was an encounter where both could test their thought against the other as a “foil,” and where part of the object of the discussion was the discovery of what could not be effaced in the other, the core of subjectivity that could not be erased. “Who actually is this with whom I speak?” he asked. According to Kracauer, this was the question that should guide both parties of the truly creative dialogue. The desire to posit one’s own subjectivity as an absolute would then be checked by the absolute encountered in the other, for the “deepest convictions of a person are bound to their nature in such a way that the manner in which they step towards the Absolute depends upon the composition of their indelible

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87 Kracauer to Susman, May 2, 1920, SN, DLA.
88 Kracauer, “Das Zeugende Gespräch,” *FZ*, March 30, 1923 (M); reprinted in Kracauer, *Der Verbotene Blick*, pp. 112-120.
89 Ibid., p. 114
existence.” The argument’s object then was not to persuade, but rather to seek a kind of recognition; once this point was attained both partners proceeded to the crucial “struggle of forms” (Ringen der Gestalten) from which the new forms that would lead closer to truth would be created. This moment Kracauer described as a “course of struggle” (Gefechtsgang) that intertwined “facts” and “essence,” and in which the “whole person,” not simply the intellect or the emotions, fully participated. No fusion of the individuals emerged from the dialogue, but rather a joint creation of form, an “act of intellectual and spiritual procreation” (Zeugung) that would then contribute to the monologues by which every individual pursued their solitary way towards truth. Monologue and discourse were thus different means of aspiring towards a common if not precisely defined goal: “It may be possible that the state of being gripped by faith (Ergriffensein) sets an end to the anxiety of existence at its fullest.” The discourse was thus a “tormenting thorn” that allowed neither for rest nor intellectual complacency, an image that Kracauer probably derived from his reading of Kierkegaard’s “thorn in the flesh.” His account, more generally, is suggestive of his interest in Kierkegaard’s dialectical theology that he wedded to the search for forms encountered in Simmel’s tragic evolution of culture. It was probably these philosophical overtones that prompted Rosenzweig to remark in a letter to Kracauer that the essay, in fact, was concerned with a “problem of logic.”

The conditions of this ideal dialogue were of course lacking in the domain of the newspaper, but nonetheless Kracauer imported some of the intentions that he associated with this ideal type into his critical work. This goes some distance to explaining Roth’s obscure remark that Kracauer wrote out of a “sense of nobility that was no longer for this world.” For since knowledge of an absolute nature was the goal, the corresponding obligations had to remain in force absolutely; judgments had to have recourse to consistent criteria, whether the critique appeared in a

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90 Ibid., p. 115.
91 Ibid., pp. 114-115.
92 Ibid., p. 118. The word Ergriffensein was associated with the theology of Paul Tillich.
93 Ibid., p. 119. By 1923 Kracauer and Adorno were both reading Kierkegaard. Kracauer told Löwenthal, “If [Adorno] should ever one day make a real declaration of love… then certainly it will be formulated with such difficulty that the young woman will have to have read … the entirety of Kierkegaard, from Sickness unto Death to the Fragments, in order to understand anything at all, or to misunderstand him and refuse” (Kracauer to Löwenthal, December 8, 1923, In steter Freundschaft, p. 51).
94 Franz Rosenzweig to Kracauer, May 25, 1923, KN, DLA. As Inka Mülder-Bach points out, the influence of Buber’s dialogic thinking is also probably in evidence here, see Mülder, Siegfried Kracauer—Grenzgänger, p. 46.
newspaper or elsewhere. This also meant, so Roth argued, that Kracauer, “often overlooked the heart. Justice is a grim thing indeed.”

Kracauer maintained that an obligation held between writer and reader. Within this contract, the reader was not to be thought of as a generalized abstraction, but instead, in the words of Reifenberg, as a “conscientious” observer, one who sought to know of the present “before he criticized it.” Thus, Kracauer desired to speak to others who might approach the real with a similarly critical agenda and a similar desire to interpret the modern landscape around them. This did not mean, of course, that a direct and didactic approach was always avoided; but Bloch was probably correct in his statement that Kracauer sought to do more than simply give the bourgeois classes a bad conscience, or remain a Kierkegaardian “thorn in the flesh.” Instead, the intention was to put the conditions of existence before a reader who was a potential ally in the task of investigating the present -- to render the current state of affairs visible to this reader. In so doing, he tried to pull the rug out from underneath those “inautical clichés that hinder the recognition of the real.” In this regard, as one of his admirers, a schoolteacher from the Ruhr, noted, Kracauer had pedagogical intentions that went beyond staking a party position or the assertion of mere “opinions and views on a situation,” rather his work wanted to facilitate a connection between individuals and reality (Wirklichkeit), to help others construct a different relationship to the profane world and to recognize their own role in its construction.

Therefore, the newspaper was for Kracauer just as much a collecting point for modernity as it was an organ for instruction. These two impulses vied with each other in the feuilleton section, and increasingly so as the political situation radicalized near the end of the Republic. Kracauer sought to incorporate the first mode into his own work even as the internal culture of the FZ was becoming increasingly factionalized by contemporary events. As the crisis in the early 1930s

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95 Roth to Stefan Zweig, August 30, 1930, Joseph Roth: Briefe, p. 175.
96 Reifenberg quoted in Stalder, Siegfried Kracauer: Das journalistische Werk, p. 100.
99 Karl Vaupel to Kracauer, January 30, 1933, KN, DLA. Karl Vaupel (1896-1968) was a schoolteacher in Nierenhof-Ruhr. He published numerous pedagogical works including Kinder im Industrieland (1933), a book that he sent to Kracauer with his letter of January 30. Kracauer responded warmly to both the letter and the book which he intended to circulate among his fellow editors with an eye to printing an excerpt in the FZ at a later date. Hitler’s ascent to power probably interrupted these plans.
deepened, Reifenberg received warnings from his friends, Max Picard, and Joseph Roth pointing out that the paper had to do more than reflect reality on the ground – a reality that, moreover, had come to include a very large bloc of Nazi voters.ḍ⁰⁰ Roth believed that the paper should in this situation adopt a more instructive role; “blood is not water,” he remonstrated, and the newspaper was obliged to say so. Kracauer, likewise, felt that the political line against Nazism had been far too tolerant in the years before 1933.ḍ⁰¹ Yet, as Helmut Stalder has demonstrated in his analysis of the correspondence between Kracauer and Friedrich T. Gubler – Reifenberg’s replacement as feuilleton editor in 1930 – Kracauer still argued that the paper should avoid the direct assertion of political positions. Instead, he preferred articles that addressed the wider contexts of politics and stimulated the critical faculties of the reader. Too much emphasis on the “general” or “instructive” article, he noted, was “bad, un-pedagogical and led, as is demonstrated by many cases, to chatter.”ḍ⁰² This did not mean that one did not aim for a political effect, he noted, but rather that one aimed to ensure that such effects would have a wider, socially transformative significance.

The background to Kracauer’s argument with Gubler was the rising threat of Nazism, but his position emerged early in his career as a journalist. In a 1921 feuilleton addressing freedom of the press he described the newspaper as a focal point for the interpretation of modernity.ḍ⁰³ His text was not free of idealist sentiments and some nationalist boiler-plate; his comments on values peculiar to the German press (sobriety, decency, love of truth) should be read with a grain of salt, particularly when read in conjunction with his stark portrayal of the cynicism that sometimes pervaded the newspaper milieu in Georg.ḍ⁰⁴ Still, this did not mean that these characteristics were not operative as ideals. The newspaper was obliged to hold itself aloof from cliques and commercial interests, and to eschew the idealisms of the day; they must offer opinions free of influence and demonstrate courage when their opinions were in conflict with public sentiments.

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ḍ⁰⁰ See the discussion of this episode in Gillessen, Auf verlorenem Posten, pp. 84-85. Also, see Max Picard’s letter to Reifenberg, September 18, 1932, Wilhelm Hausenstein Nachlaß, DLA; and Roth to Reifenberg, August 9, 1932, Joseph Roth: Briefe, pp. 223-224.

ḍ⁰¹ Kracauer to Reifenberg, February 12, 1933, KN, DLA.

ḍ⁰² Stalder, Siegfried Kracauer: Das journalistische Werk, pp. 106-111. See also, Kracauer to Gubler, July 13, 1930, KN, DLA.


ḍ⁰⁴ Kracauer, Georg, Werke 7, pp. 330-341. In this regard, it should be noted that the FZ generally tended towards the democratic parties, even if they often remained critical of them. During the Weimar period, the paper was most closely aligned to the DDP; see the discussion in Eksteins, “The Frankfurter Zeitung: Mirror of Democracy.”
This was all the more important, he noted, in a land such as Germany that was afflicted by every kind of factionalism in politics and culture. In this situation, such papers existed as an alternative:

They are the only channel for those manifest intellectual currents and political views that are not already part of a party line; their arguments consistently serve the facts, not some or another person. The impartiality of its judgments joins itself to a richness of content. Thus, they resemble a collecting basin in which the water flows together from all regions.\footnote{Kracauer, “Die Zeitung,” FZ, September 16, 1922 (M2).}

Such papers embodied traditions that had grown through an “organic” process influenced by their connections to the nation. The imperative to instruct public opinion and to challenge the prevailing status quo existed in conjunction with the belief that the paper should also serve as a “collecting basin” that assembled the political and cultural tendencies of the day. By so doing, the paper would, Kracauer argued, “mirror the hidden face of the nation.” The newspaper had to allow a contemporary physiognomy to become visible in a forum where the reader could then decipher it; this was an approach that wanted to demonstrate method, instead of just presenting the fruits of this method.\footnote{Fritzsche, Reading Berlin 1900, pp. 12-28.} The reader as a decoder of the present then becomes a substitute for the dialogue partner that Kracauer referred to in his ideal of creative discourse. To this partner in the search for truth one remained strictly obliged.

Kracauer’s sense of vocation was not inconsistent with the mission of the FZ, a paper where tradition and obligation closely overlapped. The founder of the paper, Leopold Sonnemann, had stipulated in his testament that the editorial line should represent a liberal position, rendering support to the oppressed. Among contemporary parties, he felt that the German People’s Party, founded in 1868, was a good model; but, he recognized the need to adjust the line of the paper in accordance with “new conditions.”\footnote{Eksteins, Limits of Reason, pp. 27-28.} Thus, if his directive did, in fact, incline towards a particular party, it did not require the paper to remain in lock-step with its program as German society changed. Interpreting this directive was part of the FZ tradition, reflecting a sense of duty towards both their readers and German society more generally. A test of this tradition emerged in
February of 1933. Both Kracauer and Reifenberg were confronted with the dilemma of deciding whether or not to endorse Hugenberg and the German nationalist bloc, even to the point of supporting a monarchical restoration so as to thwart the National Socialists. In their correspondence, they both felt impelled to interpret this position in light of the principles of the paper. Reifenberg had agreed with Kracauer’s suggestion that the paper should support Hugenberg even to the point of a restoration, but found such tactics difficult for the paper to take given the fact that the Nationalists were hardly a reliable coalition partner. Nonetheless, Kracauer argued that such a position could be urged, because the “analysis of the situation shows that, for the moment, even according to the tradition of the paper, this is the most correct position.” That they were even debating the question in February of 1933 suggests the importance that the founding precepts exerted within the FZ milieu. In this respect, it seems probable that the culture and past tradition of the FZ influenced him to no small degree.

For Kracauer then, tradition merged with a personal sense of obligation. In light of the journalist’s public role, the obligation of the critic was just as absolute in questions of culture as in politics. This is evident in his dispute with Stefan Zweig in late 1930 (a conflict referred to in the introduction). The disagreement arose when Kracauer had attacked Zweig for lending a few words of support to a work that Kracauer judged as decidedly inferior. “Where have the honest critics gone whose vision remains unclouded,” Kracauer complained. Zweig responded with a private letter arguing that Kracauer reviewed the work with a severity that did not correspond to the limitations of writing in a newspaper; nor did Kracauer take into account that few works were truly worthy of substantial critical attention. Given these circumstances, there was little point to applying stringent standards to the flotsam and jetsam of the day. Those works that did warrant criticism could not be presented in a manner that did justice to their complexity in the confines of the literary pages. Negative criticism, therefore, had to be practiced more cautiously as the consequences of such judgments were out of all proportion to the newspaper’s potential for

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108 Reifenberg to Kracauer, February 21, 1933, KN, DLA. Kracauer had proposed this in an earlier letter of February 18, 1933, KN, DLA.
109 Kracauer to Benno Reifenberg, February 25, 1933, KN, DLA.
110 There is a personal dimension to this tradition as well. In 1867, the Philanthropin, the school that Kracauer later attended and where his uncle taught, was forbidden to accept non-Jewish students. It was Leopold Sonnemann who intervened and led a campaign to have the decree revoked which it was in 1871. See Arnsberg, p. 106.
serious critique. “Without this relativism of values,” he added, “I hold criticism to be unfruitful and restrictive of production.”

Kracauer was in total disagreement and he countered that weak judgments could not be defended in the public sphere, and that, moreover, he seriously doubted that a writer of promising talent would be decisively discouraged by honest criticism:

I would have thought that there, where a severe failing shows itself, you would remain behind the scenes, instead of taking a position that sets an example, and where one is obligated to the public – to say nothing of the case for good literature for which one must do one’s utmost. Even in a daily newspaper and, indeed, precisely there because the newspaper is read by many, and, moreover, the judgments given in it are in no way superseded or made up for by judgments of a quite different sort...

By insisting on the cause of “good literature” Kracauer was, somewhat high-handedly, maintaining that the newspaper was no special case; it was not a minor forum in which one had license to give qualified judgments. In this respect, Lukács’ concept of the critic as a “watchman” or “precursor” was an important reference point. Moreover, the critic who abandoned his or her criteria forsook the trust of the public; in the existentially loaded terms presented in “Creative Dialogue” this meant that they abandoned the other partner in dialogue. The responsibility of the critic, Kracauer implied, could not be put aside temporarily, even if one wrote for a daily newspaper.

On the other hand, Kracauer recognized that there were constraints inherent in writing for the press; however, the significance of these constraints was tempered by the fact that they were part of a more general crisis of culture and language. The problems of the journalist – the problems of writing to order, of addressing the mass audience – were not specific to the feuilleton writer. As his friend Walter Benjamin wrote, the imbrications of literature and the press had become part of both the “downfall of literature” and the emergence of an altered conception of writing; this was

112 Stefan Zweig to Kracauer, August 26, 1930, and September 27, 1930, KN, DLA. The quotation is from the letter of September 27.
113 Kracauer to Zweig, October 2, 1930, KN, DLA.
114 See the discussion of Lukács on pp. 129-130 above.
a “dialectical moment” which on the one hand promised a progressive liquidation of high literature, but at the same time, accelerated the assimilating effects of the press: “It is the scene of a boundless degradation of the word – by way of the newspaper – upon which its redemption prepares itself.” 115 Thus, in a gesture typical of Weimar’s cultural crisis, the sinking of language represented another form of decline in which there lurked an ambiguous promise of regeneration.

This ambiguity is, likewise, apparent in the polarized concepts of language that circulated in Weimar intellectual culture, conceptions that tried to reckon with the growth of a popular mass press and the new languages of photography and film. An image from Weimar cinema offers a symbolic model of language in the modern landscape. In a scene from M, directed by Fritz Lang in 1931, a young girl, who unbeknownst to her is stalked by the eponymous murderer, lingers on the street before a bookstore window display. Behind the glass stand the books in their plain covers; but they are eclipsed by the advertising gimmicks designed to attract wandering shoppers – a whirling vortex, and a large arrow, that repeatedly moves up and down, as if hammering the books it purports to publicize. The written word almost becomes lost in this display of visual sensation, just as the viewer in this sequence is submerged in an act of voyeurism through the subjective placement of the camera. The image symbolically destabilizes the role of text as the eye is drawn from the books into the spinning vortex; however, the image itself simultaneously becomes a kind of fragmented language that speaks indirectly to the condition of truth in modernity.116

This instability of the text was likewise reflected in Kracauer’s essays. The diminished status of the word is symbolically represented in a number of articles, but of particular interest is its use in the 1925 work, “The Artist of these Times.” This essay was a hybrid – a theological polemic that doubles as a film review. It consisted of three parts, an opening segment that dealt with contemporary problems in the arts and a conclusion that attempts an answer of sorts; in between is placed a review of the 1923 film, The Street, directed by Karl Grune. As Miriam Hansen has commented, the essay had stark theological overtones, and the part devoted to The Street almost

reads as a manifesto.\footnote{117 \textit{Hansen has pointed out the radical rhetorical gesture made in this instance; see “Decentric Perspectives,” p. 59.}} The landscape of Grune’s film is presented in existential terms as a place emptied of meaning in which the written word appears as a broken vessel: “When emptiness pretends to be actual, then reality becomes a dream. Scraps of paper scorn the sleepwalker who seeks in vain to grasp a meaning.”\footnote{118 \textit{Kracauer, “Der Künstler in dieser Zeit,” Der verbotene Blick, p. 134.}} Similar to these meaningless scraps of paper are the newspaper kiosks in the essay, “Analysis of a City Plan”; they are sinkholes of meaning whose supposed purpose to inform is belied by the opacity of their content:

Out of the gloom rise the newspaper kiosks, tiny temples in which the publications of the world have their rendezvous. Only the newspapers do not know themselves. Each edition is folded in upon itself and is content with reading its own columns. Unaware of the close physical proximity that attends the newspapers their news is so far outside of any connection that they are without any news about themselves. In the interstices the demon of intellectual and spiritual absence rules unfettered.\footnote{119 \textit{Kracauer, “Analyse eines Stadtplans. Faubourgs und Zentrum,” FZ (1926), Verbotene Blick, p. 25. The precise publication date of this feuilleton has not been determined. Thomas Levin gives an approximate date of 1928 in his bibliography and this is in accord with the current German edition of \textit{Das Ornament der Masse}. However, the date is given as sometime in 1926 in the English translation and in Der verbotene Blick.}}

As the expressive powers of the text are degraded, it is now the location of the text itself in the modern landscape that mattered more than the messages they contained. The newspaper kiosks and the scraps of paper are integrated into a disguised grammar that makes visible the void of meaning as a precondition for recognizing negated truths: “However, if the real is forgotten, it is not for that reason erased, and in the horror around the vacuum that extends between the seconds, the negated divine announces itself.”\footnote{120 \textit{Kracauer, “Der Künstler in dieser Zeit,” Der verbotene Blick, p. 135.}} Thus, the diminished status of the text meant that language had to be used differently in order to approach truth. Two related issues arose from this point of view: one, how could language be used in a period when the primacy of the written text was not certain; and two, how did the effacement of language influence conceptions of the coded nature of modernity?

Such questions were not uncommon during a period when a more analytical approach to language, such as was pioneered amongst the Vienna circle, was becoming more widely known
among intellectuals. At the same time, others sought to reinvest language with the creative power it had held in religious tradition. The emphasis on language in Heidegger’s philosophical hermeneutics was also gaining adherents, and Kracauer was at least aware of these developments through his friendship with a number of former Heidegger students and devotees (Löwenthal, Dolf Sternberger, and later, Egon Vietta). He had also shown some moderate interest in Heidegger’s work in the early 1920s, referring to him as “the Cerberus at the gate of phenomenology.”

Among Kracauer’s immediate contemporaries, divergent linguistic theories arose, some of which argued that revelation and redemption inhered in language itself. This was, of course, at odds with the positivist currents emanating from Viennese philosophical circles. In the former, as represented by the work of Rosenzweig and Benjamin, language was understood as a revelatory act, underpinned by the relationship between man and God. Rosenzweig’s The Star of Redemption gave expression to this idea, as did Benjamin’s unpublished manuscripts on language that he circulated among his friends. For the latter the concept of “naming” was at the core of language – a language that was not merely a means of communication between speaker and receiver; but rather an act in which “the mental being of man communicates himself to God through name.” The former view Benjamin characterized as bourgeois, as a position that reduced language to a practical instrument of domination and was oblivious to its ontological status. It failed to recognize the “residue of the creative word of God” that persists in an unspoken language of things. Such a view of language was in marked contrast to that taken by Ludwig Wittgenstein whose Tractatus Logico-philosophicus was published in the same year as Rosenzweig’s Star. Mystical conceptions that swarmed around the act of naming, he argued, constituted a kind of “occultism” whereby “language goes on a holiday.” Wittgenstein was almost certainly unknown too Kracauer at this time, but probably would have sympathized with Wittgenstein’s radical scepticism towards this gnostic view of language.

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121 Kracauer to Löwenthal, March 1, 1922, In steter Freundschaft, pp. 38-39; and Kracauer, “Vortrag von Prof Heidegger,” FZ, January 25, 1929 (A). In general Kracauer appears to have agreed with Adorno’s hostility to Heidegger and his work.
123 Ibid., p. 331.
Yet, such comparisons do require some caution. As has been pointed out, there are numerous mystical overtones in Wittgenstein. At the conclusion of the *Tractatus*, he had stated: “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical.” Statements such as this have led some philosophers, Hilary Putnam, for instance, to propose an affinity between Wittgenstein and Rosenzweig; and furthermore Rainer Rochlitz has noted that both Wittgenstein and Benjamin shared the same desire to drive the “inexpressible” outside of language. A detailed comparison of these theories of language is well outside the scope of this study, but it should suffice to note here that in Kracauer’s intellectual milieu, the status of language was a subject of ongoing philosophical dispute. Moreover, this dispute derived, at least in part, from the alleged relationship of language (or non-relationship) to religion and metaphysics.

When Kracauer addressed the subject of language, he often did so under the rubric of a more general cultural crisis that had separated language from its capacity to indicate truth, particularly in the domain of contemporary aesthetics. However, the conclusions he drew from these problems were by no means meant to be understood as restricted to the arts alone; rather the figure of the artist was used to demonstrate a larger problem of expression as was described in his essay, “Artist of these Times.” Within every sphere of the arts, so he argued, there was a consistent failure of expression:

...artists are unable to grasp that actuality (Eigentliche), for the sake of which language has been vested within them. Either they push forwards and upwards, arrogating to themselves the authority and power of religion, which their impotence in the aesthetic medium does not grant to them; or they drive downwards and away, only partially taking heed of the

127 It should be noted on this point that Rosenzweig emphasized that The Star was not specifically a “philosophy of religion.” See the discussion in Peter Eli Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger*, pp. 134-135. Leo Strauss likewise noted in a lecture given in 1940 that it was symptomatic of the early twentieth-century revival of religion that, “a remarkable philosophical writer of predominantly theological interests was fond of the fact that the very term “religion” did not occur once in his work” (Leo Strauss, “The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy,” reprinted in Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem* (New York, 2006), p. 128).
demands of art, and exhaust themselves in the presentation of the world as a void, as a seeming and external life that knows neither face nor form.\footnote{Kracauer, “Der Künstler in dieser Zeit,” p. 130.}

Artists were confronted with this problem as they no longer were able find a way to what Kracauer called the Zwischenreich, a “median zone” in which the capacity for “soul, tragedy and the glimmer of reconciliation” was preserved — a realm that could only be inhabited by “authentic individuals.”\footnote{The concept of Zwischenreich as a space inhabited by reflection and interpretation did not originate with Kracauer; an immediate source for this concept is probably to be found in the work of Simmel. In his later work, Simmel wrote, “we belong to a third inexpressible realm, of which both the natural and the transcendental are reflections, projections, falsifications, interpretations” (Simmel quoted in John McCole, “George Simmel and the Philosophy of Religion,” \textit{New German Critique} 94 (Winter, 2005), p. 8).} In this context, the “real” referred to a liminal position that existed between ideas of contingency and absoluteness; individuals only became full participants in existence in so far as they recognized the tension between these two realms, the latter of which he referred to as that of the divine (\textit{Göttliche}).\footnote{Kracauer, “Der Künstler in dieser Zeit,” \textit{Der verbotene Blick}, p. 131.} The indissoluble conflict between these two spheres was what the artist must present: “He must experience the disjunction between the religious and the aesthetic that always burst forth whenever the void shows itself in its awfulness, and the inclusion of humanity within the real (\textit{Wirklichkeit}) becomes the primacy of action.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 140.}

However, contemporary art, according to Kracauer, had demonstrated little to no capacity for coming to terms with the modern. Either it pursued the treasure of authenticity found in cultural forms of the past, or it presumptuously allowed itself a prophetic license by attempting to heal the gap between the religious and the aesthetic through the “echo of the revelatory word” (\textit{aufschließende Wort}).\footnote{Ibid., p. 138.} He mentioned with more sympathy those artists who, with some legitimacy, had demonstrated an allegiance to everyday existence. Nonetheless, their allegiance often meant that they only affirmed reality in all its negativity; they failed to confront the “what was” with the “what could be.”\footnote{Ibid., pp. 138-139. On this point, see also the comments in Hansen, “Decentric Perspectives,” pp. 58-59.} Slogans such as “truth to materials” thus devolved into a relinquishment of art’s potential to illuminate the “median zone,” which as a result, remained untouched. Kracauer did not himself clearly theorize an aesthetics that would be commensurate to this task, but his preference for those who drove towards the negative was clear; the
incomplete and the fragmentary were to be preferred and in this regard, he claimed that it was appropriate that Schoenberg had left one of his oratorios unfinished. Incompletion was symptomatic, for the artists who moved in the negative could only “melancholically evince the absence of the Du in the world of appearances,” but they could not lay hold of the world itself. As Kracauer stated in more theologically resonant language, “to impart meaning aesthetically was not [the artist’s] office; he erects the temple, but the fundamentals of faith must be proscribed to him.”

As can be seen, Kracauer’s conception of the crisis in the arts preserved a number of metaphysical presuppositions – that humanity was a creature of the middle, caught between profane and spiritual existence; that there was an essential impulse that oriented itself to this higher, religious sphere, even if the gap between the individual and the “higher realm” could not be closed; and that aesthetic mediation was an ambiguous affair that, on the one hand, ran the risk of imposing a false unity on manifold experience, and on the other, merely reproduced the spiritually fallen state of the world in an uncritical fashion. The relationship between these two visions constitutes the space in which Kracauer believed negativity could be productive. The drive towards negativity, as Mülder-Bach has argued, also had wider valence both within Weimar culture and in that of the previous century, spanning political thought, theology and aesthetics. Gottfried Benn, Hermann Broch and Carl Schmitt were among those of Kracauer’s contemporaries who had recourse to concepts of negativity, to say nothing of the theology formulated by Karl Barth. In the prior century, Novalis had written of the nihilistic anarchy that would precede the “rising up” of religion as a “founding of the world.” Negation thus functioned as a fore-runner of religious utopia. In the words of another romantic, Friedrich Schlegel, “chaos is the confusion out of which a world can spring.”

136 Mülder-Bach, “Umschlag der Negativität,” p. 368; and Peter Szondi, “Friedrich Schlegel und die romantische Ironie,” Satz und Gegensatz: Sechs Essays (Frankfurt am Main, 1964), pp. 5-24. The tri-partite philosophy of history that Szondi outlines in the work of Schlegel has a number of resemblances with the ways in which the cultural crisis was articulated in the Weimar period. Szondi himself has pointed out the similarities to Lukács’ Theory of the Novel, and it also resembled themes found in the work of Kracauer. Briefly stated, Schlegel’s concept of history was derived from a constellation of factors: the memory of antiquity as a lost totality, the period of the modern in which confusion reigned as all meaning fell under the spell of reason (Verstand), and the utopian promise of the coming
As Mülder-Bach cautions, the numerous ways in which negativity was inflected over time and in Weimar culture does not necessarily offer a key as to how Kracauer intended this concept to be understood in his own writings. The primary model for the “reversal of negativity” (Unschlag der Negativität) she argues was an aesthetic one, derived from his reflections on the work of Proust. To be sure, his references often stay within an aesthetic sphere; negativity is transferred onto contemporary artistic trends, with Fritz von Unruh and expressionism on one side, and those who drove towards negativity – such as Max Beckmann, Stravinsky, and the Bauhaus – on the other. The latter group created a surface culture, a kind of negative ground that laid bare ideological constructions of the present, draining the world of meaning and opening the space that yearned for redemption. Such artistic movements were peculiarly sensitive to the problem that afflicted all artists: an incommensurability of expression that forbade them the “sayable,” and separated artists from their images. In the section of his essay devoted to The Street, Kracauer described this territory as an abyss that had opened up between “prophetic speech” and the “film image.” This was the region in which art must build its constructions, and this could only be done by negating the positive word and “thinking negativity through to its end.”

As Kracauer cautioned in the opening statements of “Artist of this Age,” the problems of expression were of significance “not to the arts alone.” Both the theological language he deployed (Tempel, Fundamente des Glaubens) and his references to the necessary “work of connection” that filled the space between the human and the divine, suggests that aesthetics was also a means of speaking about other spheres. The incapacity of aesthetic expression, so he argued, was a phenomenon of more general significance. Historians, for instance, had also failed to reckon with the “uncanny nature” of their subject; how the problem of expression had manifested itself in their discipline had gone mostly unremarked. He spoke of a plan to write on what he called the contemporary “misuse of history” and to discuss how “constructions of a

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religious kingdom. Negation, in this context, became an engine of hope for Schlegel, a creation of reason that anticipated redemption; see Szondi, pp. 1 and 12-17. The quotation from Schlegel is on p. 17.

139 Kracauer, “Travel and Dance,” Mass Ornement, p. 73. On this point, I agree with Mülder-Bach, but I want to place more emphasis on the theological dimensions of negativity.
140 Kracauer, “Der Künstler in dieser Zeit,” Der verbotene Blick, p. 130.
historical-philosophical sort” often concealed unacknowledged religious motivations.\(^{141}\) Such motives, he argued, were a primary agent in contemporary trends seeking to bridge the “median zone” between secular and sacred in a forced manner; thus, prophecy and providence often underpinned historical meaning. Yet, he maintained that expressions of the prophetic sort were no longer open to the present, and a philosophy of history that originated in such motives was bound to fail in its account of historical processes.

Since there was no “positive word” to speak, there was no higher spiritual good that art must represent, and this meant a levelling of the field between high and low culture. The art that functioned in a negative fashion need make no claims to have exclusive traffic with elevated cultural goods or to serve the needs of the soul. In fact, art that did so was suspect. Once the refusal to arrogate to oneself the “positive word” became a virtue, according to Kracauer, then the importance of judging between high art and low culture receded. Thus, Otto Zarek’s *Desire*, the work that provoked the disagreement between himself and Zweig, was condemned as it yoked a quotidian subject (the sexual anarchy of the younger generations) to a false psychological depth that pretended to grasp, what Zarek called, a “becoming conscious of the tendency in being itself.”\(^{142}\) Compared with such dubious pseudo-metaphysical expressions, Kracauer argued that pornography was preferable, as “decent pornographies are gallant and possessed of a certain clean cynicism that derives from sadness.”\(^{143}\) In this instance, commercial literature of the coarsest kind is to be preferred over a literature that pretends to a higher culture mission; a melancholic negativity was preferable to an art that claimed to have plumbed the depths of the soul.

The “positive” or “redemptive” word that Kracauer argued should be refused by artists was thus to be refused in every instance, and it also had no place in history or religion. That this was the case had much to do with his belief that language was in a “forlorn state.”\(^{144}\) This, he argued, had been demonstrated by the emergence of the sound film. What some saw as the limitations of

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\(^{141}\) Kracauer to Löwenthal, March 1, 1922, *In steter Freundschaft*, p. 38.

\(^{142}\) Kracauer, “Weltstadtjugend? – Brünstiger Zauber!” *Schriften* 5.2, pp. 220-224. See the discussion in Witte, “Light Sorrow,” pp. 88-90. I have used the English translation of excerpts from Kracauer’s review included in this article.


the silent medium had actually led to the emergence of a language of “mimetic gesture” that Kracauer felt was commensurate to modern experience; it allowed the silent film artist to avoid the outmoded aesthetics of psychological realism. In contrast, the advent of the talkies meant an intrusion of the spoken word in the “land of film.” It would only diminish film’s capacity to render a modern physiognomy. He further argued that language would only recover a leading role when societies accepted the task of “rationally mastering their conditions,” for “true language is bound to true insights.”

These remarks, taken from a review of Buster Keaton’s first sound film, were certainly intended to identify the aesthetic principles specific to the silent medium, but his comments aspired to a wider relevance. His more general intentions were recognized by the young Dolf Sternberger, who wrote to Kracauer to express his agreement with the article:

Actually, it is not simply the exemplary reference to the presently unspeakable silence of Chaplin that has captured my attention; but on the contrary, it is the entirely unequivocal sentences over Language in general ... that is, that language is overall falsely compelled, and at its falsest (am falschesten), precisely there, where it behaves in a mostly “originary” sense. If one wants to “speak the truth” it certainly cannot be done in the fashion of a “formed” or “creative” language. That is an experience born out by the daily practice of writing, even in philosophy or philosophical criticism ... and to what a state has a “language creator” such as Heidegger brought it to!

Thus, Sternberger correctly placed Kracauer among the critics of a so-called “creative” language, a more general phenomenon that ranged from the popular medium of the sound film to the more obscure discourses of philosophy found in the work of Heidegger.

The gnostic conception of language, Kracauer argued, was no substitute for a language of reality, though it sometimes appeared to mimic this function. What Kracauer meant by a language of reality is not fully explained, but some sense of what he intended is to be found in his 1925 essay, “Form and Decay.” Here, Kracauer voiced his scepticism to a variety of discourses that claimed to sift out the authentic from the inauthentic. Such languages arose, he stated, as a

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145 Ibid., p. 328.
146 Dolf Sternberger to Kracauer, September 24, 1931, Dolf Sternberger Nachlaß, DLA.
counter-discourse to the present chaos. Against a reality that was so debased that it was readily encapsulated by slogans and fleeting opinions, a discourse of authenticity erected a barrier of “meaning and form” \((\textit{Sinn, Gestalt})\). The unruly language of the present was shaped into coherence in a fashion that Kracauer compared to the aestheticism of Stefan George and his followers, though it also emanated from political and religious quarters:

One has found insight in the nature of Catholicism, in Lutheran inwardness, in the Calvinist strength of action, and one would like to prove the certainty of this nature; one experiences the shock of the ethical imperative and would like to comply with what is demanded without further ado. The language of reality has become just as conscious as the rational distortion of this language, and because one can separate the authentic from the inauthentic, one now wants to speak ... For is this not the way demanded of us – to represent the known and correct thing? \textit{Reflection turns against a much too rapid step in this direction.}^{147}

Kracauer answered his self-imposed question with a negative for two reasons. One, the confusions of the present and the resulting entanglements of language meant that even if one tried to “express oneself in the language of the real,” one might still assist in the spread of the prevailing “unreality.” In such a situation, “without even suspecting it, the best certainties and positions were degraded into sublimated \textit{ideologies} of the same reality that they had sought to outgrow.”^{148} Second, Kracauer argued that if a “bad” reality was in force, one was obliged to speak to it in its own language. One might be correct to judge the culture of the present as false or unreal, but this did nothing stop its expansion. “To effectively limit it,” Kracauer argued “it was essential to meet its gaze with all one’s effort.”^{149}

Since these efforts had to do without a direct language, the artist who sought to address modern conditions had to approach the real in an indirect way, or with what Kracauer called “negative constellations.” This meant an abandonment of theology and an embrace of “materialist” criticism: “Economy instead of explicit theology!” So he wrote in his unpublished essay on \textit{The...}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
  \item Kracauer, “\textit{Gestalt und Zerfall},” \textit{FZ}, August 21, 1925 (A), Hochschulblatt; reprinted in \textit{Der verbotene Blick}, p. 143. The italics are in the original text.
  \item Ibid., p. 145.
  \item Ibid., p. 144.
\end{enumerate}
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Face of Man, published by Max Picard in 1929.\(^{150}\) The essay appears to have been written with the expectation that it would appear in the Neue Schweizer Rundschau, though it is not improbable that a publication in the FZ was also intended.\(^{151}\) In any case, the review was refused by Rychner on account of its “revolutionary” tone that was not, he argued, in accord with the periodical’s general line. He did not voice his more personal criticisms as he felt this could not be done in the fragmentary form of a letter, and he recognized that the essay was “grounded in [Kracauer’s] entire person.”\(^{152}\) In fact, this was one of the few moments in Kracauer’s work where he overtly spoke of his own rhetorical strategies, and how they altered over the course of the twenties. This emerged in the context of a dispute with Picard over the question of how one should address the reader.\(^{153}\) Kracauer had objected to Picard’s unmediated identification of an image (the photograph of a child’s face) with a particular set of values or judgments (“eternal innocence”). Yet, what upset Kracauer most was not the questionable nature of this identification of image and reality, but rather the direct and emotive means by which Picard sought to stir the innermost depths of his audience. Such means, he argued, were deceptive; for in the present, “if one wants to penetrate to the inner core of men and women, the circle of positive verbal expressions must be restricted.” He continued by arguing that most individuals were “blind to language” and:

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\text{...if they hear the positive word, they revel at the sound of this vocabulary and hold themselves for saved ... for that reason, one should, in the interest of stirring up their hearts and the general state of affairs, work with negative verbal constellations.}^{154}\]

According to Kracauer, Picard responded to his criticism by arguing that, on the contrary, “the heart” was receptive to “only one type of Word,” and that the discourse of negativity of which Kracauer spoke, would have very little impact and would be readily “subsumed” by the ruling

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\(^{150}\) Kracauer, “Zwei Arten der Mitteilung,” Der verbotene Blick, p. 220. Max Picard (1988-1965), was a Swiss-German writer close to a number of individuals in Kracauer’s milieu including Reifenberg, Hausenstein and Roth. Kracauer was also acquainted with Picard, perhaps through Reifenberg. A single card from Picard to Kracauer in 1932 is preserved in KN/DLA.

\(^{151}\) Kracauer to Max Rychner, May 19, 1930, KN, DLA.

\(^{152}\) Rychner to Kracauer, May 14, 1930, KN, DLA.

\(^{153}\) Kracauer quoted from letters sent between him and Picard, none of which have been preserved in the Kracauer or Picard papers in the DLA, so we must go on faith that Kracauer has quoted Picard accurately.

\(^{154}\) Kracauer, “Zwei Arten der Mitteilung,” Der verbotene Blick, p. 220.
discourses of the day (cultural, political, economic).\textsuperscript{155} Confronted by Picard’s rebuttal, Kracauer did not altogether his position; but, surprisingly, he did concede legitimacy to Picard’s theological language. The essay concluded with the assertion that “Picard has, for the present, saved the language of theology.”\textsuperscript{156} However, Kracauer expressed this with some reservations, noting that Picard was a particular case and, moreover, that such discourse must be understood as part of a dialectical relationship with his preferred discourse of negativity.

As Mülder-Bach has pointed out, even in the context of the theological motives that inform Kracauer’s work, his positive response to Picard is surprising.\textsuperscript{157} This retrospective valorization of theological language appears incongruous in the work of a writer who was sometimes accused of being one of the more ideologically rigid critics in the German press. Klaus Mann, in his famous letter of the émigrés to Gottfried Benn in 1933, labelled Kracauer as the “most fatal” representative of this sort of critic.\textsuperscript{158} Aside from this reputation for ideological severity, the “language of the heart” found in The Face of Man also bears an uncomfortable resemblance to the political polemic that concluded the Fritz Lang film, Metropolis, a film that Kracauer later condemned for its obscurantist, if not proto-Nazi sentiments. At the conclusion of the movie, labour and capital are united in a fusion of the heart and intellect.\textsuperscript{159} His failure to reject Picard’s claim that the photographic image could bridge the gap between alienated culture and inwardness is also incongruous with the general tenor of his thinking on photography and technological reproduction. To be sure, as Mülder-Bach argues, Kracauer’s affirmative response to Picard’s work did not mark a fundamental shift in his thought. Still, it exposes one of its underpinnings – a theologically inspired repudiation of “explicit theology.”\textsuperscript{160} As he wrote to Picard: “there is theology, and I, as do you, ascribe reality to the word eternal ... one should construct a revolutionary negativity so that the space for the unsaid positive (die Hohlräume) might remain held open.”\textsuperscript{161} Thus, Kracauer’s negative discourse begrudgingly accepted

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., p. 221.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., p. 227.
\textsuperscript{157} Mülder, Siegfried Kracauer—Grenzgänger, p. 168, note 1.
\textsuperscript{158} The letter from Mann was reprinted as part of Benn’s Doppelleben, though Kracauer’s name is excised from the reprinted text. The original letter of May 9, 1933 is in the Benn Nachlaß in the DLA; see also, Gottfried Benn, Doppelleben: Zwei Selbstdarstellungen, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart, 2005), pp. 77-82.
\textsuperscript{159} Kracauer, From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film (Princeton, 1974), pp. 162-164.
\textsuperscript{160} Mülder, Siegfried Kracauer—Grenzgänger, pp. 56-60.
\textsuperscript{161} Kracauer, “Zwei Arten der Mitteilung,” Der verbotene Blick, p. 220.
positive theology in the framework of a collaborative project to uncover theological truth in the profane; but only as a silent partner, for indirect discourse, he claimed, was “imposed upon us” while the direct is an eruption.\(^{162}\)

Negativity was thus a means by which Kracauer sought a language that would avoid the pitfalls of both revolutionary discourse and that of religious revival, both of which risked a falsification of the present state of affairs. The rival vocabularies of Marxism and theology saturated the public sphere, sometimes in confrontation, other times in a mingling of vague “rebellious” sentiments; they had, according to Kracauer, so deeply influenced contemporary debate that “anyone with cultural or political depth was sensitive to this ongoing dialectic.”\(^{163}\) He added that the consequences of this “dialectic” were particularly severe among those of Kracauer’s own generation. They were the ones old enough to remember a period when they themselves had “without artifice” accepted religion as the “language of reality.” However, they were still young enough to be unsettled in these views; therefore, they were not immune to the cultural shock of the post-war German society. This was the generation that could now recognize in their former faith an ideology, but at the same time “they knew that ideologies are not only ideologies.”\(^{164}\) For Kracauer, both Marxism and philosophical language failed to conceptualize the remnants of theology that persisted on the outside of economic determinations. This was, so he wrote to Gubler, not an insignificant omission, but rather a “great mistake” of Marxists and literary radicals; he himself had written from a point of view that sought to incorporate a “high estimation of the existential position.”\(^{165}\) In his review of *The Face of Man*, he similarly conceded that Marxism was correct in so far as it wanted to connect “all content” to a “definite situation,” but it went too far when it suggested such content was no more than a “mere reflex.” Theological contents should be “bracketed off,” he implied, but not reduced to a crude reflection of economic conditions, or to an “empty ideology.”\(^{166}\)

\(^{162}\) Ibid., p. 227.
\(^{163}\) Ibid., p. 221.
\(^{164}\) Ibid., p. 222.
\(^{166}\) Kracauer, “Zwei Arten der Mitteilung,” p. 223.
Contemporary Marxism, so Kracauer thought, was inclined to this alleged misreading of theology because of a misunderstanding of Marx’s roots in the Enlightenment. Kracauer, as Müller-Bach has pointed out, traced the lineage of Marxism to Helvetius and Holbach, while mostly bypassing Hegel. For Hegelian philosophy had a tendency to obscure those “remnants” or “resistances” that evaded the dialectical process. Thus, in an unpublished review of a work by the historian Kurt Breysig, Kracauer praised the author for his cautious stance towards the dialectical method as found in Hegel. The resistance to Hegelianism was also influenced by his desire to counter any reversions to the idealist tradition. This, Kracauer argued, was the fault committed by Lukács in History and Class Consciousness; whereas Lukács had painstakingly attempted to transfer theological contents into a language devoid of myth, he then vitiated the value of this step by integrating these concepts within Hegelian idealism. Thus, as with the discourses of religious revival, the discourse of philosophical Marxism also rushed towards the “positive word” and tried to close the circle of meaning all too quickly. His “negative constellations” sought, as it were, to place barricades within the streets where such discourses roamed.

Such intentions were imbedded in the ways that he conceived of language and its use in social and cultural critique. This is reflected in his sensitivity towards different forms of writing and their implications. Some caution is needed on this point as there is nothing in Kracauer’s writing that resembles a comprehensive or even semi-comprehensive theory of language, but some scattered remarks do allow a rough construction to emerge. Negative discourse contained the desire to leave open a “hollow space” in which the truth might be recovered at some future point, and this, for Kracauer, was an imperative that had to be reflected at the level of language. In his review of an essay collection by Heinrich Mann, Kracauer used an identical formulation to describe the functions of critical writing. He compared Mann’s language to a “landscape broken

167 Müller, Siegfried Kracauer—Grenzgänger, pp. 56-58. See also Kracauer to Bloch, June 29, 1926, Briefe 1, pp. 280-284, esp. p. 282.
168 Kracauer, “Geschichtsschreibung und Geschichtsphilosophie,” Schriften 5.1, pp. 404-408, esp. p. 404. The book considered was Breysig’s Die Macht des Gedankens in der Geschichte in Auseinandersetzung mit Marx und Hegel (Stuttgart, 1926). To what extent Kracauer studied Hegel is unclear. His critique of Hegel may have been influenced by Kierkegaard’s condemnation of the deleterious effects of speculative thought. Still, he was not entirely hostile to Hegel. In his concluding remarks he defends Hegel against Breysig’s accusation that Hegel had erroneously constructed the historical process from the top down. He argued that Breysig did not recognize that, to his mind, the legitimate “way runs from philosophy of history to history, however not in the reverse direction.”
169 Kracauer to Bloch, June 29, 1926, Briefe 1, p. 282.
up with crevices.” His linguistic terrain, “holds darkness enough, but just as it does not deny the
darkness, it also does not dwell within it; rather it leaves the hollow spaces free.”

Language as a landscape, cut through by fissures, was a trope by which he could indicate the necessary
dialectic in language, a dialectic that swung between prevailing opacity and momentary insight.

If one thinks of this alternation between a darkness of non-meaning and tentative moments of
illumination as a kind of perpetual motion in language, as a means of continuous deferment, then
one might readily accept an affinity between the rhetorical strategies of Kracauer and Derrida.
This has been argued by Gerhard Richter who focuses more specifically on the so-called
“thought images” pioneered by Kracauer and others. He finds in this strategy a means of
paradoxical representation, one that attempts to illustrate the failure of language to reach its goal,
and which he sees as a sympathetic proto-type of Derrida’s “homeless language.”

The comparison is convincing in some respects, and especially in the later essays, where the “thought
image” is used in a clearly pedagogical fashion that seeks not so much to depict the truth, but
rather to assist the reader in formulating the truth as an inaccessible, but sought for object of
thought. Yet, there is some inconsistency in Kracauer’s writing that makes it difficult to accept
this comparison without some reservation. Kracauer sometimes speaks of truth (his essay on The
Castle by Kafka, for instance) in a fashion that implies its nearness, or at the very least posits
some point where meaning comes to rest. This is often described by Kracauer as a point beyond
human reckoning, but which is nonetheless to be identified with truth, or “truth contents.” When
he writes that Kafka, “looked towards the end of history that is in the truth,” he ascribes to truth a
greater degree of functional legitimacy than Derrida, perhaps, would feel is warranted; it
becomes a reference point to a model of history where “truth draws life in its wake” as means of
guiding or altering it. Such a model still lurks within Kracauer, and sits uncomfortably with
the radical questioning of such claims in the work of Derrida.

171 Richter, Thought-Images, pp. 118-146.
173 A closer investigation of this comparison lies outside of the scope of this study. See the discussion in Richter, Thought-Images, (Stanford, 2007); and also, Dagmar Barnouw, Critical Realism.
For Kracauer, perhaps truth could not be readily grasped, but discourse had to avoid obscuring it further. As a means of extending this project, he argued for the preservation of a state of “sobriety.” For truth was not to be taken by force, neither by intellectual presumption, nor by an excess of religiosity. More specifically, Kracauer suggested as a model, the “holy sobriety” referred to by George who derived the formulation from Hölderlin. The former poet was one to whom Kracauer held a number of reservations. Writing to Susman, he stated that he believed that “George had so overdone the principle of self-formation that he resembles a spike that prods and excites one into the void.” By comparison, references to Hölderlin are more rare, but sympathetic. Hölderlin’s lines An Zimmer prefaced his programmatic article on the mass ornament in 1928, and when he wrote of the lack of sobriety in Bloch’s Münzer book, it was also in reference to Hölderlin.

Sobriety, the gesture of waiting, and the discourse of negativity all shaped Kracauer’s idea of critical language. Discourse can only indicate the direction of truth when and if it allows itself to become its own negative ground. Hence, Kracauer praised the dark and “fissured” character of language in the essays of Heinrich Mann. The implications of this jagged language were further alluded to in some brief remarks concerning Hölderlin that appeared in one of his rare theatre reviews – a performance of Hölderlin’s translation of Antigone. In his discussion of Mann, Kracauer had referred to a “black ground of lacunae” (schwarzen Grund der Lücke) against which the sentences abraded and drew sparks. This alternation of light and dark finds a complement in the movement between distance and nearness, between the said and the unsaid that emerged in his comments on Hölderlin. After mentioning that the translation of the Antigone derived from a period when the poet had begun to go mad, he continued:

The language also presses the limits; it incorporates the strangely and beautifully sayable, and gives the un-sayable a palpable form. Scarcely to

174 Kracauer to Susman, February 10, 1921, SN, DLA.
175 Kracauer to Susman, October 17, 1920, SN, DLA. See also his letter to Susman of November 4, 1920, and his review of a lecture that Susman gave on the subject of George and his circle (Kracauer, “Die Gestalt Stefan Georges,” FZ, January 30, 1925, Stadtblatt). The final word of the quoted passage is not clearly legible. I have opted for the verb erregen, however nagen is another possibility; in either case, the depiction of George is ambivalent.
177 See note 170 above.
be grasped meanings often remain unfastened in their thin hulls, and between sentences of irresistible clarity silence and night spreads itself... its own word seeks to address the foreign and would like to force its buried and significant content onto the surface. Thus, originate forms and phrases that press the unheard-of within themselves, and seem to bring tidings of an unsuspected realm. Distance in them becomes a palpable nearness, and a light that soon disappears illuminates the periphery.\footnote{Kracauer, “Hölderlins deutsche ‘Antigone,’” \textit{FZ}, December 10, 1923 (A). The Hölderlin scholar, Pierre Bertaux, drew attention to this article years later when he wrote to Kracauer in praise of the recently published \textit{Ginster}; see Bertaux to Kracauer, January 11, 1929, KN, DLA.}

Language in this account wins expression when it creates its own foil. It alternates between unspoken content that is expressed indirectly and a language that is dense to the point of silence; its meaning derives from the tension that exists between these two expressive modes.

This conception of language had some affinities to ideas then circulating among his contemporaries, though there were clear differences. His comments in the Hölderlin essay regarding the literal nature of Hölderlin’s translations from the Greek almost certainly would have relied on the knowledge of his acquaintances as there is little reason to believe that Kracauer had more than a rudimentary knowledge of Greek if even that. The most probable source is Walter Benjamin, whose essay on translation Kracauer had certainly read, and who, moreover, later claimed to have discussed these issues with Kracauer.\footnote{Kracauer had been involved in the attempt to have Benjamin’s translations of Baudelaire reviewed in the \textit{FZ}. Also, see Benjamin’s letter to Gershom Scholem, May 29, 1926, \textit{The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin}, eds. Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago, 1994), pp. 300-303; and the discussion in Martin Jay, “The Politics of Translation,” \textit{Permanent Exiles}, pp. 198-216. Another possible source for his knowledge of the translation is the work of Wilhelm Michel who had prepared the text for the performance that Kracauer attended. Kracauer wrote a brief but friendly review of Michel’s essay collection, \textit{Der abendländische Zeus}, \textit{FZ}, July 20, 1923 (A).} In “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin had referred to Hölderlin, and had spoken of the risks taken in his renditions of the Sophoclean tragedies. The rigid literalism of these works had resulted in an idiosyncratic language, one that had become self-referential to the point that it jeopardized communication and was practically silent.\footnote{Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in \textit{Reflections}, (New York, 1968), pp. 81-82. See also, George Steiner's comments on Hölderlin and Benjamin in \textit{After Babel: Aspects of language and translation}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edition (Oxford, 1992), pp. 339-350.} For Benjamin, one of the only sources that could prevent the pitfalls of such practices was to be found in the translation of Holy Writ. Theological
content could redeem translation from the danger of falling into the ‘bottomless depths of language.’”

Kracauer appears to have incorporated an analogous gesture, but he differed from Benjamin on the question of sacred content as a guarantor. Kracauer did not accept the idea of a “language of Adam,” whereby naming had the properties of gnosis; for Kracauer, it was the presence of truth, stripped of positive theology and of every trace of myth that arose from the negative linguistic ground. In Hölderlin this emerged in the “borderline” (grenzhaft) character of his translation. In other texts, such as Kafka’s *The Trial*, Kracauer perceived the ground of negativity in the formal opacity of Kafka’s sentences; they “hung together from all sides so tenaciously that they allowed for no space between them.” Thus, they created an impenetrable surface, negating the reality they seemed to describe. This was not simply a formal virtue, Kracauer argued, for it derived from Kafka’s sensitivity to the “realities of the true and the just”; Kafka deleted the “normal face” of the real only in order to show that what was most significant (das Schwergewicht) in fact did not reside there. Hence, in both Kafka and Hölderlin, language was used to create a “dark ground,” either through the exaggerated consistency of language, or through its “fissured” character; and this was done in order to obliquely point towards truth. Therefore, Kracauer implied that formal nihilism could indicate its opposite: the fulfillment promised by truth, an unseen truth whose absence could only be glimpsed in the dark through a momentary flash of light. The idea of “Holy sobriety” to which Kracauer remained loyal thus finds its significance in a language that waits, that clings to the real and resists the temptation to speak names that it cannot know.

Yet, one might ask what kind of truth is implied by Kracauer in these essays? What function can a truth that is only intimated in a negative and distorted form actually have? Does this exclude the theological; or did he simply suggest that truth was contingent upon an implosion of history that was beyond human reckoning? At this point, one should refer back to his discussion of the

181 Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” p. 82.
184 Ibid., pp. 337-338.
aesthetic “median zone” that lay between photographic images and “prophetic speech,” as an answer to these questions depends to no small degree on whether or not one gives any significance to his use of the latter term. Was there actually such a thing as prophetic speech? This will be discussed in more detail below in regards to his relationship with the revival of Judaism in Frankfurt, but suffice to note here that, at least in the early twenties, his response is ambivalent. “The time of prophecy has gone by,” he argued to Susman and for the present, “we must be content with the role of John the Baptist.”\textsuperscript{185} Such a statement even as it denies the prophetic, however, does not in every case deny the theological, though he was sometimes accused of this.\textsuperscript{186} Instead, the question of theological truth is displaced, and Kracauer appears to have believed that the “bracketing off” of such questions was valid. This strategy of displacement was a precondition to Kracauer’s turn towards the profane, and towards the analysis of mass culture – only after a reckoning with religion could he decisively engage with the profane. Since he was not intending to destroy religious truth, but rather, to mediate it into a contemporary setting, a means of resolving, or displacing the issue, was a preliminary step to what an early study of Kracauer called his “Kierkegaardian leap into the profane.”\textsuperscript{187} The progress of this displacement constitutes the subject of the next two chapters.

However, before moving to this part of the argument, I want to end this chapter with a reference to the implications of Kracauer’s ideas of language. Here again, Kafka was an important reference point as it was in Kafka that Kracauer saw a literature that approached what he called the “form-bursting” potential of reason, a species of reason akin to the fairy tale. As with fairy tales, Kafka’s language, he argued, retained a dual dimension whereby words preserved an element of their unspoken negation:

\begin{quote}
But as [Kafka] reveals the \textit{disfigurement} of the earthly world abandoned by truth, he makes of this [disfigurement] a central medium no less than do fairy tales. In the oldest languages opposites are expressed by the same word; according to psychoanalytic teachings, a dream element may mean
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{185} Kracauer to Susman, undated (probably June, 1920), SN, DLA.
\textsuperscript{186} Ernst Simon to Kracauer, May 7, 1926 and May 17, 1926, KN, DLA. The letters from Simon were provoked by Kracauer’s review of the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible translation. See the discussion in Martin Jay, “Politics of Translation,” pp. 198-216.
\textsuperscript{187} Haenlein, p. 9.
the opposite. Thus, the world cut off from truth, supposes the manifest truth; the matrix of fairy tales supposes the fairy tale.\textsuperscript{188}

Hence, for Kafka, the depiction of a distinctly modern hell, however threatening, was to be read alongside its imbrications with redemption, because “the existence of the damned is bound to that of the redeemed which the poet does not know.”\textsuperscript{189} Redemption, fulfillment, truth – all such concepts are hidden away in this gesture and they are left as incomplete tasks; if they are to be completed, the conditions that would bring this about are not knowable. Kracauer’s answer then is a vague one indicated by his quotation from Hölderlin at the beginning of “Mass Ornament”:

> What we are here, elsewhere a God amends with harmonies, eternal recompense, and peace.\textsuperscript{190}

Reading through disfigurement, the process suggested by the work of Kafka, was an important theme for Kracauer, especially in \textit{The Detective Novel} to which the discussion now turns.

\textsuperscript{189} Kafka, “Der Schloß,” p. 154.
\textsuperscript{190} Kracauer, “Mass Ornament,” \textit{Mass Ornament}, p. 75.
Chapter 5
From Copenhagen to Baker Street: Kracauer, Kierkegaard, and the Detective Novel

I exist primarily, as it were, as a spy to a higher service, in the service of an idea and as such I stand at a lookout and spy upon the realm of Intellect and Religiosity... And I am no holy man.1

The romance of the police force is thus the whole romance of man. It is based on the fact that morality is the most dark and daring of conspiracies.2

The office of the confidence man is today one of the most important on earth.3

Writing in 1924, Alfred Döblin described the peculiarity of his age as a farrago, or misshapen dough in which unleavened clumps of the past blended with the ferment of modernity.4 In this sense, The Detective Novel, a work that Kracauer completed in 1925, is a Weimar book even though it was unpublished and unknown to all but a few friends and acquaintances. Kracauer, of course, would have refused the label. The category of “Weimar Intellectual” appears to have been anathema to him. When Adorno wrote an essay in tribute to his friend, Kracauer asked Adorno to refrain from mentioning his date of birth so as to ensure his “chronological anonymity.” He also appears to have regularly refused information about his contemporaries when approached by later researchers, as if he feared the consequences of being lumped together with the cultural detritus of Weimar.5 He often referred to his fellow writers, such as Döblin, Jünger, and Roth, as “seismographs” or indexes of an age, but he refused this designation for

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1 Kierkegaard, “Die Gesichtspunkt für meine Wirksamkeit als Schriftsteller,” Gesammelte Werke 10 (Jena, 1922), pp. 62-63. Most translations for the Diederich edition of Kierkegaard were done by Christoph Schrempf who later said of his own work that “the critical question is not so much whether I have accurately translated my quotations, but whether I have properly selected them.” According to Habib Malik, Schrempf often departed from the original Danish, sometimes to a very considerable degree, and as a result, he has had an ambiguous influence on the German reception of Kierkegaard (See Malik, Receiving Søren Kierkegaard: the early Impact and Transmission of his Thought (Washington, DC, 1997), p. 313). As Kracauer and Adorno would have relied upon these translations, I have here translated from Schrempf, rather than from versions already existing in English.


himself. Instead, he preferred to be known as “extraterritorial,” originating from a place that eluded contextualization. Yet, this displaced or “extraterritorial” character of The Detective Novel is what renders it distinctive of Weimar. On the one hand, the work anticipates his subsequent reckonings with mass culture, and is one of the first attempts to consider the detective genre as a socially significant form; but on the other hand, his analysis revisited a much older philosophical controversy. In this latter respect, The Detective Novel demonstrates a facet of Weimar intellectual culture that has been remarked upon both by contemporaries and later commentators – the return of disputes that ensued in the wake of Hegel, in particular, those among the Young Hegelians in the 1840s and 50s.

Kracauer thus found in modern Weimar the traces of an older cultural and philosophical dilemma. To be sure, modernity meant that these appeared in new guises and altered scenarios; they also, on account of the new media of mass culture, offered new chances for insight into the problem of culture and society. Kierkegaard was a crucial link to these issues and one that draws attention to their theological ramifications. For just as the philosophical quarrels among the Young Hegelians provoked Kierkegaard to reject the tradition of speculative thought (Kierkegaard had attended Schelling’s lectures), so in the twenties Kierkegaard found his audience among those who rejected the prevailing neo-Kantian consensus. According to Hannah Arendt, writing in 1932, the popularity of Kierkegaard represented both the “atonement for and the revenge of romanticism.” Her fellow Heidegger student, the philosopher Karl Löwith, expanded on this theme a few years later when in exile. He argued that German thought had never reckoned with the challenge posed by Hegel’s failed attempt to embrace history and religion in the confines of a systematic philosophy. Yet, if Hegel had failed in this respect, he nevertheless had let the philosophical cat out of the bag. Those who came after him, Löwith

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6 See his replies to the Döblin scholar Louis Huguet, December 28, 1958, and the Germanist, Senta Zeidler, August 27, 1954, KN, DLA. Also, see his review article of Jünger’s Der Arbeiter, “Gestaltschau oder Politik?” FZ, October 16, 1932, (A/M); reprinted in Kracauer, Schriften 5.3, pp. 118-123.
7 Habermas, Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen (Frankfurt am Main, 1986), pp. 65-75; and Karl Löwith, From Hegel to Nietzsche: the Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought (New York, 1991), pp. 119-120.
8 Schelling’s lectures of 1841 popularized the attack against Hegel. Aside from Kierkegaard, the lectures were also attended by Friedrich Engels, Jacob Burckhardt, and Mikhail Bakunin. See the account of their impact in Löwith, From Hegel to Nietzsche, pp. 115-121.
continued, were unable to think through the consequences. “The danger and importance of the radical philosophical and theological movements provoked by Hegel,” he wrote, “dangers of which the original Hegelians were well aware, was forgotten.”¹⁰ What followed was an anti-historical regression characterized by a weakly founded scepticism towards the bases of existence, and a strict limitation of history to the finite. This led to a philosophy shaped by what Löwith called a “triad” of economic, human, and spiritual misery: represented respectively by Proudhon, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard.¹¹ Kracauer had already encountered the first two parts of this triad in post-war utopian socialism and in the aesthetic “decadence” found in, for instance, Buddenbrooks and Tonio Kröger. Hence, with his study of Kierkegaard, all the components of the mid-nineteenth century reaction had found a place in his writing. This reaction, so Löwith implied, had stymied thought to such a degree that the questions that occupied intellectuals just before and after 1848 seemed almost new to later generations.

However, the early work of Kracauer is not simply an echo of the post-Hegelian aftermath described by Löwith. Placing Kracauer within this context may clarify some of the implications of his work, but there is still much to separate him from these earlier debates, and from Kierkegaard’s approach to them.¹² By situating Kierkegaard’s confrontation with idealism in a modern landscape, by yoking philosophical criticism with the ephemera of pulp fiction. In The Detective Novel Kracauer outlined a model concept of critical vocation. In this work, Kracauer sought to demonstrate what criticism could and should do in a modern setting. Moreover, his peculiar approach to modernity and the question of secular disenchantment is illuminated by this highly idiosyncratic exercise in interpretation.¹³ In this respect, The Detective Novel should be viewed, as an attempt at “appropriation” (Aneignung) in the Kierkegaardian sense, that is, as an exercise in “indirect communication.”¹⁴ If Bloch exaggerated when he claimed that Kracauer

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¹⁰ Löwith, From Hegel to Nietzsche, p. 120.
¹¹ Ibid., p. 119.
¹² Mülter-Bach has discussed the appropriation of Kierkegaardian philosophy in Kracauer’s work; see Siegfried Kracauer-Grenzgänger, pp. 40-46. To what extent Kracauer was acquainted with the writings of the Old and Young Hegelians is an open question. A letter to Susman suggests some familiarity with Feuerbach and Schelling, yet he readily conceded his lack of “philosophical education”; see the letter dated July 26, 1920 and an undated letter written sometime between June and July of the same year (SN, DLA). See also, Thomas Weber, “La réalité emphatique,” pp. 31-35.
¹³ David Frisby, “Between the Spheres,” p. 3.
was only an inferior Kierkegaard in search of his Hegel, he nonetheless correctly identified the
general framework in which Kracauer understood his role as a critic. Kierkegaard’s theologically
inspired assault on the foundations of idealist thought still resonated deeply for Kracauer; though
in the process of “appropriation” he altered these concepts in accordance with his own
perceptions of modernity.

Of these differences, the most obvious is that Kracauer is more concerned with the Kantian
legacy in German thought. Hegel, the nemesis of Kierkegaard, does appear in The Detective
Novel, and the spectre of his “bad infinity” broods over parts of the book, but it is primarily the
transcendental subject of Kant that is his target. Thus, Kracauer continued the critique of the
philosophers of life who posited a sphere resistant to the rational investigations of the Kantian
subject. This was a sphere where, in the words of Novalis, words that Kracauer cited, “no longer
are numbers and figures the key to all creatures.” Still, Kracauer argued that access to this
sphere was blocked and only indirectly perceptible; to “render it visible” was then the uppermost
problem of criticism. One could not approach it by trying to construct a philosophy or
Weltanschauung, but rather only by means of a comprehensively interpretive stance towards
reality. By placing his emphasis on interpretation as a mode of existence and repudiating the
formulation of a system or doctrine, Kracauer was, of course, in accord with contemporary
assessments of the legacy of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

Second, though Kracauer wanted to undermine the Kantian transcendental subject, he is still
ambivalent towards Kierkegaard’s radical subjectivism. To be sure, he does not follow the
Kierkegaardian critique so far as to embrace an existential affirmation of the subject; but as he
later stated to his friend F. T. Gubler, his work sought to recognize the “existential needs” of his

Robert Perkins (Macon, 1997), pp. 129-148; and Robert Poole, Kierkegaard: the Indirect Communication
(Charlottesville and London, 1993).

15 Kracauer, Der Detektiv-Roman, pp. 119-120.
16 Novalis, Schriften I: Das dichterische Werk, eds. Paul Kluckhohn and Richard Samuel (Stuttgart, 1960), pp. 344-
345. Kracauer quotes this line on p. 75.
17 On this issue, see Dagmar Barnouw, “An den Rand geschriebene Träume: Kracauer über Zeit und Geschichte,” in
Siegfried Kracauer: neue Interpretationen, eds. Michael Kessler and Thomas Y. Levin (Stauffenberg, 1990),
pp. 2-13.
18 See, for instance, Karl Jaspers, Vernunft und Existenz: Aula-Voordrachten der Rijksuniversiteit te Groningen I
(Groningen, 1935), pp. 6-11.
19 See the discussion in Heide Schlüpmann, Ein Detektiv des Kinos, pp. 10-16.
Kierkegaard was part of this project because his way to a reasserted subjectivity had the virtue of passing through the profane world, giving due recognition to the individual’s contingent relationship with the real. Only later did Kracauer come to believe that Kierkegaard’s idea of the individual tended towards an “inwardness without object”; but initially Kierkegaard was mobilized as part of a movement to seize the profane world. Indeed, he could be understood as demanding the re-enchantment of the world, rather than its abandonment, for secular reality was the site of revelation. Only in this forum, according to Kierkegaard, does the individual encounter eternal truth, and as a result, the world of appearances required closer scrutiny. In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* of 1846, he argued that the religious devotions of the past were typified by the monastery; the walls of the cloister symbolized the gap between religion and the secular world. Modern religion, however, that had “perhaps gone further” had come to a point where it was “capable of holding the thought of God together with the flimsiest expression of the finite ... with amusement in the amusement park.” For Kracauer this overlap of the finite and the eternal meant that his instincts toward the former did not entirely exclude what he sometimes called, rather elusively, the “truth contents” (*Wahrheitsbestände*) of theology. The terminology is significant as he is clearly at pains to recognize a valid core to religious contents, but does not want to refer to them directly using words such as “eternal” or “true.” Their validity appears to be based on a subjective insight that did not allow for positive statements, and, in this sense, Kracauer preserved a residue of Kierkegaard’s radical subjectivism. The persistence of this Kierkegaardian residue is also

21 Haenlein, p. 9 and 134.
22 The phrase is borrowed from Adorno; see his *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (Minneapolis, 1989), pp. 30-32. On the basis of his review of this book, Kracauer appears to have accepted Adorno’s argument that Kierkegaard ultimately fails to engage with the objective world; but this does not negate the importance of Kierkegaard to Kracauer’s earlier turn towards the profane.
24 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments I*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton, 1992), pp. 472-473. See also George Pattison, *Kierkegaard, Religion and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Culture*, pp. 42-43. In general, my discussion of Kierkegaard is indebted to Pattison’s argument that one needs to situate Kierkegaard in the feuilleton culture of his day in order to interpret his work. The italics in the quotation are my own.
reflected in his stated intentions to unite the existential claims of the individual with a new idea of the collective.\textsuperscript{27}

The third distinction is, of course, his displacement of philosophical criticism into the realm of detective fiction. The detective genre, so he argued, was a symptomatic expression of modern culture. On the one hand, the apotheosis of reason in the form of the detective reflected a society where rationalism had become the absolute measure of things; on the other hand, the stylization of the genre produced a form of aesthetic distortion beneath which some writers believed they could sense the traces of a negated reality. Kracauer, as will be seen, was not alone in viewing the subjugation of reality as a consequence of secular disenchantment; thus, the mystery genre became a kind of profane theology through which one was given intimations of a sphere beyond reason. To be sure, the divagations of the detective remained an extension of ratio; however, if one decoded the aesthetic distortion that was typical of the genre, then one might expose the peculiarly modern regime of encryption and decipherment through which an intimation of the truth might become visible.\textsuperscript{28} This framework of interpretation might be understood as a project of negative knowledge. In this respect, the strategy of reading that Kracauer proposes in \textit{The Detective Novel} is clearly informed by contemporary currents of negative theology, as well as by a more general interest in concepts of negativity in philosophy and aesthetics.\textsuperscript{29}

Aside from those discourses that drew from Kierkegaard, \textit{The Detective Novel} should also be situated within the more general reception of detective fiction during the Weimar Republic, and, as will be seen, defenders of the genre were quick to point out its theological significance. The genre both promised and withheld the sensation of mystery. To some writers, the tensions of the genre derived not so much from its suspense-filled plots, but rather from the fact that it played upon contradictory impulses in the reader. On the one hand, the detective offered an outlet for the romantic lust after the unusual and the mysterious, but on the other, his heroic aura depended

\textsuperscript{27} This subject will be further discussed in the conclusion, see pp. 284-285.


\textsuperscript{29} Mülder discusses the aesthetic and philosophical contexts of his turn to negativity. See her essay, “Umschlag der Negativität” pp.359-373.
on the ability to subordinate all mystery to reason. Thus, mystery is deployed only in order to demonstrate that there are, in fact, no mysteries. In this case, the detective emerges as a mere subordinate of logical process, a status that is at odds with the almost anarchic freedom enjoyed by some of its protagonists; the detective, as Sherlock Holmes once stated, embodies an “impersonal thing – a thing beyond myself.”

Kracauer described the detective as a “counterpart to the adventurer,” an adventurer that seeks no novelty, but only a continuation of its own inner workings. This emphasis on logic diminished the individual heroism of the detective, and, as a result, it generated a tension, an opposition to the illusory freedom that was sought after in mystery and adventure.

This dichotomy of freedom and determinism also has an aesthetic correlate. For as an aesthetic representation, the detective novel re-enchanted the world, or in the words of G. K. Chesterton, it conjured “that thrilling mood and moment when the eyes of the great city, like the eyes of a cat, begin to flame in the dark.” The mysteries of the modern cityscape, Chesterton argued, had been mostly ignored by his fellow writers; having done so, they had neglected a vital part of modern experience. The detective story fulfilled this function, even if it most often did so in works of poor literary quality. However, according to Kracauer, the reinvestment of mystery into the prosaic world was deceptive. In classic detective fiction - Sherlock Holmes, Arsène Lupin, and Nick Carter – before the story ends, the detective inevitably closes the circle and all the mysterious details that beckoned as unknown ciphers are frozen into a definite meaning. Thus, they are degraded to the level of that which can be rationalized, and the mysterious becomes the commonplace. This process of reducing the unknown to the known was, for Kracauer, as for other critics, the defining characteristic of the genre; it was on this basis that Régis Messac, in his mammoth pioneering study of 1929 distinguished detective fiction from the criminal or suspense novel. This process is also, of course, determined by the designs of the author, and the

30 See the discussion in Karl Lerbs, “Einleitung” to Der Griff aus dem Dunkel: Detektivgeschichten zeitgenössisches Erzählers (Leipzig, 1924), p. 15.
32 Kracauer, Der Detektiv-Roman, p. 57. On this point, see Martin Rosenstock, “Ernst Jünger’s Dangerous Encounter—the Detective closes the case on the Adventurer,” Monatshefte 100, no. 3 (Fall, 2008), pp. 392-393.
34 See the chapter entitled, “Prozeß,” Der Detektiv-Roman, pp. 98-130.
unravelling of the mystery reminds us that the fictional entanglements that have obscured our view to the truth are only a matter of authorial invention. Thus, the arbitrary ordering of the world becomes visible; its provisional nature is exposed in a way that anticipates the critique of ideology offered in his subsequent essay on photography.\(^{36}\) For Kracauer, this is analogous to the functions of the Kantian subject, a position that he argues using a passage from the French mystery writer Emile Gaboriau’s *The Alibi*. Just as Gaboriau contrives a set of clues whose seeming lack of coherence defies explanation but which the detective readily disentangles, so the Kantian subject pre-structures experience on the basis of its own categories and, thus, can only have knowledge of a world that it has, in some sense, created. Thus, reality in detective fiction is a fabricated totality generated by a rationalism that “constitutes its own world” (*der ratio als dem welterzeugenden Prinzip*).\(^{37}\)

Yet, it is not clear that mystery is, as a result, banished. For Chesterton, the police order, or what he calls the “conspiracy of morality” is an order upheld by a “successful knight errantry.”\(^{38}\) In other words, there is a quixotic aspect to everyday reality; the commonplace, in fact, is the stuff of mystery and by no means conflicts with it.\(^{39}\) Kracauer muffled this point of view in *The Detective Novel*. Just as the detective always solves the crime, the victory of *ratio* is assured, and the unknown gives way to rational certainty. Yet, Kracauer’s description of *ratio*’s triumphal progress does include a victim. “The object,” so he writes, “suffers a radical destruction so that the transcendental subject can preserve itself as lawgiver.”\(^{40}\) There is then a potential site for mystery contained in the realm of the violated object; but where is this located, and how is it constituted? The detective cannot and does not tell us, but by a reading of the aesthetic distortion generated by *ratio* a circumscribed recognition of the truth becomes possible. Hence, the “superficial expressions” of “low culture” do become imbued with a kind of truth. As Holmes tells Watson at the beginning of one of their adventures, one must take care not to overlook the


\(^{39}\) See the recent discussion of Chesterton and orthodoxy in Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 35-42.

\(^{40}\) Kracauer, *Der Detektiv-Roman*, p. 105.
details wherein the heart of the matter resides; it is through realism that one discovers that “there is nothing so unnatural as the commonplace.”

If the detective has a talent for discerning the truth buried in the seemingly ordinary, so Kierkegaard’s figures of the spy, the plainclothes policemen or secret agent also have an affinity for the “prosaic,” though here too the commonplace retains a hidden meaning. The ethical decision of Either/Or is hidden beneath an aesthetic veil that enchants the world and keeps the religious and ethical dilemma from view. Similarly, the spy of God is submerged in the prosaic world of appearance. The spy does not inhabit, but rather stands before the higher ethical realm. Kierkegaard described this figure as morally compromised, a somewhat disreputable figure who is readily compelled by a higher power. The spy is no “holy man,” nor a secularized hero as is found among the protagonists of detective fiction. There is no aura of omnipotence or of romantic freedom that surrounds him; rather the spy sinks into the quotidian and assumes an incognito status that cloaks his or her position towards the world.

The spy or plainclothes agent in Kierkegaard is, of course, not in every sense identical to the detective, yet, they have comparable functions in a regime of encryption and detection. For both Kierkegaard and Kracauer, modernity is a realm of endless and fragmentary appearances whose meaning has been obscured by the levelling processes of reason and abstraction. Within this profusion of appearances, the detective and the spy suggest a specific mode of existence, whereby interpretation is a means of resisting the categorization of experience that results from this levelling. As Kierkegaard puts it, the secret agents (Geheime Agenten) of the present have recognized “the divine meaning of the diabolical principle of the levelling process.” In a regime where all experience is supposedly identifiable and definable, the spy and the detective are significant as they inhabit that border area between rational and irrational, between aesthetic and ethical. They find the “divine meaning” in the corrupted world of the profane; they confuse appearances, disrupt the fixed order, and destabilize meaning. More concretely, they remind one that the café that stands to the side of the square is still, in fact, the abyss of secret terrors, that

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41 Conan Doyle, “A Case of Identity,” Adventures of Sherlock Holmes, p. 27.
one cannot move through the world with certainty if you only rely on the certainty of reason.\textsuperscript{44} For Kracauer, even more so than the detective it is his opponent, the “gentleman criminal,” the genial “salon heretic” or con-man who functions in a distinctly modern fashion. It is this figure that unsettles the social order by pretending to be what he is not and, in so doing, demonstrates that social reality is not what it seems to be.

This play between appearance and reality affords a space for critical interpretation, but it is one that must be approached indirectly. Gertrud Koch, for instance, has given due emphasis to the role of aesthetic distortion in \textit{The Detective Novel}, a subject that will be discussed further below. However, I want to argue that in addition to reading the world as a distorted text, Kracauer followed the intentions of Kierkegaard’s “indirect communication” in a more general way. The style of \textit{The Detective Novel} forbids a clear interpretation. Formally, the work is, in his own words, deliberately “exaggerated” (\textit{absichtlich ganz zugespitzt}), and the surprising conjunction of “low” literature and philosophical critique would have struck many readers as odd had it been published. Such difficulties appear to have been anticipated by Kracauer, who was not unduly alarmed by the negative comments he received from those friends and acquaintances who read the work. He could scarcely have expected otherwise, as the book appears to have been constructed so as to provoke disorientation. In line with the intentions of indirect communication, the work opens up, or draws attention to a “chasmic gap” between author and reader.\textsuperscript{45} This, in turn, demands an act of critical appropriation on the part of the latter. Thus, the direct polemic is avoided in the study, just as he had argued against the polemical article in his letters to Gubler. Kierkegaard had written in a similar vein in his \textit{Concluding Unscientific Postscript}: “The highest principles for all thinking can be demonstrated only indirectly.” The “confusion of our age,” according to Kierkegaard, was the result of an “excess of the didactic.”\textsuperscript{46} It is with this concern in mind, that Kracauer approached the problem of criticism. This is not to say that he never deployed overt polemic, but rather that his understanding of critical vocation placed the emphasis on the indirect, on what he saw as a more pedagogical approach.

\textsuperscript{44} Pattison, \textit{Kierkegaard, Religion, and the nineteenth-century Crisis of Culture}, pp. 22-23.
\textsuperscript{46} Kierkegaard, \textit{Concluding Unscientific Postscript}, p. 220 and p. 280.
Indirect communication existed in two guises in *The Detective Novel*. The critic interpreted the genre and the genre interpreted the world.\(^{47}\) The regions in which the detective tale distorted reality, where its socially constructed nature reflected intentions that went over and above those of the author, was the terrain of the critic. In a sense, Kracauer’s study anticipated the position argued by W.H. Auden in a 1948 essay in praise of the genre. Auden argued that the ideal reader of detective fiction would be someone such as Josef K in *The Trial*. In fact, the Kafka protagonist, he argues, is “a portrait of the kind of person who reads detective stories for escape.”\(^{48}\) To be sure, Kracauer also believed that the genre was most revealing when it fulfilled its function as a species of entertaining *Kitsch*; but the matter could not rest there.\(^{49}\) For to read detective stories only for escape is precisely what should not happen; rather they required the sort of exegesis that K. fails to undertake in one of the concluding scenes of *The Trial*. Here, K. enters a cathedral and encounters a priest who reads to him the tale, “Before the Law.” To the frustration of the priest, when K. tries to understand the tale, he grasps too eagerly for a clear message; he hastily draws conclusions, and the text foils his attempts to coerce meaning from it. Shortly thereafter, he is, of course, executed by functionaries of the court. The existential stakes of interpretation then are high, and they were for Kracauer as well. Towards the end of his study, in a chapter entitled “Transformation,” he offers a tentative glimpse towards the object of his study: “If the categories of the detective novel were to be fully blown apart ... the authentic would receive a direct language that would allow it to speak, even over the abyss.”\(^{50}\) Thus, the “reversal out of negativity” would be completed and the indirect language of a fallen world would become the direct language of the real. It is not clear how Kracauer meant this potential to be understood; but nonetheless, the task of the critic was to pursue this “direct language,” to push past the abstract categories that concealed it – to find the language that could speak “over the abyss.”

\[^{47}\text{Koch, Siegfried Kracauer, p. 25}\]
\[^{49}\text{Kracauer, “Spannende Romane,” FZ, January 7, 1925 (M); reprinted in Schriften 5.1, pp. 285-288.}\]
\[^{50}\text{Kracauer, Der Detektiv-Roman, p. 98.}\]
Before discussing the content of The Detective Novel, some exploration of the reception of Kierkegaard is needed as Kracauer’s intentions become clearer when his reading of Kierkegaard is situated among his contemporaries. While the book is idiosyncratic in its juxtaposition of Kierkegaardian themes and popular fiction, Kracauer was motivated by a set of problems that was far from uncommon among Weimar intellectuals. On the one hand, the post-war surge of interest in Kierkegaard was a broad phenomenon that left its traces in art, philosophy and religious thought. Moreover, the reception of Kierkegaard crossed confessional boundaries. Hannah Arendt explained this by noting that “the differences between the confessions pale in comparison with the gigantic abyss that has opened up between a self-contained atheistic world and a religious existence in that world.” Thus, the problems confronting religion in modernity, the problems of redefining and reinterpreting religion in a secularized setting were shared dilemmas that, at least to some degree, stepped over doctrinal differences – though this was probably more the case between Catholics and Protestants. While Arendt does not mention Jewish writers specifically, Kierkegaard’s work, as she was almost certainly aware, was read by many Jewish intellectuals of the period: Brod, Benjamin, Lukács, Adorno, Buber, and Kafka, just to name a few. The interest in Kierkegaard then, was in no way esoteric.

Moreover, the interest in Kierkegaard was a trend that some observers saw as symptomatic of the social and cultural angst that followed the war. Of course, the reception of Kierkegaard’s work had begun in the early part of the century, and thus had its roots in the cultural crisis of the late Kaiserreich as well. German translations of Kierkegaard began to appear by the end of the 1800s, and he even had enough of a reputation to attract the attention of Max Nordau who included him in his rogue’s gallery of degenerates. Thus, according to Arendt, the reasons for his current popularity were to be sought not only in the present malaise, but also in the uncanny

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51 On the reception of Kierkegaard in Germany and elsewhere, see Habib C. Malik, *Receiving Søren Kierkegaard*, pp. 339-392; and Roger Poole, “The Unknown Kierkegaard,” pp. 49-75.


54 Pattison argues against giving too much emphasis to a “rediscovery” of Kierkegaard. See Pattison, *Kierkegaard, Religion and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Culture*, pp. 177-178.

55 Malik, p. 340; and Arendt, “Sören Kierkegaard,” *Essays in Understanding*, p. 44.
resemblance between contemporary Europe and the crisis of the past century. Kierkegaard, she states, was “one of the first writers to live in a world constituted much like our own... a secularized world stemming from the enlightenment.” Yet, his thought had come too early; the cultural landscape in Germany had needed to “catch up” to Kierkegaard. He was thus a writer of and against modernity, and he anticipated the later crisis of culture manifested some decades later in the work of Nietzsche, Dilthey and the “philosophy of life.” Such writings had worn down the conventional truths of a faded rationalism; the destruction of the war, she suggested, had done the rest. Similarly, in his account of philosophy in the twenties, Hans-Georg Gadamer argued that Kierkegaard posed what was in fact the traditional theological problem of existence as opposed to essence; but he did so in a stark fashion that repudiated both the churches and much of the pieties associated with religious belief. After the war, when the “problems of existence took on a renewed virulence” the Kierkegaardian critique of religion and of rationalism found a receptive audience, particularly among those who had been most affected by the pre-war mood of crisis. Confronted with the mass death generated by the mechanized armies of the state, the work of Kierkegaard became a “thorn in the flesh,” forcing individuals to confront their anxieties concerning modern society, and to reckon with their own codes of conduct that were deeply implicated in the catastrophe of war and defeat. “What our time needs,” stated the Catholic theologian Ferdinand Ebner, is “Kierkegaard and once again Kierkegaard.”

Ebner, of course, saw Kierkegaard who was, at least nominally, a Protestant, as within the circle of Catholic belief, but the existential facets of his thought were relevant both to non-Catholics and to those who had abandoned the churches altogether. To many, Kierkegaard was valued for his devastating attacks on Hegel and the idealist tradition. According to Adorno, this seemingly decisive assault led many students to abandon altogether the classic works of idealism. Having first disposed of these grand philosophical systems, Kierkegaard then forced philosophy to return to what some saw as its proper object: the subjectively existing individual and his or her relationship to absolute truth. As Franz Rosenzweig stated, Kierkegaard had placed the fulcrum

58 Ferdinand Ebner, from a diary entry in 1921, quoted in Malik, p. 387.
of existence outside of any “objectively” existing system. Of course, for Kierkegaard truth was closely bound to his own interpretation of Christian dogma, which via the birth of Christ posed the paradox of the eternal having entered into the contingent world. This meant that the individual who sought faith must risk her redemption on an “absolute relation” with the eternal, yet this relationship was both beyond thought and only attested to by a temporal event – the historical existence of Christ.

However, what this formulation of paradox meant for modern philosophy or religious belief was, unsurprisingly, not always clear. As Arendt pointed out, the work of Kierkegaard represented not only a turning away from Hegel or Kant, or even a shift within philosophy; rather it represented a “repudiation of philosophy as such.” As with Nietzsche, he was seen less as the source of philosophical doctrines, but rather as a mode of existence; or in the words of Karl Jaspers, a different “total position in thought” (denkende Gesamthaltung). This somewhat hazy conception of philosophy readily lent itself to appropriation by intellectuals with divergent and varying agendas, and in ways which Kierkegaard may not have approved. For instance, Max Brod thought Kierkegaard confirmed his own conception of Judaism. Kierkegaard, he claimed, offered a powerful statement of the “here and now” (Diesseitigkeit) of revelation, a moment that transformed existing reality under the sign of redemption. Indeed, he argued that this concept had received its clearest statement in Fear and Trembling. In a sense, Brod created a Kierkegaard that would serve to explain aspects of Judaism, just as Ebner and other Catholic thinkers sought to appropriate him for Catholicism. Later, he would become associated with existentialism or what one writer called “theology without God.”

60 Paul Franks and Michael Morgan, “From 1917 to 1925,” in Rosenzweig, Philosophical and Theological Writings, p. 89.
61 Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, pp. 578-579. See also the discussion of paradox in Brod, Paganism, pp. 233-235.
63 Jaspers, Vernunft und Existenz, p. 6.
64 See the skeptical remarks concerning this subject in Rosenzweig, “Apologetic Thinking,” Philosophical and Theological Writings, p. 101.
65 Brod, Paganism, pp. 126-149.
Thus the reception of Kierkegaard was inflected across a varying paradigm as different intellectuals deployed his radical critique in different agendas. The fact that Kierkegaard attracted writers as diverse as Kafka, Haecker, Jaspers, Buber and Mann gives some sense of the multifaceted nature of his reception. Nonetheless, his strongest association was with the burgeoning *Existenzphilosophie* and, according to Gadamer, the term *Existenz* actually becomes more common in Germany largely on account of his influence.\(^{67}\) Not everyone found this diverse reception to be unproblematic. Adorno, for instance, was suspicious of the ways in which Kierkegaard was mediated into German culture. Sometimes this meant the sting of his “thorn in the flesh” was removed so as to make Kierkegaard’s writings more palatable and less likely to provoke a bad conscience among his readers. It was also evident in a spiritual obscurantism that readily used the “qualitative leap” as a cover for all kinds of mystical points of view; or in the words of Brod: “imagination has a field day... for once the shield of the paradox of faith is allowed to cover up all fancies, there is no end to it.”\(^{68}\) By the last years of the republic, Adorno was lamenting that Kierkegaard was fast becoming the “house philosopher of Eugen Diederichs,” the publisher known for his predilection for mystical and esoteric thought. Kierkegaard, so Adorno thought, had provoked a cultural “pandemonium” in Germany.\(^{69}\)

However, Kierkegaard was also incorporated into an anti-metaphysical trend sympathetic to closer engagements with material reality, the belief that one had to push to “the things themselves.” This emphasis on the concrete finds a curious echo in the recollections of the Dadaist writer, Richard Huelsenbeck, who mentioned Kierkegaard in connection with the *neue Sachlichkeit* of the mid-1920s: “This was the time Kierkegaard’s wisdom forced attention to shift from heaven to earth and when Freud introduced the concept of dynamics into psychology. People felt that mankind was creative, and creativity encompassed both evil and good.”\(^{70}\) For Huelsenbeck, there is little sense of the religious aspects of Kierkegaard; the “leap of faith,” the primacy of scripture, for instance, disappears into a general movement of anti-romantic

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\(^{68}\) Brod, *Paganism*, p. 235.


dynamism. Kierkegaard’s suspension of the ethical loses its significance as a bridge to the eternal, and instead becomes a license for aesthetic creativity. By and large, his comment suggests that Adorno was, perhaps, not wrong to fear the uses to which Kierkegaard might be put; but on the other hand, Huelsenbeck also drew attention to an important aspect of Kierkegaard reception: the emphasis on the profane world as the site of revelation. The relation to the Absolute was thus to be experienced not in metaphysical speculation or through the alleged byroads of abstract thought, but rather as something concretely existing in the world.  

To some degree, Kracauer exemplifies the rough pattern of Kierkegaard reception that emerges from these contemporary accounts. He must have first read Kierkegaard before or during the war, but it was only after 1918 that his influence is strongly apparent. Thus, in his unpublished study on the individual (Persönlichkeit), he mentioned Kierkegaard as an “excellent” observer of the conflict between ethical and aesthetic sensibilities; but it is only in The Detective Novel that Kierkegaardian concepts are substantially explored. His contempt for the direction taken by German philosophy, his disgust at the alleged cultural decadence of his age, his interest in the Lebensphilosoph – all these characteristics identify him as one of those intellectuals that Arendt thought were inclined to welcome the bracing critique of modern rationalism found in works such as Present Age, Either/Or and the Concluding Unscientific Postscript.

However, Kracauer was susceptible to Kierkegaard not only because he found in him a sympathetic critic of modernity, but also because he addressed, in radical terms, the problematic relationship of the individual to the absolute. For despite Kracauer’s religious scepticism, expressed both in “Those Who Wait” and in his letters to Löwenthal as early as 1921, he was still situated on the cusp of religious revival. The occasional expression of religious enthusiasm, as we have seen, appears in his correspondence with Susman, and his evident devotion to Rabbi Nobel also suggests that he was not entirely immune to charismatic religiosity. The conflict between religion and reason was one that Kracauer appears to have accepted as inevitable. In a

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73 Rabbi Anton Nobel (1871-1922) was active in Frankfurt after the war. Of Nobel, Leo Löwenthal stated, he was a “remarkable blend of mystical religiosity, philosophical insightfulness, and also a more or less suppressed love towards young men” (Mitmachen wollte ich nie, pp. 19-20). Kracauer reported on the death and burial of Nobel in the FZ; he expressed his personal grief in a letter to Löwenthal on January 24, 1922 (In steter Freundschaft, p. 35).
study undertaken during the war, for instance, he wrote of the relationship between secularism and religious faith in terms that assumed a fundamental incompatibility between the two: “the conditions of faith, in and of themselves, hinder the independence and unrestricted development of personal intellect.”

The very title of this work, *The Suffering under Knowledge and the Longing after the Act*, is suggestive of the revolt against rationalism that Kierkegaard addressed. Such sentiments persisted after the war and they were an important context for his post-war sociological and philosophical pursuits. “We long to approach God, as *Volk*, as humanity,” he wrote to Susman, “but iron sociological laws force us to distance ourselves from Him. That is inescapable fate.” Thus, Kracauer’s sceptical refusal of religious revival needs to be set against this wavering course between the religious and the profane, for if he refused a confession of faith, he still believed that religion’s decline was deeply problematic. Moreover, the turn to sociology was not undertaken without a sense that one had to understand social structures in order to perceive how society had prevented individuals from gaining insight into their situation. In other words, to study sociology was, in one sense, to know the enemy.

Kracauer’s most intensive interest in Kierkegaard coincides with the period when he began work on *The Detective Novel*. Near the end of 1923, he mentioned the beginning phases of his “metaphysical” study in a letter to Löwenthal. At the same time, Kracauer was very close to Adorno, whom he described as obsessed with the work of Kierkegaard. As Kracauer and Adorno spent significant parts of 1923 and 1924 travelling together it is certainly probable that Kierkegaard occupied much of their discussions and collective reading. Hence, there is good reason to look on *The Detective Novel*, in part, as a collaborative work, especially in light of Kracauer’s impassioned statements on friendship and intellectual creation. For his part, Adorno in a letter to Kracauer described his own work on Kierkegaard as no “private intellectual accomplishment,” but rather as a product of our “common philosophical past.”

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75 Kracauer to Susman, January 11, 1920, SN, DLA.
76 Kracauer to Löwenthal, October 16, 1923, *In steter Freundschaft*, pp. 48-49.
78 See the early writings collected posthumously in Kracauer, *Über die Freundschaft: Essays*, ed. Karsten Witte (Frankfurt am Main, 1974).
collaboration, however, was not an easy one, and it was complicated by the ambivalent homosexual desires of the much older Kracauer.\(^{80}\) Indeed, Kracauer wrote to Löwenthal of his sufferings on account of Adorno:

> I was and am very sad due to Teddie. I believe you know that I feel an unnatural passion for this person, so that I could only explain it if I am, in fact, simply homosexual in intellectual and spiritual (geistig) matters.\(^{81}\)

These biographical details are not extraneous to the genesis of the work, but rather a significant influence on its composition. As Heide Schlüpmann points out, the book emerged out of an intensive existential collaboration that was both intellectual and intimate. Encountering the other in philosophical discourse was a means by which the language of Kant or Kierkegaard was to be appropriated and transmuted into a “language of the body and intimacy.”\(^{82}\) Part of this encounter would have involved, according to Schlüpmann, recognition of the “clinging to appearances” of the individual, whereby one’s image of the other person dissipates in a general and reciprocal dissolution of subjectivity – a theme that was important to the subsequent thought of both Kracauer and Adorno. Thus, the concrete encounter with the other in philosophical dialogue became a means of exposing the false view of the subject as a well-defined entity. It revealed the bounds of the individual, and it was thus a starting point for their departure from the radical subjectivity of Kierkegaard. Schlüpmann suggests that in the early period of this relationship, Adorno became a kind of Dr Watson to the Holmes-like detective figure of Kracauer.\(^{83}\) Whether or not putting the relationship in these terms clarifies the intellectual indebtedness of one to the other is, perhaps, debatable; but still Schlüpmann does elucidate the existential significance that Kracauer placed on intellectual partnership in the context of *The Detective Novel*.\(^{84}\)

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\(^{80}\) The recent publication of the correspondence between Adorno and Kracauer only partly clarifies their relationship. Kracauer’s letter of April 5 1923, written when Adorno was 19 and Kracauer 34, is the most direct expression of his hopes for further intimacy. Adorno’s reply, if there was one, has not been preserved and there are no other letters between them until September of the following year.

\(^{81}\) Kracauer to Löwenthal, April 12, 1924, *In steter Freundschaft*, pp. 53-55.

\(^{82}\) Schlüpmann, *Ein Detektiv des Kinos*, p. 15.

\(^{83}\) Ibid., p. 24.

\(^{84}\) Adorno did in fact describe his relationship to Kracauer in terms that reciprocated at least some of Kracauer’s intentions. “The meeting with my friend,” he wrote to Alban Berg, “is in every way stimulating and important; it commands every exertion in human terms, in point of fact, it compels a revision of fundamentals.” Adorno added,
As a symbol of a very troubled relationship, it is fitting then that the book also has not fared well. Kracauer gave a public reading from the work in a Frankfurt café in 1925, and he probably circulated it among his friends, but it was never published in his lifetime. A letter from Adorno in summer 1925 suggests that this was due to the rupture in their personal relations. Adorno wrote that he had imagined Kracauer might one day surprise him with a publication, “but no, you will not do it, out of [your] anxiety to symbolize something that is there no more, and because you hate every lasting sign of us.” With its original dedication to Adorno, the book first appeared in its entirety six years after Kracauer’s death.

The collaborative origin of the work may explain why Adorno was the only contemporary who appears to have read Kracauer’s intentions with sympathy. Based on the few surviving responses, the general attitude to the book was hostile and even Kracauer admitted that it was a problematic work. “I recognize that it is difficult,” he confessed to Löwenthal, “to penetrate my artificiality.” Yet, what some saw as its repetitiveness was part of his intentions. As we have seen, he readily conceded its exaggerated style, and he also recognized the obsessive quality of the work: “I do not shy away from variations on one theme.” On this point, he was referring to the complaints of his fellow editor on the Frankfurter Zeitung, Hermann Herrigel, who found the chapter on the “Hotel Lobby” too repetitive and stylistically “precious.” Herrigel had also argued that Kracauer’s portrayal of a world fully subordinated to ratio was too pessimistic. The sociologist Karl Mannheim had a comparable response, suggesting that the book was “oppressive” and “almost unallowable.” Despite these criticisms, Kracauer appears to have

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85 Adorno to Kracauer, May 31, 1925, Briefwechsel, 1923-1966, pp. 72-75.
86 Kracauer to Löwenthal, November 2, 1924, In steter Freundschaft, p. 65.
87 Kracauer to Löwenthal, October 16, 1923, In steter Freundschaft, p. 49.
88 Kracauer to Löwenthal, November 2, 1924, In steter Freundschaft, p. 65.
89 Kracauer to Löwenthal, July 28 and 29, 1924, In steter Freundschaft, pp. 59-60. Neither Herrigel nor Mannheim appears to have read the whole work, only the chapter entitled “Hotel Hall.” The word that Kracauer attributed to Mannheim is schwül. The closeness of this word to schwul (homosexual) may have been intended, but there is insufficient context to be sure one way or the other.
stuck to his original designs. In early 1925, he wrote to his friend Werner Thormann, that he had “danced the night away and brought the work to an end.”

Perhaps Kracauer assumed that the popularity of detective fiction might have stirred some interest in his readers, but the mode of analysis suggests otherwise. *The Detective Novel* is not an easy book to categorize. The subject matter of the work seems at odds with its difficult style and almost obsessive pursuit of philosophical themes. It is difficult to imagine what kind of audience Kracauer envisioned for the work, and he rejected the labels of sociology or phenomenology that Herrigel attributed to it. The book was neither, he complained, and “even if it were, à la bonheur, it would still be better than a ... faded authenticity.”

This reference to authenticity or to those whom he called the “concrete ones” gives some idea of, if not the audience, the second target of the book: the purported “authenticity” of the religious revival. Such authenticity, Kracauer suggested, demands a sign, a set of criteria to validate the work, but this is what Kracauer wants to avoid. Instead, *The Detective Novel* deploys a kaleidoscopic approach, repeating its themes from varying perspectives and incorporating them into different angles of critique. This does, nonetheless, give the book a repetitive if not monotonous character, and if Herrigel found reading through one chapter difficult it is not hard to imagine how he would have responded to the entire text. Against such criticism, Kracauer responded that it was “easy” to have an idea, it was the fleshing out that was decisive: “the eternal variation of continuously new points of view is precisely what lends intensity and engraves an image.”

The risk of monotony then was worth taking as he thought his analysis would gain from its shifting perspectives and intensified imagery.

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So what was Kracauer trying to uncover in the detective novel? He was certainly not alone in the conviction that the genre contained a hidden social content, a tentative expression of subterranean social desires. In a 1929 review of detective fiction for *Die Literarische Welt*, Heinrich Mann argued that detective stories attracted those readers disappointed by the humdrum

90 Kracauer to Thormann, January 31, 1925, Thormann Nachlaß, EB 97/145, Deutsches Nationalbibliothek, Deutsches Exilarchiv, 1933-1945, Frankfurt am Main.
91 Kracauer to Löwenthal, November 2, 1924, In steter Freundschaft, p. 65. The omitted word was illegible in the original letter.
92 Kracauer to Löwenthal, November 2, 1924, In steter Freundschaft, p. 65.
pace of modern experience. Even the war, he claimed, could not break the monotony of an endless progression of days; but it was “something altogether different when criminals lock an heiress in a dungeon.” Here, one finds mystery and surprise, and delights at the ensuing “process of discovery.”\(^93\) The novels responded to “our unconsidered inclinations” and such attractions, “alongside the more rational ones, are often attached to a master of mysteries and dangers.”\(^94\) Thus, the genre had a dual function: it disrupted the routine nature of reality, and then it furnished the hero who restored the disrupted order. This was a world in which apparent stasis alternated with mysterious and dynamic events, and the firmly ordered world of reason was juxtaposed to the apparently unexplainable.

It was only a short step to invest such terms with a theological interpretation, and in an article by Willy Haas, the editor of *Die Literarische Welt*, this potential manifests itself in the alternation of chaos and revelation. For Haas, the detective story was a modern morality play in which the detective restored moral order to a world that had obscured the truth with a veil of material facts.\(^95\) Haas described the setting and plot of the detective story in terms similar to Kracauer. The action occurred in a median zone or *Mittelgrund*; the characters acted in accordance with a typology that placed them in different relations, either higher or lower, to this level – what Haas identified as the “upper,” “lower,” and “deepest.” These levels certainly referred to moral status, but they also corresponded to levels of intellectualism. According to Haas, the criminal is primarily distinguished by his or her complexity (*Kompliziertheit*). Thus, crimes are perpetrated in the most uncommon and ingenious of fashions; the facts defy explanation and threaten to disappear into worldly chaos. In this respect, the criminal contributes to and perpetuates the prevailing disorder of the world. His collusion with chaos is a matter of natural affinity, as it is in disorder that the criminal hides himself. This, of course, is an affront not only to morality, but also to the prerogatives of reason that everywhere clarifies the nature of things and is embodied by the detective. The solution of the crime then confirms “that the world ... is logical,” that effect follows cause which, as Haas tells us, is “not often the case in human experience.” Haas goes further, however, and suggests that this function is akin to that of divine providence. The


detective story then becomes “a substitute for failing religious belief. It confers confidence upon
the divine Word and divine Justice.”96 In his closing remarks, Haas introduced a theme that paralleled Kracauer’s intentions. “The theological,” he writes, does not and can not “express itself openly,” and thus the detective should be understood as one of its indirect expressions, a
“subterranean theological symptom of the times.”97 What both writers shared then was the belief
that the detective story not only contained unstated elements of social reality, but also, that it indirectly represented impulses contributing to its construction. Thus, detective stories
illuminated the society that generates and consumes them, and the decoding of these stories was
a crucial task for criticism.98

What is unique to Kracauer is that within this task he allows for the potential recovery of a
language liberated from ratio. Through such a language the violated world of objects might
again express itself, and it is upon this premise that the potentially redemptive task of criticism
rests. The language of the real constitutes a point of resistance hidden beneath the categories of
abstract reason that in The Detective Novel appear as “mere legality,” or Kantian
transcendentalism. The detective novel is a staging ground for this struggle, but one that depends
on reading the distorted images of the aesthetic sphere and decoding their correspondences to the
higher or “upper” ones.99 Where Kracauer holds out this possibility, he refers to “intentions”
that are aimed towards this sphere, yet it is not exactly clear what these “intentions” are, and how
they are to fulfill their liberating function. One potential source was the “fracture points”
( Bruchstellen) that, according to Adorno, Kracauer always took care to emphasize when reading
a philosophical text. These were the moments in a work where the writer was unable to reconcile opposing motives, thoughts and judgments. They existed as “fissures and flaws,” or a visible
“wound” on the surface of the work, but a wound in which its “essential” contents became

96 Haas, “Die Theologie in Kriminalroman,” p. 177. Haas edited a special number of Die Literarische Welt devoted specifically to this question in which a number of writers and intellectuals were invited to discuss the modern fate of the Ten Commandments.
97 Haas, p. 178. Haas may have known of this work. Kracauer gave a public reading from the book in 1925 which was mentioned in a letter from Adorno (May 21, 1925, Briefwechsel, 1923-1966, p.63) who heard of the event through the Prague-based musician and writer Hermann Grab. He could be one potential source. Walter Benjamin, with whom Kracauer spoke about the work in some detail, is another. It is most probable that Kracauer showed the completed work to Benjamin who may have discussed it with Haas though I have not seen any evidence of this.
98 Koch, Siegfried Kracauer, p. 25.
99 Ibid., pp. 16-17.
legible, even more so than in its direct statements.\textsuperscript{100} While such flaws were usually not deliberate, they represented an “intention towards the higher sphere” – the failure betraying, perhaps, an unfulfilled desire to reconcile the lower and the higher. In Kant’s work, Kracauer suggested that the “thing in itself” constituted one such fracture point, a trace element of reality that his followers hurriedly tried to cover over.\textsuperscript{101}

Another source resided in the role of artist. Kracauer did not elaborate on this point at much length in \textit{The Detective Novel}, but the artistic task of performing the work of “connection” between higher and lower spheres was alluded to in his 1925 essay, “Artist of these Times” – an essay that has much in common with the detective study. Here the artist was ensnared between rival claims. He or she could either represent the merely material facts of existence, or arrogate to themselves a religious status that was not in accord with their aesthetic powers.\textsuperscript{102} In the latter role the artist acquired a nearly prophetic position as aesthetics took over the functions of religion and attempted to give order to the world; the more secular the world became, the more it needed art. In \textit{The Detective Novel}, Kracauer argued that it was a mistake to grant artists this kind of authority, but it was, nonetheless, a comprehensible one. For by “inserting intentions” into the “entangled matter” of appearances, the artist allowed them to become transparent and readable. Such intentions derived from the “directed self” that the artist then infused into the forms of life.\textsuperscript{103} Reading and interpreting these images was thus a matter of reading disfigured intentions and decoding their displacement into an aesthetic medium. The language of the real that might then emerge, however, still required translation, for it speaks or “stutters,” so Kracauer stated, in a “foreign idiom.”\textsuperscript{104} Hence, he called his study a demonstration of the “art of translation” (\textit{Übersetzungskunst}), a means of reading “translatable counter-images” and of cultivating a “questioning existence” (\textit{Vernommensein}) in the reader.\textsuperscript{105}

The book’s argument proceeds by way of an analysis of the typical figures and settings found within the detective genre and by drawing attention to its mode of stylization. Against this

\textsuperscript{100} Adorno, “Curious Realist,” p. 160.
\textsuperscript{101} Kracauer, \textit{Der Detektiv-Roman}, p. 77.
\textsuperscript{102} Kracauer, “Der Künstler in dieser Zeit,” \textit{Der verbotene Blick}, p. 130.
\textsuperscript{103} Kracauer, \textit{Der Detektiv-Roman}, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., p. 50.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., p. 9 and pp. 22-23
stylized typology, the unexpressed “intentions” stood out more visibly. This typology, Kracauer argued, is itself demanded by ratio, as by its very nature ratio seeks out the typical, or what he calls “pure quantities”; every contingency is, as a result, reduced to a mere decorative function. In terms of setting, Kracauer argues that the representative venue of the genre is the hotel lobby, a space that functions primarily as a collecting point from which individuals can be dispersed according to their various functional capacities (Zweckhaftigkeit). It is an aesthetic microcosm of the world at large, an artistic rendering of Kant’s “purposefulness without purpose.” Kracauer, referred explicitly to this Kantian concept as a means of elaborating a more general critique of the relationship between secularism and Kantian thought. For as life sinks away from the comprehensive meaning that religion once bestowed upon it, society must “demand more of the work of art”; the aesthetic totality thus steps into the position vacated by religion. In the case of the hotel lobby, its chaotic traffic is subordinated to an aesthetic construction that satisfies the need for spectacle, but is in itself meaningless. This he contrasts with the “house of god”:

The house of god, just as much as the hotel lobby, answers to an aesthetic sense that registers the requirements legitimate to it; however, if in the former, beauty has a language with which it bears witness against itself, so there [in the hotel lobby] it is mute and closed within itself, and does not know how to find the other. In the tasteful lounge chairs the civilization directed towards rationalization comes to an end.

Here, the aesthetic totality is one of meaningless and superficial patterns, or in Kracauer’s words, it degrades reality to a “mere relation of forces.” It is a world ruled by abstraction, and such “categorical imperatives” are “no substitute for the direction that arises out of moral decision.” Here, he places against the world of ratio an ethical decisionism derived in part from the “qualitative leap” found in Kierkegaard, but also reminiscent of the decisionism of Carl Schmitt. The theme of the decision emerges as an undercurrent in the study, placing him

106 Ibid., p. 10.
107 Ibid., p. 40.
109 Kracauer, Der Detektiv-Roman, p. 41.
110 Ibid., pp. 41 and 43.
111 Koch, Siegfried Kracauer, pp. 19-20. Kracauer briefly mentions Schmitt in his essay on Die Tat (FZ, December 10 and 11, 1931), reprinted in Mass Ornament, pp. 107-127), but he most probably knew of Schmitt’s work much
squarely within a discourse on the “theological-political” problem, as will be discussed further below.

The aesthetic totality Kracauer describes in the hotel lobby is complicated, however, by his Kierkegaardian model of the spheres. True to this model, humanity inhabits a median position, suspended between the lower sphere of the aesthetic (ruled by ratio) and the higher or religious spheres. They live “in time as well as in the glimmer of eternity, they cling to a perpetually untenable position between the natural and the supernatural.”112 The lower aesthetic sphere, typified by the hotel lobby, is one that is utterly secular. Ruled by logic and abstraction, it is a place where the demon of Laplace has triumphed. Nonetheless, the higher spheres haunt this reality, even if they must remain inaccessible to human thought. They surface in the denied promise of utopian fulfillment, a promise that is not yet extinguished. Existing in this suspended state between the aesthetic, ethical and religious spheres, humanity tries in vain to satisfy their opposing claims. This ensures the preservation of the paradox, a condition that legitimates the ethical decision, for law can only achieve validity in so far as it directs itself to the higher spheres even as it recognizes the contingency of the lower.113 If the community should ever loosen themselves from the paradox, then they would succumb entirely to the abstract forces of the lower spheres.114 The world of the detective novel is one where this descent appears to be in an advanced stage. Yet, even here, in spite of this brutally rationalized world, there remain what he calls “correspondences” between the higher and lower spheres. As Kracauer writes, “the crude insights and positions of the lower regions have [...] counterparts in the higher ones; the tidings that they bring represents authenticity by inauthentic means.”115 The cosmos of the detective then is a nightmare of reason, but one in which the religious sphere retains a ghostly presence, a theological inversion of Fritz Lang’s Dr Mabuse – everywhere present but nowhere visible.

earlier, if only second-hand through Walter Benjamin. At the very least, his discussion of law and justice suggests close familiarity with Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” published in 1921. Kracauer’s fascination with Kierkegaard’s idea of the “qualitative leap” is referred to in a letter from Adorno, July 25, 1930, Briefwechsel, 1923-1966, p. 237.
112 Kracauer, Der Detektiv-Roman, p. 13.
114 Koch, Siegfried Kracauer, pp. 20-21.
115 Kracauer, Der Detektiv-Roman, pp. 11-12.
Kracauer is also consistent with Kierkegaard in that he represents the aesthetic totality as a site of violence. For Kierkegaard the city was the cultural and social terminus of aestheticized cruelty; the archetypical city was Rome at the time of the martyrs, and its representative artists were Nero and Caligula. An echo of this violence is to be found in the destruction of the individual perpetrated by ratio. According to Kracauer, the characters of detective fiction are dismembered and dehumanized; they exist only as “insubstantial marionettes,” “particles of soul” and “complexes of atoms.” They were remnants of the individual soul that were in no way specific to a person, but rather part of a generalized and abstract mass of collective drives. Qualities such as love, faith and jealousy were treated by ratio as “accent markings” – a mere “springboard for intellectual artifice.” The concept of the free and independent individual as formulated by writers of the romantic period, a concept to which Kracauer had some sympathy in his earlier work, was degraded to a collection of desires, impulses and reactions. Evidence of this destruction was to be found in the corresponding degradation of names. Whereas in the religious community names “unfolded themselves” (die Namen sich erschließen) in a process that reckoned with the whole person, in the secular world names were “mutilated into oblivion (bis zur Unkenntlichkeit verstümmelt).” The world of the detective novel is thus one that always presupposes violence, a suppressed crime, committed by ratio, and evident in language.

The institution of the law is the primary domain where the breadth of this crime becomes apparent for Kracauer. As Gertrud Koch has argued, the formation of the law is a test case of the paradoxical and “doubled” nature of reality in the detective novel. Kracauer argued that law was fractured by two fundamentally opposed conceptions of itself which he introduced with a quotation from Anatole France. On the one hand, law is absolute, “immutable, derived from

117 Kracauer, *Der Detektiv-Roman*, pp. 25, 36 and 63.
118 Ibid., p. 25.
119 For contemporary statements of the romantic idea of Persönlichkeit, see the discussion on Kracauer’s “Über das Wesen der Persönlichkeit,” in Chapter Two, pp. 56-57 above. Also, see Eva Fiesel, *Die Sprachphilosophie der deutschen Romantik* (Tübingen, 1927), p. 226.
120 Kracauer, *Der Detektiv-Roman*, p. 11. The terminology Kracauer used here is reminiscent of both contemporary phenomenology and Benjamin’s theory of language. As discussed above, Kracauer was not usually sympathetic to the concept of naming as gnosis as in his critique of Bloch’s *Münzer* book.
God,” but on other, law is contingent, a “natural product of social life.” Humanity is destined to remain in the tension created by these irreconcilable positions, the latter of which offered a “distorted” or “disfigured” version of the first. For Kracauer, there is no knowledge of the law as an absolute (echoes of Kafka) because the higher spheres are beyond human reason; yet this does not give individuals a license to ignore the idea of absolute law. The society that does so negates its relationship to the higher spheres and sinks further into the regime of ratio, losing all connection to the paradox and to the real. In respect to the law, this means that society lapses into what Kracauer calls “mere legality.” In contrast, the religious community is one where law and freedom have merged, where law is to be understood more in the sense of a way, path or direction chosen in freedom. The legal order, of course, claims legitimacy on account of its alleged connection to the higher spheres, but if it claims to legislate on behalf of these spheres then it oversteps its prerogatives. Just as in the fairy tale the brooms enchanted by a sorcerer continue to sweep even when the sorcerer has departed, mere legality remains oblivious to its own sources. Kracauer argues that such a step is fatally presumptuous and represents the triumph of ratio in the guise of Kantian transcendentalism. “The unrestrained growth of the legal principle,” he wrote, “is analogous to the expansion of philosophical systems that directly strive to establish themselves as a totality ... only if the knowing self is reduced to the transcendental subject ... can there emerge the thought of embracing the totality within a system.” This means that for Kracauer the legal and epistemological are not far apart; the patterns of rule and the patterns of perception converge in a conspiracy against the real.

The descent into “mere legality” has wide-ranging consequences that Kracauer anticipated in a study written in 1919 for an essay competition. Entrants to the contest, sponsored by the Moritz-Mannheimer Stiftung, were invited to consider what form of government would best ensure the

123 Kracauer, Der Detektiv-Roman, pp. 14-15. Ausgerichtet and hingespannt are Kracauer’s preferred adjectives when he refers to this relationship.
124 In “Das Leiden unter dem Wissen,” Kracauer cited with enthusiasm a passage to this effect that he encountered in a 1916 lecture given by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, “Das europäische Ich.” The source was apparently from Tolstoi, but it has not been verified. See Werke 9.1, p. 270 and p. 404.
125 Kracauer, Der Detektiv-Roman, p. 67.
126 Ibid., p. 71.
promotion of “charity, justice and tolerance.” As Ingrid Belke has pointed out, the judges had intended that entrants should address the values of the enlightenment, the legacy of 1789, and the creation of the constitutional state (Rechtsstaat). Kracauer, however, turned the question on its head, arguing that there could, in fact, be no permanent correspondence between a specific political order and moral ideals. He also argued that philanthropic values (Menschenliebe) had no specific affinity to state institutions and were just as well, if not better, served by a religious community (Gemeinschaft). In a sense he flew directly in the face of secular rationalism. To the judges, it must have seemed as if in the first year of republican rule, he was already casting doubt on the long-term viability of democracy.

Yet, his argument was not simply a matter of conservative reaction; on the contrary, Kracauer implied that if laws were mutable, as the revolution had demonstrated, then this had to be the case for all political orders, the Rechtsstaat included. In this respect, enlightenment principles had no greater claim to permanence than those laws that the revolution had removed. “The manufacture of eternal justice,” he proclaimed, “requires eternal revolution.” If this was the case then a just political order needed a flexible attitude towards the legal and constitutional order, what Kracauer called “lability” (Labilität). This meant that all political arrangements must adjust themselves to changing circumstances. Indeed, Kracauer thought it should actually implement a mechanism for regular upheaval; for otherwise the community suffered under the burden of outmoded forms, customs, and laws. The influence of Simmel and the philosophy of life are readily clear. Laws were subject to an ongoing process of generation and decay, and they had their greatest validity only at the moment of origin – at the moment when they created an outlet for the spiritual forces of humanity. Afterwards, they declined and became hindrances to spiritual and moral progress.

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131 Ibid., p. 119.
In *The Detective Novel*, the atrophy of form is equated with the decline of law into mere conventions, a process by which they lose their original ethical significance. According to Kracauer, it is the police force as a social institution that represents this decline. The police are only executors of the law and they have no part in its creation. Laws, he argued, arise from the crucible of “decision” (*Entscheidung*) and this is not within the capacity of the police. As mere followers of the letter of the law, they represent what happens when the law take on a life of its own and seeks to preserve its own power as an end in itself. The further the legal order removes itself from the original ethical decision, the more arbitrary it becomes, and then there emerges “legality without legitimacy.” From this point of view, the police are only the guardians of the status quo, and they forsake justice so long as their power remains in force. It is symptomatic of this condition that they often assume the role of arbitrarily imposing the will of one part of society upon that of the other. In terms of Kracauer’s philosophical critique, the police are the enemies of the real. They fulfill the same role in his aesthetic allegory as Kant’s successors who repudiated the “thing in itself” in order to establish the absolute rule of *ratio*.

As Gertrud Koch has argued, Kracauer’s conception of a rift between law or “mere legality” on one side, and the cause of justice and ethics on the other, corresponds in significant ways to the work of Walter Benjamin. In his 1921 essay, “Critique of Violence,” Benjamin argued that one must distinguish between violence that affirms existing laws and violence that creates new ones. The most radical instance of the latter is that of divine violence, that which destroys the existing order “for the sake of life.” This formulation raises some alarm bells as Benjamin’s distinction seems to allow for a potentially legitimate use of violence, a conclusion that would have suited the cultural and political radicalism of the day. As Derrida has argued in an extensive discussion of this text, Benjamin found something “rotten” in the law that he traced to its conservative function – that it protects the law as an entity in itself. Hence, he was at great

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133 Ibid., pp. 65-77 and p. 92.
134 Ibid., p. 67.
135 Kracauer, *Der Detektiv-Roman*, p. 128 and p. 77. Kracauer mentions both Fichte and neo-Kantianism which at the time was centered in Marburg around thinkers such as Paul Natorp. For a discussion of this intellectual terrain, see Gadamer, “Die deutsche Philosophie zwischen den beiden Weltkriegen,” pp. 454-455.
pains to preserve the distinction between violence that preserves the law and violence that founds it, in spite of its deeply problematic character. Kracauer, as can be seen from the discussion above, also maintained this distinction, and as Kracauer did discuss this work with Benjamin during the planning stages, an influence from this quarter is plausible. Of course, some of these themes had wider currency, and we have seen that Kracauer was writing on comparable ideas as early as 1919. At this juncture he referred to the religious constitutions of medieval Jewish communities in Germany as a model of lability, and this does suggest wider roots for the concept.

Still, the affinity to the work of Carl Schmitt in Kracauer’s conception of the moment of decision is striking. Behind these affinities is their shared interest in Kierkegaard. Schmitt’s formulation of the exceptional state in which sovereignty is established and exercised refers explicitly to Kierkegaard’s concept of the exception. In the well known example of Abraham in Fear and Trembling, the exception is the divine command given to Abraham to murder his son; the authentic decision is arrived at when Abraham accepts this paradoxical decree. As a secularized variant of Kierkegaard’s leap, Schmitt conceives of political sovereignty in terms of an “either/or” decision that takes place in an exceptional moment. In this situation, the one who decides is sovereign, and in so doing the sovereign power asserts itself over and against the normative order of morality.

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139 Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” Reflections, pp. 295-300. For a reading of Benjamin’s essay that argues for a “complicity of discourses” between Benjamin and Schmitt, see Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” pp. 3-67. The Schmitt/Benjamin connection has been disputed. Though Benjamin acknowledged his indebtedness to Schmitt, Derrida probably overstates this. See Raphael Gross, Carl Schmitt and the Jews: The “Jewish Question,” the Holocaust, and German Legal Theory (Madison, 2007), pp. 246-247. It should also be noted that the concept of “extraterritoriality” that so fascinated Kracauer has a legal origin, referring to the state of diplomatic immunity from local law.

140 Frisby, “Between the Spheres,” p. 3.

141 Kracauer, “Sind Menschenliebe, Gerechtigkeit,” in Werke 9.2, pp. 118-119. The origin in Jewish tradition is also suggested by the striking resemblance of Kracauer’s idea of Labilität to a short work by Kafka, “The City Coat of Arms.” Herein, Kafka writes of a city existing in perpetual political and social conflict. Incorporated into its coat of arms is a giant fist which, according to prophecy, will one day smash the city with five blows. Many of the city’s inhabitants long for this day, and the fist that will carry out the prophecy is emblazoned on the city’s coat of arms. Divine violence ends the imperfection and futility of human institutions.

142 Carl Schmitt, Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty, (Chicago, 2005), p. 15.

143 Schmitt, Political Theology, p. 10.
In *The Detective Novel*, Kracauer also subscribes to a critique of the law that undermines the legitimacy of the legal parliamentary order. The moment of decision arises in an existential consciousness of paradox; in this indeterminate situation the decision creates those forms that govern social and political life. According to Kracauer, the creation of such forms is the province of the “exceptional ones” (*besonderen Einzelnen*). It is they who expose the rift that divides the legal from the ethical, and the legal order from the just one. If Kracauer did not embrace the need for revolutionary violence with the same fervour as Bloch, or even the more reserved judgments of Benjamin, he nonetheless comes dangerously close to a position that legitimated extra-legal violence. He even implies that such acts may, in fact, have a closer relationship to the higher spheres of reality. Since the legal order is questioned, the criminal too has an important role to play, for in so far as his actions compel the legal order to reveal its provisional and arbitrary nature, the criminal exposes those intentions that seek the higher spheres:

> The figures of the whole business of legality do not know that in the transgression against morality the displaced ethical can manifest itself, that murder is not just murder but rather it may signify the cancellation (*Aufhebung*) of finite, humane statutes through the higher mysteries.

In so far as Kracauer allows for the violent transgression of moral law in the service of a higher ethical purpose, he is consistent with Benjamin and also with Schmitt’s assertion that in the moment of decision “the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid with repetition.” Kracauer uses terminology consistent with Schmitt, arguing that the legal system erroneously interprets illegal acts only in terms of rational norms (*normhafte Handlungen*) and, thus, it does not recognize their legitimate “challenge and question” to the existing order. In this respect, the legal order fails to reflect on the origins of its sovereignty; as a result, it cannot understand the public’s “secret admiration” for the criminal who “lays bare the violence of the legal system.” Instead, the law leaps over the reality of

145 Kracauer, *Der Detektiv-Roman*, p. 15.
146 Ibid., p. 28.
147 Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 15.
every “human situation that demands an intertwining (Miteinander) of the law and the supra-
legal, of justice and of grace.”\textsuperscript{150} The cause of justice, he implies, is not identical with a
normative legal order.

Yet, the comparison does not hold in every respect and on at least one point Kracauer clearly
diverged from Schmitt. In Schmitt’s discussion of the conservative thinker Xavier de Maistre, he
praised de Maistre for arguing that “any government is good once it is established.” Schmitt
approvingly glossed this statement with the remark that “making a decision is more important
than how a decision is made ... the important point was that no higher authority could review
[it].”\textsuperscript{151} Kracauer’s concept of lability cannot, of course, be brought into agreement with this
view. Whereas for Schmitt there is no review of legitimate sovereignty, for Kracauer legitimate
sovereignty cannot escape it. Every form or law, he wrote, should “at the moment of its origin
raise its own shroud.”\textsuperscript{152} Of course, Schmitt could have asked how any sovereignty could
establish itself if its claims to legitimacy were immediately challenged: would this not result in a
cacophony of voices each laying claim to an existential “authenticity”?

A wider comparison that might attempt an answer to this question cannot be undertaken here,
and, in any case, Kracauer did not pursue this issue in a substantial way. Though the issue of
political legitimacy did occupy him on occasion, outside of his essay for the \textit{Moritz-Mannheimer
Stiftung} there are very few attempts to handle the subject. Indeed, it is difficult to see how he
thought some of his ideas, such as the “intertwining of the legal and the supra-legal” would
emerge in practice, because he rarely discusses them in concrete terms. In \textit{The Detective Novel},
visions of the community living in the higher sphere only emerges faintly in his allusions to fairy
tales of the past, and their present-day counterparts, such as Chaplin’s heroic struggle against the
machines in \textit{Modern Times}.\textsuperscript{153} The free society appears to have a chimerical quality that eluded
definite description.

\textsuperscript{150} Kracauer, \textit{Der Detektiv-Roman}, p. 29.
\textsuperscript{151} Schmitt, \textit{Political Theology}, pp. 55-56.
\textsuperscript{153} Kracauer, \textit{Der Detektiv-Roman}, pp. 20-21.
Yet, some sense of how his conception of the law might emerge in practice is to be found in his court room reporting— in particular, his coverage of two sensational murder trials, the Angerstein case and that of Lieschen Neumann. The latter case involved the murder of a watchmaker named Ulbrich by three unemployed youths from the working class district of Wedding in Berlin. In his assessment of the trial, Kracauer argued that the murder was symptomatic of the prevalent malaise.\textsuperscript{154} He did not compare the crime to a kind of traffic with the “higher mysteries” of the “supra-legal,” but he did perceive it in terms that are consistent with his philosophical critique. He does not deny that the perpetrators displayed character traits consistent with the crime, but he does not dwell on these factual details. In contrast to much of the press that portrayed the sixteen year old Neumann, in particular, as a female demon and “the Greta Garbo of Wedding,” Kracauer argued that the murderers were essentially more typical than abnormal.\textsuperscript{155} On account of the widespread unemployment they had few prospects in life, and had surrendered themselves to the random ebb and flow of a life that lacked stability (\textit{Haltung}). They did not, Kracauer argued, intend and plan a murder; rather they “stumbled upon it.”\textsuperscript{156} Their crime was one of a species of meaningless actions that punctuate the prevailing order, upsetting the normal stasis of everyday life. The legal system sought only to reduce the crime to a pattern of cause and effect upon which it could then pass judgment, thereby confirming its normative continuity without dealing with the deeper problems the crime had exposed. Thus, to Kracauer, the conclusion of the trial revealed almost nothing about the crime itself. Instead a chasm opened up between the act and its interpretation. This emerged clearly in the encounter between the courtroom examiners and Stolpe, the most violent of the three defendants. Kracauer saw in him a presumably uneducated and simple individual for whom “the encounter with the formal thought that rules over him and regulates his affairs is practically a threatening collision.” In the courtroom, he is unable to logically reconstruct his crimes because, Kracauer states, he never experienced these events in a fashion “that can be assimilated to thought (\textit{gedenkenmäßige}).”\textsuperscript{157}

\textsuperscript{156} Kracauer, “Murder Trials and Society,” p. 740. According to Lessing, the murderers claimed to have planned a robbery that through a series of unforeseen circumstances escalated into murder.
Thus, his sullenness and confusion represented these events more faithfully than any logical narrative ever could.

His discussion of the Angerstein trial follows a similar pattern. Angerstein, an allegedly mild civil servant who went on a killing spree that began with his wife and claimed the lives of seven others, was put on trial in July of 1925. Kracauer filed his concluding summary of the case under the title “The Crime without a Criminal.” Here too, the perpetrator “stumbles” onto the crime. As Kracauer reports, the psychological experts who testified at the trial suggested that Angerstein did not plan and execute the murders, but rather they “happened to” him (passieren). What Angerstein “did” was more of an “elemental event,” rather than an explainable outrage; it did not allow itself to be placed into a comprehensible context, but rather it now stood “purely as an event in itself, as an isolated fact that lacks a correct origin.” He continues:

Interrogations and depositions have informed us more or less of all that there was to be told. Unknown details have emerged to the surface and from a thousand statements a crude whole has been built. The image is not false, but it is also not correct. It brings to light what has, nonetheless, irrevocably decayed into darkness; it offers it to a judicial reckoning, as insufficient as it is, yet, at the same time liberating.

Thus, Kracauer sharply limits the degree to which the legal order can know the truth about that which it judges. He appears to suggest that the law can tell us less about crime than crime can tell us about the law – a conclusion that runs parallel to Schmitt’s view that reflections on the exceptional state of affairs can tell us much about political norms, much more, in fact, than these norms can tell us about the exception.

A similar tactic is at work in Kracauer’s interest in the “hidden camaraderie” between the criminal and the detective. These figures resemble one another in as much as they both stand apart from the law; for even though the detective ostensibly serves the legal system he is not part

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159 Kracauer, “Die Tat ohne Täter,” FZ, July 13, 1925 (A).
160 Ibid.
of it. Kracauer placed the detective among those “exceptional” individuals who live on the margins of society and who are engaged in the work of connection with the higher spheres. Among this group, there are the relatively legitimate figures such as the priest and hero; but there were also some ambiguous sorts: the religious zealots, enchanters and medicine men. Only in so far as they have a “relation to the mysteries” do they represent the “closeness” (Verbundenheit) of the community, that is, in so far as their actions originate out of a “necessary vocation.” The detective is related to the priest in this respect, but in keeping with his modern genesis, he is more ambivalent. The detective is part hero, but he is also an abyss that represents the triumph of abstract thought. Kracauer described the hero in very ambiguous terms:

...certainly the hero meets the danger that oppresses the community from without or that originates from its own antinomies. He breaks through the shell that encloses the living space, but he does not, as does the priest, recognize the paradox... on the contrary, he asserts the unshakable and intransient claims of the absolute in the particular, without connecting them; it is all the same whether he blindly brings about the commission of fate, or whether he wishes to assist in the victory of the idea over the law.

Therefore, the hero brings the paradox of existence into view. However, in contrast to the priest, there is no promise of reconciliation; indeed, if the hero serves the community he does so almost as if by accident. The rational process drives him onwards, not the collective good. This is represented in the detective novel by the social aloofness of the detective and the uncertainty of his motives. The detective is without intimate relations to the community – sexual relationship are excluded and even a friend such as Watson exists primarily as a witness, as an occasional instrument of Holmes, rather than as a true companion. The detective may have idiosyncratic habits – cocaine use, playing the violin – but the general portrayal is nondescript. This aloofness of the detective draws attention to the importance of logical process, to the pure system of quantities and relations that Holmes stated was “beyond” himself; but it also relates him to the criminal as will be discussed below. In general, Kracauer appears to pursue two directions in his

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162 Kracauer, *Der Detektiv-Roman*, pp. 87-90.
163 Ibid., p. 19.
164 Ibid., p. 20.
165 Ibid., p. 18.
166 Ibid., pp. 87-88.
discussion of the detective, on one hand, drawing attention to the detective as the agent of
disenchantment, but on the other, not allowing the significance of the detective’s process to fall
into oblivion. His terminology suggests that the detective is a kind of impostor of divine
providence, but perhaps he is one who plays an indirect role in illuminating a world emptied of
truth. Thus, the detective is at various times described as the “contrary of God,” a “descendent of
the spirit of Laplace,” a “puppet of cloudy realms,” someone who has “leapt out of a hole to fill
an empty position”; he or she appears as a sorcerer in “pointy hat and star-spangled cloak,” the
“disguised figure of the adventurer.” Whether intended or not, the last terms suggest
something of the world of fairy tales which, in general for Kracauer, is associated with the
promise of utopia. It is not clear that Kracauer intends for the detective to partake of this aura,
but at the very least, as a representative figure, these descriptors suggest that the detective
occupies an ambivalent position – at once the representative of a fixed rational process, and also
the possibility to refer to something beyond that process.

This latter possibility becomes more evident in the final chapters as the text draws the detective
and the criminal into a closer relationship. For in spite of the fact that the criminal and the
detective are intellectual opponents from opposite sides of the law, they do have an affinity for
one other. Kracauer conceives of this as a camaraderie born out of their mutual recognition of the
limitations of the police. Both figures take up an ironic position in regards to the police whose
bumbling attempts to apprehend the criminal serve as a foil to the superior logical powers of the
detective and the criminal. As the detective pursues the solution of the crime this ironic position
becomes more pronounced:

If he turns to the illegal, the detective, a conscious bearer of the ethical,
distances himself decisively from his starting point. His camaraderie with
the criminal, his respect for those led astray out of passion exposes, at the
very least, the dubiousness of the legal order, when it no longer tries to
represent the paradox of existing and has fallen out of the relation [to the
higher spheres].

167 Ibid., pp. 54-57.
168 See the comments in Hansen, “Decentric Perspectives,” pp. 55-56 and p. 70.
169 Koch, Siegfried Kracauer, pp. 21-22.
170 Kracauer, Der Detektiv Roman, pp. 91-92.
Still, one might ask, why should the detective become a bearer of the ethical? This appears problematic, especially since Kracauer has already stated that the detective initiates the process whereby “existential and ethical being” is turned into conventional legal relations. The answer, it would appear, derives from the fact that in pursuing the task of logic as an absolute, the detective violates the letter of the law. As Kracauer points out, Sherlock Holmes does not shy away from robbery or other illegal acts when trying to solve a case; Arsène Lupin is himself both detective and master criminal. As the gap widens between the detective and the letter of the law, the principal of ratio becomes at odds with itself. In terms of his “aesthetic allegory” Kracauer states that the detective represents ratio as it appears to itself, that is, as the authentic “law giver”; the police, on the other hand, represent it as it appears from the point of view of “reality”; from this latter position the imperfect relationship between law and justice is apparent. As the detective pursues his object, he breaks the law and, thus, reopens the question of how the law is constituted. From this point of view, the detective can represent ethical claims against those of the law.

This does not mean that the detective is identical with the criminal, but rather that since they both have traffic with the “supra-legal,” they both represent a fissure within the legal order. Therefore, to maintain itself the legalism must obliterate the connection between the illegal act (Widergesetzlich) and the “supra-legal” (Übergesetzlich). As discussed above, the existential community is always in a tension between law as an absolute and law as contingent. The legal order attempts to void this tension; thus, it removes from the law its “enduring problematic being” and it removes from the unlawful any claim it might have to represent justice. In the coming together of the two figures – the criminal and the detective – the provisory nature of the law again becomes evident.

For Kracauer, the figure that most clearly represents the instability of the prevailing order is the “Gentleman-criminal” or Hochstapler. Kracauer suggests that these characters are attempts to represent, if only superficially, the “paradox of existence (Paradoxon des Existierens); they are “disfigurements” of existing individuals, in other words, a disfigurement of the “oriented”

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171 Ibid., p. 128.
172 Ibid., p. 78.
individual who accepts and recognizes the median position of human experience. However, the gentleman-criminal is distinct from the existential individual in that the latter has a “double-life” that constitutes a personal unity, while the former represents a “rendezvous” between two different series of actions. They do not have any organic relationship to one another, but only occur by chance within fleeting time; only in vain do they “pretend to have originated from one soul.” Therefore, instead of a malignant will at the root of the crime, Kracauer implied that malignant events seek out the individual and assert themselves on the same point; “respectability” and “impropriety” exist side by side, but the relationship is one of mere chance. Kracauer suggests a number of interpretations for this figure: that they are products of “pure accident”; that one side of the character is a mask for the other; or, that through this “doubled figure” the detective genre may be “transcended.”

Kracauer explores the last possibility at some length, and in the process he suggests the possibility that the categories of the detective novel might disintegrate and the language of the real be recovered. Still, it is difficult to tell what the significance of this is for Kracauer. As Gertrud Koch points out, he is, yet again, not precise on this point. In one passage, he seems to suggest that ratio could, in the manner of the “gentleman-criminal,” be “turned” and made to serve the cause of the real:

Were ratio to be detained in some part of reality, it would be able to think of the totality as nothing other than one that aims towards the ideas of God, freedom and immortality, in which the determinations of being that constitute that reality, restore themselves under cover.

Yet, he also appears to foreclose this possibility. If the cosmos of the detective novel is to be transcended, then it appears to happen only negatively. The Hochstapler may resist the legal and share with the detective an ironic position towards it, but Kracauer cautions us that this proceeding is still under the rule of ratio “which drives the whole business.” However, here

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173 Ibid., pp. 84-85.
174 Ibid., p. 85.
175 Koch, Siegfried Kracauer, p. 23.
176 Kracauer, Der Detektiv-Roman, p. 109.
177 Ibid., p. 95.
again Kracauer has recourse to the so-called “intentions driving to the higher spheres.” These become evident in the double-sided actions of the gentleman-criminal, for in as much as they render visible the desire of ratio to master the totality, they also demonstrate its inadequacy relative to the superior power of the higher spheres. This, of course, is a theological argument depending to no small degree on the alleged existence of this higher sphere however it may be construed. It is not entirely clear what Kracauer intends at this point, but the primary function of these “intentions” would appear to be as a wedge driven between ratio and the reality it claims to encompass, but in fact only poorly represents. Therefore, it confers a measure of agency outside of the rational process:

Thus, the higher sphere that is included in the immanent world may connect itself to the criminal whose deed separates him from the society of the pseudo-legal. The detective then disappears, because the indifference of the rational process moves entirely to the call of the mysteries; he disappears into the criminal, who now in an inner dialectic reckons with the supra-legal, or whose soul is alone the point upon which it can intervene. Instead of ratio exposing him without finding him, [the criminal] unveils himself in order to be found.178

Yet, how much freedom has been claimed in this self-exposure? It does not appear that Kracauer wants to give an answer.

Primarily, the confusion arises out of a question of whether or not the detective’s confrontation with the criminal alters either figure, and if so what are the consequences. Moreover, does the detective effectively subsume criminality within a rational system? For as Kracauer stressed, this was the agenda of ratio in the guise of the detective – to bring that which existed outside of the law back within the circle of rational totality. Such motives were evident in the criminological literature of his day, and having studied sociology Kracauer was no doubt acquainted with some of this writing. The path-breaking work of Franz Alexander and Hugo Staub, for instance, presented its mission in terms of the rational penetration of the criminal psyche: “We want to understand the criminal in order to be able to judge him correctly... any disturbance of the common sense of justice has a destructive effect upon society.”179

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178 Ibid., pp. 95-96.
179 Franz Alexander and Hugo Staub, Der Verbrecher und seine Richter: Ein psychoanalytischer
would certainly have objected to their belief that one could seamlessly move from “understanding” to “justice” and as we have seen he regarded with scepticism the attempt to logically explain crimes such as those of Stolpe or Angerstein.\(^{180}\)

In the discussion of the “gentleman-criminal,” however, it is the detective, not the criminal, whose psychological identity becomes volatile. The boundary that separates the detective from the criminal becomes less clear as the detective too becomes involved in crime; eventually, the detective simply “vanishes” into the criminal, a disappearance whose meaning is probably meant to demonstrate a conflation of the subject and object at certain points in Kantian philosophy.\(^{181}\) The disorientation provoked by this metamorphosis is compounded by the fact that the criminal is identified now as the “unfortunate one” (Unglückliche), a figure who steps from the pages of Dostoevsky into the position of the criminal. Kracauer says of this character that “no detective seeks him, but rather he emerges of his own accord; his deeds are no triumph of ratio ... he is an existence who is who are able to produce his own meaning.” A relationship between this figure and the detective is implied, but only in an allusive fashion by way of comparison with various pairings of criminals and their interrogators from \textit{The Idiot} and \textit{Brothers Karamazov}: the Lord kissing the Grand Inquisitor, Ivan and Alyoscha, Myschkin and Ragoschin. These are relations that interrogate, but do not save the sinner and Kracauer appears to find in them an echo of what transpires between the detective and the criminal.\(^{182}\) Towards the end of this complicated passage, the detective appears to emerge triumphant and passes into (eingehen) the criminal, and one might suspect that the detective (or ratio) has triumphed and absorbed the criminal into the rational process. Yet, the chapter concludes with the somewhat cryptic statement that in this case the detective does not track down the connection between “figure and fact, but rather the unity of person and action unfolds itself (erschließen sich) in reference to the mysteries.”\(^{183}\) On the one hand, the attribution of a deed to a particular person is the resolution of the crime and the triumph of logic; but Kracauer presents this as inconsistent with the “unfolding” process that

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\(^{181}\) Kracauer, \textit{Der Detektiv-Roman}, p. 106.

\(^{182}\) Ibid., p. 96.

\(^{183}\) Ibid., p. 97.
unites the person to his or her actions. It would seem then that the encounter with the criminal creates a process whereby the individual may recover a voice outside the rational totality.

To recover the language of the real then appears to depend on a restoration of the bonds that unite the individual and his or her deeds - in other words, the restoration of the individual who engages with reality as a “whole” individual (Persönlichkeit). This idea of the individual is to be recovered from under the mantle of the transcendental system, but it is also not identical to the radical subjectivity of Kierkegaard. Kracauer may have referred to the “dialectic of inwardness” in the Kierkegaardian sense, but as Inka Mülöder points out, he does not make the leap.\(^\text{184}\) For Kracauer the individual who engages with reality is bound up with a process, one that he describes in terms of constant questioning and interpretation:

Reality is not a condition; it is a trial, an interrogation and an answer, a way or a process, a sanctifying process, theologically speaking, to which what is immanent must struggle since it does not rest upon itself.\(^\text{185}\)

Further along, he expands on this theme: “Reality is a contradiction, a conflict, an openness to that which opens ... It is visible only when it is not seen; it is reality only if it remains beyond reality.”\(^\text{186}\) Reality then demands constant investigation and interpretation, something that he argues the idealist system does not do. What he primarily objects to in idealism is that in order to attribute universal validity to a priori judgments, it makes determinations that interrupt the process of interpretation that is at the core of existence. The individual who exists in the paradox must defer to the decisive significance of what Kracauer calls “beyond reality” or above it (Überwirklichkeit); the idealist system, on the contrary, must subsume everything to itself, and thus, it negates the tension of existing in the median realm.\(^\text{187}\) Still, humanity, according to Kracauer, has to remain within its suspended state and preserve an awareness of its existence in the “median zone.” By the fabrication of “axiomatic images of the ideal” the idealist system has in effect ripped asunder the “umbilical cord” that connected the “I and the world.” Only then

\(^{184}\) Mülöder, Siegfried Kracauer—Grenzgänger, p. 44. The following discussion is indebted to her discussion of Kracauer’s concept of Wirklichkeit in Der Detektiv-Roman; see pp. 35-48.

\(^{185}\) Kracauer, Der Detektiv-Roman, p. 98.

\(^{186}\) Ibid., p. 131.

\(^{187}\) Ibid., pp. 103-108 and p. 131.
could the transcendental system set itself up as the “creator of objects,” but only at the cost of reducing itself to a limited “logical reference point.” \(^{188}\)

In his conclusion, Kracauer attempted to distance himself from any stain of irrationalism, and he declared that ratio as an agent of the idealist system shared much in common with the enthusiastic endorsement of the irrational. Wherever a system finds its conclusion within its own inner workings, he argues, it betrays the “here and now” and reduces the real to a mere determination in order to preserve itself. It was no matter, he claimed, whether this system was one of Kantian idealism, the “classless society,” “Schopenhauer-Hartmannesque pessimism,” or the popular bromide, “Have sun in your heart.” \(^{189}\)

To what extent Kracauer does justice to Kant in the course of his critique is a question that is outside the scope of this subject; rather I want to focus on what his stated claims against idealism suggest about his concept of criticism. There is much in his position that is consistent with his engagement with Simmel and the philosophers of life – the “tragic concept of culture” is here reformulated as the tragedy of a paradoxical existence. Moreover, there are a number of points at which the essay reflects contemporary themes in his journalism. For instance, his identification of the real as an “openness to that which opens” is consistent with similar formulations he used in his essay “Those Who Wait.” Also, his suspicion of the religious revival has a correlate in the detective study as well, most obviously in his disparaging remarks towards the “medicine-men” and “miracle workers” that flooded into the so-called danger zone. Indeed, his reference to “Have sun in your heart” (the title of a sentimental lyric written by Cäsar Flaischlein that was popular in the post-war years) was significant in this respect as he also referred to this verse in connection with his distaste for Rosenzweig’s Star of Redemption. \(^{190}\)

Given these connections between Kracauer’s journalism and The Detective Novel, the latter study should be seen as a collecting point of a number of the motives and impulses in his

\(^{188}\) Ibid., pp. 106-107.
\(^{189}\) Ibid., p. 133.
\(^{190}\) Kracauer to Löwenthal, August 31, 1923, In steter Freundschaft, pp. 46-47. The full passage reads: “It [Rosenzweig’s book] is truly rubbish! A right proper philosophy of apotheosis that begins with the void and concludes with “Have sun in your heart.” I despise this sort of philosophy that makes a system out of a hymn; for its own sake the most excellent of constructions applaud themselves … and creation, revelation and redemption are drooled over in an enthusiastic tone that drives a dog to pity.”
criticism. It was not, however, a manifesto offering explicit instructions on critical practice, but a potential model of how a specific cultural formation might be read or interpreted. It could also be thought of as a cultural-political approach to what Leo Strauss later called the “theological-political problem,” the issue of disentangling politics and theology in cultural discourse. This entanglement is clearly related to the figure of the “gentleman-criminal” where a generalized ambivalence is connected to problems within idealist philosophy. I have given more emphasis to those aspects of his critique that I believe represent his critical intentions, hence, the focus on the potential “fracture points” in the detective genre that is represented by the Hochstapler. In the concluding section of this chapter, I want to argue the significance of this figure in relation to some further themes that will elucidate the theological impulses behind Kracauer’s work of the early twenties: the Kierkegaardian idea of the spy, physiognomy, and negative theology. Of these three, negative theology will be discussed in the following chapter so only a brief remark should suffice here. Inka Mülder has discussed the idea of the “reversal of negativity” (Umschlag der Negativität) in his Kracauer – the idea that one pursues a nihilist position to the point that there is a sudden recoiling, throwing one towards redemption. She has outlined the aesthetic and philosophical sources of this notion, to which I would also add the influence of contemporary negative theology.

A comparison of the figures of detective fiction with the Kierkegaardian conception of the spy suggests this theological motive behind Kracauer’s drive into negativity. Spies, plainclothes policemen and secret agents appear at many points in Kierkegaard’s work, most significantly in his Point of View of my Work as an Author, where he identified himself explicitly with the spy. Still, some caution is needed as these figures are not always used in a univocal fashion. At one point, the spy is an unknown observer who detects what goes unnoticed in the world; such a person is often an outsider, compromised morally and thus easily coerced into performing the work of God (in relation to God, so Kierkegaard tells us, humanity is always in the wrong). What does this work consist of outside of observation? There is no real answer, for according to Kierkegaard, while “being” is a “system, it is a system for God.” Therefore, it can have no clear

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191 Leo Strauss, “The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy,” in Meier, Leo Strauss and the theologico-political Problem, pp. 115-140.
192 Inka Mülder, “Der Umschlag der Negativität,” pp. 368-373
meaning for the individual who serves it. At other points, the “spies of God” resemble hidden points of authority that circulate unknown in society. They only appear incognito, and whereas in the past authority radiated from the individual and was worn outwardly as a badge, in the present, under the yoke of Hegel and the popular press, authority was distinguished by its “unknowability.” The distinctions of the “excellent ones” are, thus, born “covertly [...] and only negatively support their corresponding distinctions. That is to say, they are unknowable or [...] secret agents.” As such they mingled with the crowds and became a hidden piece of the eternal existing in the modern spectacle of the city.

In The Detective Novel the figures of the “gentleman-criminal” and the detective have a role that in some ways derives from Kierkegaard and suggests that Kracauer read these passages closely. As already discussed, the “gentleman-criminal” is a volatile figure, one that threatened to erase the categories of the detective novel and expose the paradoxical nature of the law. The incognito of the “gentleman-criminal” thus had a potentially explosive function, for having donned social convention to pursue his advantage, the moment of his exposure also exposes the society that accepted him. Morality and the law are revealed to be a matter of mere convention, one of the “beautiful games” that ratio imposes upon the real. If, in some cases, the Hochstapler also has the force of justice behind him, as is the case of Maurice Leblanc’s character, Arsène Lupin, then the vertigo is all the more tumultuous. Lupin actually occupied both positions – a criminal who was recruited by the bumbling police force that he had once opposed. Thus, the detective “vanishes” into the criminal.

The detective also vanished into the crowd and like the “unknowable ones” in Kierkegaard he assumed the incognito, but with a very different effect. The detective readily disappears for he is, Kracauer argued, little more than an effect of ratio, an apparatus designed to fill the needs of logic; even the police are more concrete, though they do not share his superior powers. Hence, the incognito of the detective needs to be distinguished from that of the Kierkegaardian spies and

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194 Kracauer quotes from this passage in the Philosophical Fragments in the final chapter of Der Detektiv-Roman, p. 120.
198 Kracauer had originally intended to have the following quotation from Goethe at the beginning of his study: “I play really beautiful games with you.” See Frisby, “Between the Spheres,” p. 1.
agents. In allegorical terms, the detective does not have a corresponding position in the higher spheres, rather Kracauer states that the detective is where the allegory breaks down – he is a gap or an abyss that obliquely signifies society’s exclusion from the real. The detective and his deeds become an anti-allegory that buries itself into the rational process governing everyday life. Thus, the potential of the detective is one of negative revelation, one that might lead to the “reversal” though this is only tentatively expressed.

The incognito of the disguised detective, who hides his identity in order to pursue the solution of a case, is in fact, Kracauer argues, not a true incognito. Instead, it should be seen as a distortion of its function in Kierkegaard; it signifies a sleight of hand that exists within the logical process, one in which the detective resembles an “experimenter” who has concealed his own role in determining the conditions of the experiment. Therefore, he only finds results consistent with logic, as the experimenter does not have contact with the world of the “unrepeatable” or exceptional.

In contrast, in the upper spheres disguise is inconceivable. Each individual bears his or her own existence indelibly and visibly; here, the force of inwardness tolerates no potential for concealment. The conditions of the “median zone” are, of course, more ambiguous, and here Kracauer sets the meaningless disguise of ratio against the incognito of the high ones. He makes explicit reference to Kierkegaard’s interpretation of Christ’s appearance as a commoner and also, perhaps more surprisingly, to Harun-al-Raschid wandering unrecognized through the streets of Baghdad. In such cases, he argues, the incognito is no disguise, but rather a “covering for the exposure to the other” (Ummantelung zur Entblößung der andern); it represents a “becoming-revelation of inwardness, an invitation extended to the one who exists to actually be in reality – for no purpose of knowledge, [but] a sacred meaning that binds one to it.” Again it is difficult to know whether or not Kracauer actually imagined that the landscape of modernity was inhabited by such figures. It is not probably, but at the very least he seems to have entertained the possibility of their secular correlate. The image of modernity that thus emerges in his diagnosis is one that possesses two ways of disappearing into the crowd and two corresponding kinds of

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199 Kracauer, Der Detektiv-Roman, pp. 112-113.
200 Ibid., pp. 109-110.
201 Ibid., p. 111.
revelation. The disguise of the detective offers a potentially negative revelation that demonstrates the emptiness of appearances, a nihilist vision that pushes one towards the “reversal” (Umschlag). The other rests with the hidden or “unrecognizable ones,” those upon whom Kierkegaard placed the hope of redemption. Such figures have the potential to reveal the fraud that has been perpetrated by ratio. They inhabited the streets of the city and disappeared in the chaos of an aestheticized urbanity as a hidden source of negative revelation. For Kierkegaard, as for Kracauer, the city was the realization of aestheticism, where experience becomes spectacle. 202 Reading the city, its forms and drives, its traffic and entertainments then becomes the crucial task for the critic, for the redemptive potential is hidden in its interstices.

Yet, it was not clear what branch of knowledge one could look to in this task and in spite of the growing influence of the social sciences, the older traditions of conjecture remained possibilities. 203 Many of these conjectural sciences were, of course, also the specialty of the detective. According to Carlo Ginzburg, the detective novel preserves the traces of this encounter between the modern sciences and older conjectural traditions. As Ginzburg defines them, the latter were “born of experience, of the concrete and the individual.” Moreover, “that concrete quality was both the strength of this kind of knowledge and its limit; it could not make use of the powerful and terrible tool of abstraction.” 204 They consisted of modes of investigation that targeted those areas remote from the sciences, such as the ephemera of daily life; they conceded that reality was “opaque” but suggested that there were still “clues” and “symptoms which allow us to decipher it.” 205 The most compelling case was that of the medical sciences, particularly in the area of diagnostics. While medical practice incorporated experimental methods, its results in the nineteenth century were inconsistent, and success often appeared to rest on intuitive judgments. Yet, it was generally accepted that medicine was a science based on rules of observation. As the power of the state increased and the natural and “human” sciences were consolidated, the conjectural sciences were either assimilated to scientific method, or

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204 Ginzburg, pp. 100-101.
205 Ibid., p. 109.
discredited. The so-called “golden age” of the detective novel preserves traces of this juncture – thus, Sherlock Holmes’ powers of deduction did not prevent him from falling for phrenology.

Of these conjectural sciences, the one that Kracauer appears susceptible to was that of physiognomy. He had a clear if ambivalent interest in a number of the practitioners of this art. During the early twenties he had some contact with Ludwig Klages. In 1924, he told Löwenthal of a visit from Klages to the FZ offices during which Klages had analyzed his handwriting.²⁰⁶ He also was involved in the placement of an excerpt from a recent book by Klages, Of the Cosmogenic Eros, into the feuilleton section, and he reported on a radio lecture that Klages gave on the subject of graphology.²⁰⁷ These contacts were minor, but he had a more definite interest in the mystical physiognomists, Rudolf Kassner and Max Picard. An early essay on Kassner has been lost; but he did publish a brief account of a lecture given by Kassner in 1927. He reported the event in surprisingly neutral terms given his hostility to occultism and esoteric lore. Though he recognized that Kassner’s methods were not “free from objections,” he was nonetheless impressed, so he stated, by Kassner’s physiognomy of movement and, for instance, the capacity to extract meaning out of the relationship between the brow and the chin.²⁰⁸ These articles do not, of course, suggest a significant indebtedness to the work of either Kassner or Klages, and given Kracauer’s general antipathy to this sort of pseudo-science, it would be tempting to conclude that they represent no more than a passing curiosity. Yet, his surprisingly positive essay on Max Picard’s The Face of Man suggests otherwise.²⁰⁹ As we have seen, Kracauer allowed a measure of legitimacy to Picard’s theological mode of address, but a consideration of Picard as a physiognomist will elucidate some further implications that may be drawn from Kracauer’s interest in Picard’s work.

²⁰⁶ Kracauer to Löwenthal, November 2, 1924, In steter Freundschaft, pp. 64-65. Kracauer wrote that Klages “noticed my inhibited nature right away, but he compensated for this with much fantasy.”
²⁰⁷ See Kracauer to Klages, May 5, 1922, and Klages’ reply on May 11, 1922. Both letters are in the Klages Nachlaß/DLA. The excerpt was printed in the feuilleton of the first morning edition on 14 June 1922 with introductory remarks by Kracauer. Also, see Kracauer, “Ludwig Klages im Radio,” FZ, October 25, 1924(A). While Kracauer noted the objections that could be raised against graphology, he nonetheless described the talk as “enthralling.”
Before he turned to writing, Max Picard, the son of Jewish parents, had studied medicine and for a brief time practiced as a surgeon. He later converted to Catholicism and wrote works of cultural criticism with a theological-philosophical bent. He was close friends with Benno Reifenberg and Wilhelm Hausenstein and it is probably through these connections that he and Kracauer came to know one another. Picard wrote a review of Kracauer’s *The Salaried Masses* under a pseudonym, and in his review of *The Face of Man*, discussed above, Kracauer refers to letters between them that have now been lost.\(^{210}\) Among contemporaries who were impressed by Picard’s work were Thomas Mann, Joseph Roth and Hermann Hesse.\(^{211}\) The latter described Picard’s books as standing “for themselves amidst a great silence” among the numerous books of spiritual reflection.\(^{212}\) Others who knew Picard spoke of him as someone in possession of tremendous powers of insight. The deep impression he appears to have had on those who knew him is belied by the degree to which his reputation has been eclipsed today.\(^{213}\)

Of late, however, he has emerged in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who has pointed out that for Picard physiognomy was not just a means of reading psychological depth from surface detail, but rather was directed towards “deciphering the universe from these fundamental images or metaphors.”\(^{214}\) Picard took the biblical statement that humankind was created in the image of the creator quite literally; thus, to his mind the human face was a cipher of creation and of the eternal.\(^{215}\) To look upon the face of another, he wrote, was to look upon the face of God and when two faces looked upon one another, “eternity is in the middle and looks upon both.”\(^{216}\) Typical for his age, Picard embedded his discussion in a narrative of steady degeneration. At the time of creation, the face was radiant with the stamp of the creator, but today humankind had descended to a point where it can no longer bear the gaze of the eternal; thus, it looks upon the

\(^{210}\) A letter from Picard to Kracauer (October 2, 1932) refers to a review published under a pseudonym. The letter is in KN/DLA. Also, see “Zwei Arten der Mitteilung,” pp. 220-221.
\(^{211}\) Roth to Friedrich T. Gubler, October 8, 1931, *Briefe*, p. 211. Picard wrote to Hausenstein in 1930 that he had heard that Mann “loved” the book and planned to review it; see his letter dated, 17 March 1930, Hausenstein Nachlaß/DLA.
\(^{212}\) The quotation comes from the end page of *Das Menschengesicht*, quoted in Siegfried B. Puknak, “Max Picard and Ernst Wiechert,” *Monatshefte* 42.8 (December 1950), p. 372.
\(^{213}\) Among the contributors to his *Festschrift* were Kassner, Gaston Batchelard, and Gabriel Marcel among others. See *Max Picard zum siebzigsten Geburtstag*, eds. Benno Reifenberg and Wilhelm Hausenstein (Zürich, 1958).
\(^{216}\) Picard, p. 13.
face no longer. In his review, Kracauer approvingly quoted a line to this effect. He also cited Picard’s contention that at the “end of time” if God wants to warn humankind, he will do so through the “insignificant face of a simple man through whom He will reveal himself.” Of such lines Kracauer wrote, that “this is no metaphor, this is reality seen with unerring, ancient eyes.” This claim should be kept in mind when discussing what Kracauer meant by “reality” and, as was already seen this was no stable condition for Kracauer, but rather a process that was constantly measuring itself against the supra-reality. Picard’s conception of physiognomy echoes this metaphysical motive. The drive to uncover the “face of the times” that Kracauer spoke of was something more than a metaphor, but rather a theological premise.

Yet, it would be wrong to leave an impression that in following Picard Kracauer was leaning towards mystical speculation or pseudo-science. What attracted him to Picard’s work was his attempt to approach the surface of things with a practical aesthetic sensitivity and interpret them in a fashion more akin to the conjectural practices than formal logic. Kracauer, as we have seen, was well aware of the methodological limitations of these practices. Here the distinction which Ginzburg makes between “high” and “low” intuition might be useful. Klages, it could be argued followed the “high” path leading towards untrammelled irrationalism; the “low” form, however, remained “rooted in the senses” and according to Ginzburg, had “nothing to do with the extrasensory intuition of various nineteenth- and twentieth-century irrationalisms.” It is more about explaining how and why one doctor is able to give a more accurate diagnosis than another at a time when it was difficult to formulate diagnostic success into a set of prescriptive norms.

By way of conclusion, I want to return to the theme of the Inkognito and the unknowable ones, in relation to the already mentioned legend of the Zaddikim, a legend that was important to both

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217 Here one should recall the hostility that Kracauer felt towards his own face. Unsurprisingly then, Kracauer noted that Kassner had mentioned Socrates as both the first opponent of myth and, also, the first ugly face to come down to us from antiquity. See Kracauer, “Rudolf Kassner über Physiognomik,” FZ, May 21, 1927 (A).

218 Kracauer, “Zwei Arten der Mitteilung,” Der verbotene Blick, p. 225. Compare this to a quotation from Charles Peguy included in Walter Benjamin’s “Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire”: “One things is certain: when Hugo saw a beggar by the road, he saw him the way he is, really saw him the way he really is, … saw him, the ancient beggar, the ancient supplicant, on the ancient road.” See this essay in The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire, (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 112-113


220 Ginzburg, p. 110.
Picard and Kracauer. In _The Face of Man_ Picard concluded with a reference to this legend of the 36 just ones whose righteousness holds up the world. Every generation has its 36; according to some variations, to discover one of them would bring catastrophe.\(^{221}\) Picard, following this legend, suggested that there were also 36 faces that performed a parallel function. It is not clear from Picard’s description whether the 36 just faces would belong to the just ones themselves or whether they would belong to other individuals. In the end he decides even one would suffice to ensure salvation and to preserve the redemptive link between the creator and the created.\(^{222}\) We have seen above that Kracauer was also fascinated by this legend, and he included it in his final, unfinished work, _History: The Last Things before the Last_. Here, in a surprising gesture, Kracauer proposed a futile quest for the 36 as a legitimate subject of historical investigation. However, rather than constituting an affront to the theological meaning of their incognito (the search, of course, would fail) Kracauer had a different agenda that harks back to his study of the detective genre. This was an attempt to recover meaning from the “interstices” or _Bruchstellen_ of historical time, a temporality that was threatened by a “bad infinity” of endless progression that _ratio_ threatened to impose on reality. The idea of the Just Ones itself becomes a cipher for the structure of historical time; for Kracauer they constituted the promise of fulfilled or redeemed time – a negative ground or foil to the profane. He argued that they existed outside the causes that determined most of our ideas of history, and “location” was to his mind “suggestive of their content.”\(^{223}\) From this point of view, it is perhaps not too surprising that the physiognomic motive also returns with his evocation of Ahasuerus, the wandering Jew, whose face contained the folds and lines that somehow incarnated history. Still, the reappearance of these overt theological and physiognomic motives strikes a peculiar note near the end of his career. It is as if a trusted psychoanalyst had suddenly pulled out a phrenological model and asked to take measurements of your head; this has, perhaps, contributed to the general consensus that his final book was a failure.\(^{224}\) Perhaps his proposed search for the 36 should not be read too literally, but instead should be understood as a touchstone for a set of problems that he associated not with history specifically, but with criticism or interpretation more generally and which remained his

\(^{221}\) For a discussion of the origins and variations of this legend, see Gershom Scholem, “The Tradition of the Thirty-six Hidden Just Men,” _The Messianic Idea in Judaism_, pp. 251-256.

\(^{222}\) Picard, _Das Menschengesicht_, p. 223.

\(^{223}\) Kracauer, _History_, p. 8.

\(^{224}\) Martin Jay has nonetheless argued a case for this work; see “The Extraterritorial Life of Siegfried Kracauer,” _Permanent Exiles_, pp. 181-197.
constant task, inflected over diverse subject matter. In a letter to the sociologist David Riesman, Kracauer tried to define his approach in a way that is very similar to what has been discussed in relation to the conjectural sciences: “the approach to a specific situation and the methods of diagnosing it must be acquired or learned in a sort of apprenticeship, like the one a student of medicine undergoes in the course of his training.”225 That he turned too emphatically towards “intuitive leaps” and against empirical means of validation, as Georg Iggers points out, weakened the book. It can be readily understood as a survival of his critique of ratio in The Detective Novel, a return to the scene of the crime and an attempt at playing “God’s policeman.”226

225 Kracauer to David Riesman, June 8, 1958, KN, DLA.
226 Georg Iggers, review of History: the Last Things before the Last, by Siegfried Kracauer, American Historical Review 75.3 (February 1970), pp. 816-817.
Chapter 6
Religion on the Street: Kracauer on Religious Flânerie

All genuine scholars or artists are, or should be, vagrants.¹

In the previous chapter, I have argued that Kracauer constructed The Detective Novel as a tentative model of cultural criticism. It was a means of approaching a layer of social reality that he thought had been abandoned by both art and philosophy. To a significant degree, he framed this abandonment with reference to earlier conceptualizations of the conflict between German idealism and a theologically founded idea of the real, a conflict that he also found expressed in the work of Kierkegaard. Even his interests in the forms of supposedly “low” culture are, I would argue, consistent with the lines of Kierkegaardian critique. It should be added that the study was written in the years when Kracauer was becoming accustomed to his position as a journalist and editor on the FZ. His duties exposed him to numerous lectures, readings, and discussions devoted to religious and philosophical subjects; The Detective Novel was decisively shaped by this encounter. As a journalist, he observed the various forms that the post-war religious revival took, and he commented on its modes and intentions, its strivings and its alleged failures. Could such movements adjust themselves to modernity, could they give an account of modern experience that was convincing to those individuals who felt the loss of religious values? How he answered such questions and how this shaped his critical vocation is the subject of the following chapter.

Kracauer’s public statements on religion are often less direct and probably informed by the exigencies of publishing in a newspaper, while his private statements were often quite blunt. To his friends Löwenthal and Susman, in contrast, he often made his views quite plain. Moreover, his statements often had a polemical intention, and he doggedly sought the agreement of his addressee. Thus, he wanted Susman’s approval for the agenda outlined in “Those Who Wait,” and he tried to dissuade Löwenthal from pursuing Hebrew studies at the expense of secular philosophy.² Taken together with Kracauer’s blunt attacks against Scheler and the religious

¹ Kracauer to David Riesman, October 1, 1958, KN, DLA.
² See his letter to Susman, dated April 20, 1921, SN, DLA, and his letter to Löwenthal, April 12, 1924, partially reprinted in Belke and Renz, Siegfried Kracauer, p. 40. Löwenthal ignored the advice from Kracauer, at least in the short term. However, he credits Kracauer for having exerted some influence on his later development. See Löwenthal, “As I remember Friedel,” NGC 54 (August, 1991), pp. 8-10.
revival, one might conclude that the general trajectory of his thought led away from religious and theological concerns towards more secular pursuits; and, as we have seen, Kracauer himself sometimes confirmed such a view.

Yet, this does not fully account for the twists and turns that characterize his public statements on religious themes. The convoluted development of Kracauer’s attitude towards religion is evident, for instance, in his inconsistent responses to the issue of portraying religious subject matter in film. Given his later success as a film critic, it is not surprising that one of the earliest articles he wrote for the FZ was a review of the 1916 film, Christus, a dramatization of the life of Christ directed by Giulio Antamoro. 3 His article offered little in the way of actual film criticism; instead Kracauer indulged in generalizations on the national peculiarities of religious expression. Thus, he found the realism in Christus too crude and more appropriate to an Italian audience. “We are,” he wrote, “fortunately, not yet so Americanized that we require such exhibitions to incite our piety.” Germans, he continued, would not tolerate such “profanation of the holiest tenets of faith (Glaubensgüter).” In a short notice published the following day, Kracauer returned to this theme, but in more detail. He suggested that the lead actor was sometimes too coarse in his gestures. His bold physicality was unable to represent the sacred in a “truly comprehensible” way. 4 His main objection then is that the film has not solved the problem of representing religious subject matter; he does not as a rule, however, reject such representations.

Yet, by 1926 Kracauer took the opposite position on the same question. In a review of Ben Hur, Kracauer argued a position similar to the prohibition on graven images that emerged in the later writings of the Frankfurt School. 5 The representation of religious subjects on the screen, he argued, was “offensive” and an “evil.” The creators of the film, so he claimed, seemed to think that technical expertise alone (such as the early use of colour) could somehow bridge the gap between sacred and profane. He noted that even where the filmmakers attempted a tactful gesture

such as in the decision to not show the full figure of Christ, they had in fact only worsened the problem by drawing attention to the film’s otherwise ambitious fabrications.  

There are a number of questions that arise out of these two reviews. One, why does Kracauer object to the representation of sacred history in 1926, when he found it acceptable or not even worth mentioning in 1921? To what extent should one understand this objection in theological terms, that is, on what grounds does Kracauer reject these representations? Also, who is the “we” in the first article? Is Kracauer including himself in the plural form? At the outset, one must concede that Kracauer may have been influenced by the editorial policies of the FZ. His reviews of Christus appeared just days before Christmas and the editors may have been reluctant to offend religious sentiments during the holiday season. Moreover, Kracauer would have been well aware that his readership was predominantly, though not exclusively, German and Christian.  

However, these facts do not entirely resolve the question of his personal identification with the views expressed. To be sure, his rejection of excessive piety and of the allegedly crude materialism of these films is consistent with his stated ideal of “holy sobriety.” Moreover, there is reason to believe that Kracauer took seriously the question of offending religious sentiments. For instance, when the FZ was attacked publicly for offending religion and morality, Kracauer was entrusted with writing the rebuttal. The attack against the paper was led by a Professor Brunner who spoke on behalf of the Interkonfessionelle Verein zur Hebung der Sittlichkeit. The group had been angered by the newspaper’s support for a theatre company that had performed Reigen, a controversial play by Arthur Schnitzler. While conceding that the correct balance between artistic license and immorality was often difficult to determine, Kracauer argued that the paper had, contrary to the views of Brunner, always sought to find this balance without harming public sentiment; indeed, the paper had often “raised its voice against the wounding of public sensitivity in religious matters.” Of course, given the collective nature of the FZ editorial conferences and the sensitivity of this issue, it is probable that Kracauer expressed a position

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7 The FZ did, of course, have a large number of foreign subscribers, and it was certainly well read by the Jewish population in Frankfurt.
8 Kracauer, “Kunst und Sittlichkeit,” FZ, May 2, 1922 (M2).
approved by the FZ editors in common. Yet, I would argue that the “we” Kracauer used here, and in his reviews of Christus and Ben Hur, was, by and large, in accord with his own views at the time. For Kracauer’s response to the Reigen affair is consistent with a pattern that emerges in his subsequent journalism on religious themes. On the one hand, he argued that religion must reckon with modernity and that this imperative precluded religious revival; but on the other hand, he never refutes religion as such – at times, he even claims to defend it.

The rationale behind Kracauer’s position is two-fold. One, throughout much of his writing, he is reluctant to abandon religious concepts such as redemption and grace (Erlösung, Gnade). Though his usage of the latter term declined after the mid-1920s, redemption remained an important theme throughout his work. However, before 1925, both terms retained a critical function, particularly in his polemics against Weimar’s so-called “vagabond” religiosity.

Kracauer argued these concepts preserved viable “truth contents.” These could be salvaged from their “mythological hull,” stripped of their theological language and deployed anew in a program of ideological critique. This was, for instance, how Adorno understood Kracauer’s intentions. Of course, secularizing theological content does not necessarily amount to a defence of religion. Thus, Kracauer was unconcerned with the fate of religious institutions after their “truth contents” had been appropriated. Nonetheless, his position argued that, for the moment, religious tradition was still the custodian of a conceptual richness that could not be ignored. Any attempt to reckon with the social desires that these concepts represented, meant that one had to reckon with religious traditions more generally.

Related to this point was a general refusal to allow secular culture the foundational functions that Kracauer believed religion had possessed in the past. This was not so much an abandonment of “revolutionary culturalism,” but rather a redefinition of culture in light of the claims of religion. As he wrote in 1925, the artist only “builds the temple,” but the “fundaments of faith” are not his

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9 On the editorial policies of the FZ, see Eksteins, The Limits of Reason, p. 27 and pp. 122-124.
10 See the remarks in Enzo Traverso, “Sous la signe de l’extraterritorialité,” pp. 186-197; and also Zachary Braiterman, The Shape of Revelation, pp. 252-254.
11 Kracauer to Ernst Bloch, May 27, 1926, Briefe 1, pp. 272-275.
13 Kracauer to Bloch, May 27, 1926, Briefe 1, p. 274.
or her concern. Thus, culture does have a role to play, but it is one with limitations. Society may grant an artist the role of prophet, he argued, but the artist is never commensurate to this function. For in a secularized world the function of art was restricted to the negative. Culture could not create a meaningful and unified whole from the variegated world of appearances; rather it exposed the failure to find such meaning. Thus, its predominant mode in modernity, as Lukács had argued, was ironic. In accord with this position, Kracauer could not accept the view that religion was simply an effect of culture, a mere superstructure resting on the economic base; on the contrary, since culture did not have the resources to found a true community, religion could not be listed under the rubric of “cultural goods.” On the contrary, he accepted the view that religion had once been a foundational condition of culture itself, and it was religion that had performed the unifying task that eluded and would continue to elude modernity.

Not only did such a position mean that culture should not and could not appropriate a religious aura, it also meant that positive religiosity was harmful to artistic expression and not be equated with genuine religious conviction. Most often, so Kracauer believed, these expressions were merely formal, an aesthetic counterfeit of religious life. This was at the root of his seemingly “nihilist” position towards religious revival. A model of what he thought was the proper relationship between religion and art emerged, surprisingly enough, in the correspondence between Jean Cocteau and Jacques Maritain. Kracauer reviewed the published letters between the two men in 1927 and found that the Catholic theologian and the avant-garde aesthete were in substantial agreement: there was no need to fashion a Catholic or religious art, rather artists served God by remaining faithful to the demands that were specific to their artistic vocation. Thus, “the art that pleases God,” so Maritain claimed, “is an art with all of its teeth.” Kracauer went on to note that in Germany this insight was too often neglected in the rush to “subordinate” art to positive religion and thus produce a sanctified culture that supposedly gave access to the religious sphere. Moreover, in a “transitional society” such as Germany, the “reality-contents of

15 Ibid., pp. 139-140.
16 Kracauer, “Georg von Lukács’ Romantheorie,” Der verbotene Blick, p. 84.
17 Braiterman, The Shape of Revelation, pp. 252-254.
art” (Wirklichkeitsgehalte der Kunst) were inseparable from wider “social powers.”

Thus, Kracauer conceived of “religious art” as a form of expression that had to avoid ostentatious piety, but could not avoid social critique. In general, he felt the religious revival had reneged on this socially critical function.

The actual extent of the religious revival in post-war Germany is, of course, difficult to determine, so it is hard to know whether or not Kracauer was in fact responding to a broad and deeply rooted cultural transformation. Historians of the Great War such as Jay Winter, Annette Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau have argued that religion and spiritualism surged during the war, and that these impulses continued to manifest themselves in post-war practices of commemoration and personal bereavement. Similarly, the authors of the Handbuch der Kirchengeschichte reported a deep and wide-ranging boom in religious practice among German Catholics after 1918, an increase that was expressed in movements for liturgical reform and greater participation of the laity. Kracauer’s home city, Frankfurt, was an important if idiosyncratic locus of this revived Catholicism. It was home to a large Catholic minority; after 1918, one of every three Frankfurters considered themselves to be Catholic. Thus, together with its relatively large and long established Jewish population, the city had a decidedly multi-confessional character.

For Kracauer himself, evidence of the religious revival is readily found in the daily facts of his working life. His duties as a journalist compelled him to inhabit the lecture halls of Frankfurt and south Germany where he heard numerous lectures on a bewildering variety of religious, cultural, and philosophical issues. During the first half of the twenties, he wrote on a diverse range of these subjects: church reform groups, discussion evenings devoted to events in Russia, Brahmanism, Chinese philosophy, anthroposophy, experiments in communal life, school reform,
Buddhism, spiritual hucksters and so forth. What united most of these diverse groups, was the common impulse of renewal – of moral, spiritual and cultural regeneration. His second book *Georg* satirized this spiritual hunger that seemed to regularly draw considerable crowds into the auditoriums of Frankfurt:

> The followers of anthroposophy wanted to awaken in him a longing for the supernatural, while the school reformers are, in the best sense, sensual and want to develop everything from the child itself who then, perhaps, will never come to read Dostoevsky, concerning whom numerous lectures were held that compelled him to dissipate into a Russian and to wait upon the redemption – of course, not for too long, because then comes straightaway the *Decline of the West*, according to which he must harden himself until Count Keyserling appears who mollifies him anew, because Keyserling reconciles all contradictions harmoniously, one with the other, a singular harmony that lasts for precisely one hour. And so he ranged forlornly over the sea of the public sphere.24

Thus, setting aside the question of the actual extent of the religious revival, it is clear that there was a significant public discourse on the issue, and it is within this discourse that Kracauer positioned himself.

Of course, for Kracauer the religious revival was in many ways a personal reality. As discussed above, he himself was not entirely immune to its “siren call”; more importantly, the religious revival was a vital issue to a large number of his friends and intellectual acquaintances. Some of these figures, such as Susman, Löwenthal, Rosenzweig, and Thormann, have already been mentioned; others will emerge in the course of the following discussion.

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Kracauer’s position towards the religious revival had already taken a confrontational turn when he published his sharply negative review of Max Scheler’s *Of the Eternal in Man* near the end of 1921. By that time Scheler was an intellectual “star of the first order”; Kracauer, on the other hand, was a scarcely known journalist at the beginning of his career.25 Hence, the essay’s harsh

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and almost disrespectful must have been surprising. Kracauer almost certainly intended to have this effect, as he had shown a draft of the essay to Susman months in advance and her comments would have alerted him to the fact that some might find the essay too aggressive. For his part, he remonstrated with her that he did not see Scheler as a “leading” thinker; thus, he was not obliged to treat him as such. Though in the end he proposed the addition of some mollifying references to Scheler’s intellectual stature, the effect was no less unsettling and the published review earned him a private rebuke from Rosenzweig.26 The abrasive and ironic tone that he adopted when discussing religious issues did much to alienate Kracauer from his more religious-minded friends. As one friend, Ernst Simon, pointed out to him, even if he claimed to respect those he criticized “admiration does not take well to irony.”27

Yet, even if his tone was aggressive, Kracauer did not want to be understood as irreligious or anti-clerical. As he wrote to Susman, he did not sympathize with the radical scepticism of a Max Weber.28 This was one part of the argument contained in his 1922 article, “Those Who Wait.” This essay outlined a tripartite approach to the problem of religious revival and secular society. Between the religiosity of figures such as Rabbi Nobel, for instance, and the deep scepticism of someone such as Weber there were those who waited and watched. These were the ones who were deeply affected by the loss of religious certainty; they would have welcomed faith, but they could not justify it in intellectual terms. Moreover, they believed that faith could not be compelled, and the result was that they occupied a position of indefinite waiting. Kracauer described this state as a “hesitant openness,” but he did not elaborate on this point at much length - what are these people actually waiting for? Nonetheless, he clearly intended that this suspended state should not be understood as a merely passive “wait and see” with no object in mind, even if the final resolution was outside of our understanding. Such a position should not cause undue despair, he argued, at least not for those who were still “exerting themselves.”29

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26 Kracauer to Susman, September 17, 1921, SN, DLA; and Kracauer to Löwenthal, April 12, 1924, In steter Freundschaf, pp. 53-55.
27 Ernst Simon to Kracauer, May 17, 1926, KN, DLA. Ernst Simon (1899-1988) probably met Kracauer in 1920 through Löwenthal. He studied religion and philosophy and was active in the Free Jewish School. A proponent of Zionism, he immigrated to Palestine in 1928 and taught at the Hebrew University.
28 Kracauer to Susman, June 16, 1920, SN, DLA.
The question then becomes what did the exertions of “waiting” involve, and how did Kracauer envision this state of endless anticipation? At least part of the answer resides in the formation of a critical vocation. Active waiting involved the deciphering of the present and *The Detective Novel*, for instance, put this stratagem into practice. Modernity was akin to the “danger zones” described in the opening chapter of the study. This was the space where the swarms of enthusiasts, miracle workers and religious adventurers ran rampant. Amid this “flood of heretics” the process of *ratio* was embodied in the profane black mass celebrated by the detective and his “unwilling helper,” the criminal. The solution of the mystery, however, did not unveil the real; rather it reduced it to the ready-made categories of idealist thinking. Similar to the man in Kafka’s story “Before the Law,” none of these heretics and adventurers is able to push their way through the door and find access to the truth. The critic was no exception to this rule; but Kracauer accepted this limitation and confined his task to seeking out and identifying the door and its gatekeepers. These were to be found wherever theological impulses ran aground on the shores of the secular, where the utopian confronted the real. If access to the religious sphere was blocked, then criticism would expose this blockage. We could not know redemption, but we could know what needed to be redeemed. Furthermore, we could recognize the ideology that held human society to be a knowable and ever-fixed order. What Mülder-Bach called the “reversal of negativity” was predicated on this recognition of the provisional nature of human relations, to the world and to each other. Exposing ideology would provoke an unmediated encounter with the negative and launch humankind on a vaguely defined and uncertain path to redemption, though, to be sure, this was redemption of a different kind.

This concept of the critical vocation appears in Kracauer’s letters to Susman. In these private expressions he anticipated the public agenda outlined in “Those Who Wait.” The letters refer very little to specific political events though they do convey the uncertain mood of the newly born Republic. For Kracauer, the instability of those years provoked a mood of anticipation that compelled him to take a position, to define himself vis-à-vis the numerous discourses of revolutionary transformation. It is on account of these discourses, that his response, one of

30 Kracauer, *Der Detektiv-Roman*, p. 19.
31 Kracauer to Susman, April 20, 1921, SN, DLA.
renunciation and waiting, acquires a measure of radicalism; for during a period when almost everyone followed a program or party line, or spoke of the “new man” and the new order, “waiting,” so he implied, was a form of resistance. If as the protagonist of Georg proclaims, everyone must have a position (Haltung), then waiting might be described as an anti-position. Yet, it did offered Kracauer a foothold from which he could still contribute to the cultural-political struggle. Writing to Susman in early 1921, he described his response to the contemporary spiritual revival:

To be sure, a tremendous historical moment is at hand – I sense it, it stirs me to my very fingertips, I cannot sleep because of it ... The quest for meaning echoes powerfully as it does throughout the centuries. Within Catholicism it begins to stir, and Protestant idealism as well is everywhere inflamed. Settlements have been founded, such as that of Eberhard Arnold’s at Sannerz bei Schlüchtern that seeks to start a new life on the basis of a Christian-communist foundation. The same goes for Judaism; many live again within the law and seek to devote themselves inwardly to form.  

Clearly, Kracauer was not unmoved by the upsurge in religious sentiments, and we have seen that Rabbi Nobel of Frankfurt made a significant impression on him. If Nobel had not died suddenly in 1922, it does not seem improbable to imagine that Kracauer could have been drawn further into Jewish religious life. With his loss, however, there disappeared one of his stronger personal attachments in the circles of the Jewish revival.

Of course, it is not clear that the charisma of someone such as Nobel would have been enough to have drawn him into a religious existence. In the same letter to Susman, he casts suspicion on movements that depended on “charismatic personality.” Such movements, he claimed, could not generate ideas or concepts that transcended the personal; thus, they were incapable of effecting the “transformation of thought … for which we all longed.” His remarks on this question were

34 Kracauer to Susman, April 20, 1921, SN, DLA. After studying philosophy and theology, Eberhard Arnold (1882-1935) turned to evangelical work with the Salvation Army. In 1920, he founded a Christian Gemeinschaft at Sannerz. The membership grew to the point that a larger farm was sought, but after 1933 the community was persecuted by the NSDAP and eventually disbanded. It has since become known as the Bruderhof movement and is still active in the United States.
35 Though Kracauer was impressed by Buber, he noted that they lacked a genuine rapport; see his letter to Löwenthal, March 1, 1922, In steter Freundschaft, pp. 38-39.
more specifically directed at Protestant and mystical sects, but he also conceded that in spite of his admiration for Nobel, he could not follow his model. Similarly, he could not find his way to the certainty (*Haltung*) that was claimed by Rosenzweig and Rosenstock-Huessy, for instance. It would be “romanticism,” he asserted, to come to an “affirmation and dedication to the “Law”… only out of knowing, out of insight.” Without faith such actions lacked authenticity. Having thus repudiated the path of religion, his only position was one that he identified with the gesture of waiting:

I see only one way to follow!! *Waiting!!* To be passive, to watch and to know, to live right and virtuously… perhaps, the words of Lao–Tse are valid here: nothingness moves the world. Please write to me: can you follow Judaism as does Rosenzweig? Can you follow Catholicism? No, that I know. You are a mystic. Perhaps we all must be one; it is, at the end of the day, our fate!36

Surprisingly, he argues that he had found confirmation of his agenda in a discussion with Rosenzweig, but he did add that Rosenzweig maintained that what for Kracauer was only “tendency” was for himself a definite “positive.” This he defined as a *Mitleben*, an always present “dwelling” within the religious sphere: “I live in it. I have that which you call form.”37 Kracauer eventually responded to Rosenzweig’s claims of authenticity with the idea of the “short-circuit man.” According to Kracauer, these were the individuals who sought refuge from a meaningless world by embracing religious certainty. They are, so he claims, often indistinguishable from the “genuine believers” and their psychology and motives are more difficult to recognize.38

Kracauer seems divided at this point between attributing some authenticity to the religious sentiments and rejecting them altogether. Though he mentions the “genuine believers” whom the “short-circuit men” resemble, one suspects that he did not believe that such individuals existed, or at the very least, they were extremely uncommon. To be sure, he cautions against being so presumptuous as to shine a light into the “spiritual depths of others,” but he seems to do precisely that when he later claims that the “short-circuit men” can only reach the religious sphere in part:

36 Kracauer to Susman, April 20, 1921, SN, DLA.
37 Kracauer to Susman, April 20, 1921, SN, DLA.
…their faith is not borne by the full breadth of their self, and for that reason the truth of religion does not draw entirely near; it is more a will to faith rather than a lingering within it, more a hasty interpretation than an accomplished state of affairs. 39

Kracauer seems unable to concede the possibility of faith, a fact that may have derived from his perceptions of what I would call a religious flânerie. Everywhere, he claimed, the religious traditions of the world are sampled as if they were goods in a department store. “No confession of faith is too strange,” he mused, “we mix Buddhism, Confucianism and Mohammedism as if we were shuffling cards.”40 Even those who had appeared earnest had wavered at times, or had undergone crises of conversion, as was the case with men such as Scheler, Rosenzweig, and Rosenstock-Huessy. His inability to concede ground on the question of religious authenticity eventually would cause him further strife with the advocates of the religious revival. From their point of view, Kracauer was among the “inauthentic” and, according to Adorno, this meant he was excluded by them from any serious discussion of religion. 41

The difference between the authentic and the inauthentic was carried over into different interpretations of waiting, its meaning and its occupations. At the close of his letter to Susman, Kracauer offered some idea of what direction his own work was to take in light of this position. He imagined a project that would re-evaluate words such as “I,” “time,” and “Eternity”; however, he stressed that he could not give these concepts a new meaning (Sinn) for he did not possess it. Instead, the drive to interpret these terms anew was a preliminary or anticipatory gesture: “I stand outside the door, and only know that here is the entrance. Is that enough, to point to the entry way? But perhaps someone else opens the door!”42 This then was to be a project that observed certain limits. In contrast to the man who seeks the law in the Kafka tale, Kracauer assumes from the outset that one cannot pass over the threshold of the law.

41 The reference is to the opening pages in Adorno, Jargon of Authenticity, pp. 3-4.
42 Kracauer, April 20, 1921, SN, DLA.
How Susman responded to Kracauer’s overture is not known as her half of the correspondence has been lost; but she probably would have had little difficulty in sympathizing with his views. Indeed, she might have found very little that was striking about them. Her own writing covered similar terrain, and it was this aspect of her thought that was admired by Ernst Bloch, for instance. Before the war, he had written to her in gratitude for the fact that she had demonstrated to him that Judaism was an “unconcluded” religion:

Judaism,” he stated, “is the religion of waiting … the relativity that works as a poison among all religiously ungifted devotees of a form of faith, has become in Judaism a motive in itself; it is ever heretical, because it is always longing, being in the beyond (Darüberhinwegsein), and mysticism.43

Thus, there is agreement on waiting as recognition of the perpetually inconclusive nature of the world and of a longed for but not actualized redemption. Certainly, the idea of “waiting” was one that Kracauer could have derived from Jewish tradition. However, as a means of investigating how this trope took shape in his work, some further consideration of his engagement with the religious currents of his day is needed, including the religious revival in Christianity.

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What Kracauer thought or felt in regards to the Christian and Jewish faiths was sufficiently vague to elicit speculation concerning his actual religious allegiances. Within the circles around Rosenzweig, Kracauer was sometimes suspected of having Catholic or Protestant sympathies. At one point, Rosenzweig remarked that his work “smelled of Catholicism,” while his friend Hans Ehrenberg stated that Kracauer was a lowly offshoot of recent trends in Protestant theology. According to Ehrenberg, Kracauer hid his “inner impotence” with a cloak à la Barth, though he “naturally” did not want to suggest that Kracauer was of the same intellectual rank.44 His loyalty to Lutheranism, so Rosenzweig later suggested, was probably one of the reasons behind his

43 Bloch to Susman, undated letter probably from 1911, reprinted in Susman, Das Nah- und Fernsein, p. 79.
44 Rosenzweig to Martin Buber, October 11, 1922, reprinted in Rosenzweig, Franz Rosenzweig: Der Mensch und sein Werk, 1.2, pp. 836-837; and Hans Ehrenberg to Franz Rosenzweig, May 11, 1926, Franz Rosenzweig Collection, reel 7, “Luther und die Schrift,” Leo Baeck Institute, New York. See also, Rosenzweig to Rudolf Ehrenberg, March 3, 1922, Franz Rosenzweig: Der Mensch und sein Werk, 1.2, pp. 755-756.
attack of their translation of the Bible: “Comical people, these Jews, who work themselves up in the spirit of a bible-thumping Protestant matron!”

Yet, there is not much to suggest that Kracauer ever thought of himself as a Protestant, and, moreover, his responses to the Protestant revival after 1918 suggest that he had many reservations towards Protestantism. These stem from two main sources. One, the Reformation was, to some degree, tainted by its role in destroying the stable order offered by medieval Catholicism; it had thus inaugurated the destructive process of secular emancipation. “At present, the decisive turn in the German spirit since the Reformation,” so he argued in the pages of Die Rheinlande, “consists in the fact that it has forfeited the unconditional truth and absoluteness of the church’s holy teaching.” As a result, the “cosmic unity” of the past had been blown apart.

In the immediate post-war years, Kracauer undertook a study of these events, reading works on the Reformation by Dilthey and Ranke as part of his attempt to reckon with the meaning of a secularized world. In the latter, Kracauer claimed to have found echoes of his own position in the words of the Protestant leader, Zwingli, to the effect that “one could not bring heaven to earth.” On the other hand, he thought that Luther’s support of the princes during the Peasant Wars had had a devastating effect on the course of German history. However, neither Luther nor Zwingli, he believed, could be counted as true revolutionaries; indeed, he suggested the incompatibility of revolution and the German spirit:

To the German, revolution is not a final goal; indeed, one notes this today. “Society” does not mean the same thing for him as for the western nations; he is so barbaric and stupid in all his political affairs. When his nature is absorbed into society, he only feels a shudder; he is only beautiful when he is an inwardly, metaphysical individual.

45 Rosenzweig to Martin Buber, April 28, 1926, Franz Rosenzweig: Der Mensch und sein Werk, 1.2, pp. 1092-1093. I have slightly modified the grammar in translation.
47 Kracauer to Susman, June 16, 1920, SN, DLA.
48 Kracauer to Susman, June 16, 1920, SN, DLA.
For Kracauer, Protestantism then is associated with a fatalist decline from the organic unity of the middle ages to the fragmented and stoic world of individualism. The liberation from the Roman church is paid for with an incurable inner restlessness, and the individual now had to confront an impenetrable world with the limited resources of culture and science. In this view, an organic communal totality is displaced by the idea of society as a perpetual cultural project. The rise of idealist thought was to be understood as a flawed attempt to reckon with this problem—though Kracauer was careful not to attribute the rise of idealism exclusively to the Reformation.

It is surprising to find Kracauer paying homage to an almost romantic vision of medieval Catholicism, even if he discarded the ideal of a “closed culture” early in his writing career. Still, in the early twenties, this concept exerted an almost magical aura that seemed to obscure the difficult questions of emancipation and secularism. That a closed culture of this sort implied a potentially oppressive degree of cultural and religious homogeneity did not unsettle his crude vision of organic harmony. Indeed, Kracauer seems oblivious to this as a problem at all, and part of the reason for this may be that he simply did not associate the emancipation of Jews and other minorities with the rise of secular culture. Indeed, in his essay for the Moritz-Mannheimer Stiftung he suggested that some values such as charity could in fact be best ensured within the framework of a church-led society. The state, on the other hand, was inevitably limited; it could legally emancipate Jews, but it could not compel their social acceptance. Therefore, legal equality did not translate into social equality, and while institutional changes were not negligible, only a comprehensive transformation of social values would decisively alter the situation. In this respect Kracauer implied that the religious community could be a more effective agent of change than the constitutional state as it addressed a deeper level of social values.

If the state was unable to affect a social and cultural transformation then the locus of attention shifted to the individual, and it was here that Kracauer detected a more intractable dilemma in Protestant theology. Kracauer accepted the view that the Protestant insistence on the individual’s

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49 Kracauer, “Georg von Lukács’ Romantheorie,” Der verbotene Blick, pp. 82-83.
direct relationship to God coincided with the emergence of the rational and autonomous subject. The latter had the effect of undermining belief in any “absolute meaning” that transcended subjectivity. This disappearance of meaning meant that abstract thought could insert itself between the subject and “concrete reality.” Thus, thought no longer remained in the “custody of the formed world,” but rather it presumed itself to be the “middle point” of existence. In Kracauer’s words, “the cherished idea of the free-floating ‘I’ takes the place of the world-sheltering myth.” Under the reign of this modern individual, religion also suffers; God is reduced to a mere “idea,” a formal concept dependent upon the judgments of the rational subject (Vernunftsubjekt). This overweening subjectivity led to two kinds of individualism: the levelling and “atomizing” individualism of the enlightenment and the romantic ideal of an unfolding personal essence (Wesen). Though superficially these conceptions were at odds, they resembled one another in that neither of them facilitated contact with the objective world of things. Thus, to recover the real one had to dismantle the idealist influence that dwelled in Protestant theology.

Yet, Kracauer was also aware that the need to overcome idealism was embedded in contemporary Protestantism itself. After 1918, the work of Barth, Jaspers, Thurneisen and Gogarten had initiated a wide ranging critique of both liberal and orthodox theology. These writers tried to restore Protestantism to its fundamentals, that is, to the individual relationship with an absolute and unknowable God. This meant removing all mediations between God and the individual, including the allegedly noxious overgrowth of idealist philosophy. While Kracauer was sympathetic, he did not believe that idealist tendencies could be so easily removed. In a 1925 article discussing contemporary religious trends, he argued that the repudiation of idealism had, in fact, been pursued to such an extreme that the new theology had hindered their intentions to take hold of the real. By emphasizing that only through faith in God could one enter reality, they had eliminated all other factors. When compared to Catholicism, Kracauer believed that the new Protestant theology allowed no room for “creaturely contingency.” Moreover, he argued that their reinvigorated concept of the individual subject was still built upon idealist constructions; essentially, the new theology had not advanced far beyond

55 See the opening remarks in his article, “Protestantismus und moderner Geist: Ein Vortrag Gogartens,” *FZ*, April 3, 1924 (A), Hochschulblatt.
the old. Instead, they had mistaken the recovery of Protestant origins with an overcoming of
eidalist thought, yet, it was by no means clear that the latter followed from the former. To
Kracauer, what resulted was a rigid “negative religiosity,” a “world view that no longer viewed
the world.”

However, in spite of these reservations, Kracauer did sympathize with some aspects of Protestant
thought. By rendering visible “those deep shadows that idealism did not see and did not want to
see,” the new theology had performed an important task. Just as importantly, Kracauer believed
that Protestantism retained a rebellious core that might serve as a bulwark against the
encroachments of state power. In two articles written in 1933, he drew attention to what he saw
as the stubbornly non-conformist aspects of the Protestant tradition. Given the situation in
Germany at this time, this was a potentially useful legacy. In the resistance of Barth and other
theologians to the Nazi church reforms of that year, Kracauer argued that one could trace the
“spirit” of the Reformation. “While the Vatican had made its peace with Hitler,” he wrote,
Protestants had met the Nazi state with “open resistance.” Such claims were almost certainly
exaggerated for tactical purposes. Thus, his earlier judgments concerning Luther’s political role
during the Peasant war were put aside. It is also worth noting that in the same article Kracauer
mentioned Friedrich Gogarten as one of those resisting the Nazi threat to church independence.
Yet, three months prior to this article, Gogarten had sided with the German Christian movement
(a decision that he reversed in November of that year). Either Kracauer was unaware of this fact
(which is not improbable), or he chose to ignore it in light of Gogarten’s later withdrawal from
the movement. If the latter case is true, he may have chosen to ignore Gogarten’s temporary
allegiance to the German Christians (not to speak of his wider interest in a völkisch theology) so
as to make tactical use of his reputation. Similarly, Kracauer drew attention to the fact that

57 Kracauer, review of Psychologie der Weltanschauungen, Karl Jaspers, Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und
Sozialpolitik 51(March 1924): pp. 832-834.
59 Kracauer, “Deutsche Protestanten im Kampf,” L’Europe Nouvelle (November 18, 1933); reprinted in Schriften
5.3, pp. 253-255. In general, Kracauer does not appear to have undertaken much investigation of the post-1933
situation of either church in Germany. If Protestants resisted more, for instance, this could readily be explained by
the fact that the law uniting the 28 Protestant churches was far more invasive of internal church structures than the
Concordat signed with the Vatican in July of that year.
60 Gogarten withdrew from the German Christians only after the Sportpalast meeting of November 11, so it is
improbable that Kracauer could have had knowledge of Gogarten’s decision before his article went to print. Thus, it
is more likely that he was unaware of Gogarten’s involvement with the movement and his break with Barth.
Barth’s pamphlet, *Theological Existence Today!* represented a critique that went far beyond the conflict between church and state; for Barth could hardly repudiate Nazi policy toward the church without likewise repudiating the ideological premises of the total state.\(^{61}\) Of course, Kracauer also believed that the current nationalist frenzy did, in fact, have a distinctly Protestant stamp, but nonetheless he seized upon Barth’s intervention in church policy as a potential means of challenging Nazi claims to absolute power.\(^{62}\)

Thus, on the one hand, Protestantism emerged as a resistant force towards the powers of the state, and on the other, it harboured tendencies that supported, or could support, accommodation to Nazism. This was a conflict of direction that he almost certainly was aware of firsthand through his connection with Hermann Herrigel, a fellow editor on the *FZ* who was responsible for the university page (*Hochschulblatt*) in which many of Kracauer’s essays first appeared.\(^{63}\)

Not much concerning their relationship is known, but according to Kracauer, initially they had a good rapport. The two men often discussed “the most difficult of philosophical questions” well into the evening hours, and Kracauer told Susman that they shared the same fundamental position (*Grundposition*), readily finding agreement on the work of writers such as Lukács and Count Keyserling.\(^{64}\) As already mentioned, Kracauer also sought the opinion of Herrigel regarding his detective study, a fact suggesting that he valued Herrigel’s opinions. Of greater interest, however, is his claim, in a letter to Susman, to speak both for Herrigel and himself when he articulated the general outline of his position of waiting, what later became his essay, “Those Who Wait.”\(^{65}\) Given the scant number of sources that attest to this collaboration, the issue of Herrigel’s potential influence must be stated with caution, but as he does appear to have been a

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\(^{62}\) Kracauer, “Theologie gegen Nationalismus,” *Schriften* 5.3, p. 188.

\(^{63}\) According to Gillessen, Herrigel edited the *Hochschulblatt* until his forced departure from the paper in 1934; see Gillessen, *Auf verlorenem Posten*, p. 151 and 330.

\(^{64}\) Kracauer to Susman, October 17, 1920, and November 22, 1920, SN, DLA. According to Belke and Renz, Susman may have introduced Kracauer to Herrigel. They must have met, at the latest, by July 1920. See Belke and Renz, *Siegfried Kracauer*, p. 34.

\(^{65}\) See pp. 215-220 above.
significant figure for Kracauer at this early stage in his career, some attention should be devoted to this largely forgotten writer.\textsuperscript{66}

Herrigel may, in some respects, be thought of as a kind of religious flâneur, a notion I want to use more widely in connection with Kracauer’s reading of post-war religiosity. The use of this term should not suggest that in some way his religious opinions and judgments were superficial, resembling the passing judgments of the casual window-shopper on the street; but rather that he represents a fluid and mobile religiosity, one that sought ways to accommodate faith in modern culture and that was open to experimentation in the religious sphere. Herrigel was a devoted observer of trends in religion and philosophy as is evident in two of his works from the twenties: New Thinking published in 1928, and two years later, Between Question and Answer: Thoughts on the Cultural Crisis. Moreover, he wrote numerous essays on religious and philosophical themes, not only in the FZ, but also in journals such as Die Rheinlande, Die Tat and Die Kreatur. As this list suggests, Herrigel was also deeply engaged with questions of religious revival. He was a member of the Evangelical church, and he was close to Friedrich Gogarten whose ministry he sometimes visited.\textsuperscript{67} However, his circle of friends and acquaintances was broad in terms of confession, and it overlapped considerably with Kracauer’s milieu – for instance, Ernst Michel, Alfons Paquet, Werner Thormann and Martin Buber. A Friday evening Stammtisch, to which Kracauer referred in a letter to Thormann, would probably have included Herrigel.\textsuperscript{68}

As a student, Herrigel had been impressed by the work of the neo-Kantian philosopher, Paul Natorp; yet, Herrigel was no simple neo-Kantian. He was, in fact, deeply critical of the attempt to revive idealist thought, and by the end of the decade he had become an avid supporter of the so-called “new thinking” – a term that he probably derived from Rosenzweig, whose work he also supported.\textsuperscript{69} These interests led him to Davos in 1929 where he witnessed and reported on

\textsuperscript{66} For a brief biography and overview of Herrigel and his work, see Günther Schulz’s introduction to Ursula Schulz, Hermann Herrigel, der Denker und die deutsche Erwachsenbildung. Bremer Beiträge zur freien Volksbildung (Bremen, 1969), pp. 7-14.
\textsuperscript{67} Günther Schulz, pp. 7-14.
\textsuperscript{68} Kracauer to Werner Thormann, 22 September 1927, Thormann Nachlaß, EB 97/145, Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, Deutsches Exilarchiv, 1933-1945, Frankfurt am Main.
\textsuperscript{69} Hermann Herrigel, Das neue Denken (Berlin, 1928), pp. 228-244. Rosenzweig was sceptical of Herrigel as an interpreter of the “new thinking,” and he noted with some irony that Herrigel appeared to have only read his
the famous quarrel between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger. While his account was by and large even-handed, he was clearly more sympathetic towards Heidegger and his departure from western philosophical traditions.  

What made Herrigel a promising discussion partner for Kracauer was both his critical attitude towards idealism and his deep interest in the fate of religion in modernity. Herrigel was a vigorous proponent of what he called the “realistic spiritual movement” – an umbrella term encompassing the religious revival. He promoted this idea in a special number of the FZ university page in 1928, wherein his own work appeared alongside an essay by the cultural philosopher Eberhard Grisebach, a discussion of Gogarten, and shorter excerpts from the work of Rosenzweig and Rosenstock-Huessy. These writers, so the editors remarked, sought to overcome idealist influence, a critique that Herrigel had put forward as early as 1922. In this earlier essay, published in Die Tat, he claimed that idealism had hindered the connection to the real, a connection crucial to any religious concept of the world. Therefore, the influence of idealism needed to be countered by what he called “transcendent critique,” a process of thinking through the system of abstract thought to its end. This method would isolate the absolute limit that separated humankind and God, the negative from the positive. Such ideas are not without some affinities to Kracauer’s work of the early twenties, but this should not obscure some of the differences between the two – these were already apparent in Herrigel’s negative response to the Detective Study. Even though they shared common reference points to mutually recognized problems, their motives and intentions differed considerably. This was certainly the case in terms of statements of positive religiosity. In contrast to Kracauer, the existence of God was for Herrigel both a condition of the “negative world” and a necessary part of any critique of idealism. From this point of view, he was predisposed to misread The Detective Novel as a

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71 See the section Für Hochschule und Jugend in the FZ of April 22, 1928 (A).


73 Herrigel, “Zur Kritik des deutschen Idealismus,” pp. 119-121; and Das neue Denken, pp. 94-97. This section of the Herrigel’s book derives largely from his 1922 article in Die Tat; cf. pp. 82-97.
purely negative representation of reality excluding any positive valuation of ratio, or any positive consequences whatsoever. Kracauer grumbled to Löwenthal “as if that was what I had meant.”

For both Kracauer and Herrigel, the post-war period was a period of flux in terms of their attitudes to religion and politics. That is, they both were flâneurs of a sort, but for Herrigel the search for different forms of belief tended towards a more closed system of thought: Protestant nationalism, and afterwards, the German Christian movement. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that after 1933 he became an enthusiastic supporter of the Nazis. By his own admission, he was deeply impressed by the theology of Hans Schomerus, a strong exponent of the German Christian movement, and he also had ties with the völkisch theology represented by figures such as Gogarten and Wilhelm Stapel. During the Third Reich, he edited the journal *Christliche Besinnung Heute* which was a forum for his views. The journal was, however, eventually banned by Nazi authorities in 1939. His accommodation to National Socialism appears to have been assisted by his belief in a so-called “middle order,” a layer of reality that he argued was suspended between the symbolic and the factual and that was only valid in faith.

74 Kracauer to Löwenthal, November 2, 1924, *In steter Freundschaft*, p. 65.
76 The Herrigel Nachlaß (HN) is kept at the Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Stuttgart. The papers are not yet catalogued and his letters from the 1920s appear to have not survived. Only correspondence from after the Nazi ascent to power remains, though he clearly had a relationship with Gogarten since the early twenties. According to some sources, Herrigel, perhaps under the influence of Gogarten, increasingly identified with the position of the German Christian movement. According to Gillessen, Herrigel took a sympathetic position to the movement in his journalism, a position that was not in accord with the other editors of the *FZ*; for this reason he was eventually forced out of the editorial conferences, Rudolf Kircher being one of the editors who appears to have forced this issue. Moreover, Heinrich Simon reported to Reifenberg in 1933 that in questions of race Herrigel was in favour of a position close to the NSDAP (see Gillessen, *Auf verlorenem Posten*, p. 147 and p. 151). In that year, Paula Lewin, who appears to have been a friend from Frankfurt wrote to him in astonishment concerning a rumour that he had joined the party (Paula Lewin to Hermann Herrigel, 23 May 1933, HN, Ordner no. 1, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Stuttgart). His response has not survived and I have not found evidence confirming that he did in fact join the NSDAP. Adorno, however, returns to this issue in 1963, and he numbered Herrigel among the “authentic” ones who he attacked in the opening passages of his *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*. In a letter to Kracauer, he stated that Herrigel had out of “sheer concreteness” (*lauter Konkretheit*) become a “fervid Nazi.” See Adorno to Kracauer, October 28, 1963, *Briefwechsel, 1923-1966*, p. 614.
78 Among the subscribers to *Christliche Besinnung heute* were Martin Buber and Wilhelm Hausenstein, both of whom cancelled their subscriptions due to economic reasons. However, this may have been an alibi on both counts. Buber’s disagreement with Herrigel over the relationship of politics and religion is discussed in Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber’s Life and Work: The Middle Years 1923-1945* (New York, 1983), pp. 189-190. On Hausenstein, see below.
From this point of view, God was to be sought for only in the sacred words of belief; the material world, on the other hand, could be left to politics. To be sure, he did not want to separate these realms absolutely, but he believed that politics would “mistake its task” if it became a mere instrument for the “work of God.” The state then was obliged to not interfere in the religious development of the individual, but politics was another matter. In a letter to Martin Buber written in 1936, Herrigel argued that to his mind the current political order had struck a good balance between these claims. It did not invade the space between the private person and God; rather, through the Führer principle the movement placed more emphasis on “personal responsibility and decision.” It allowed for freedom in religious cultivation, and action in politics – and politics, so he argued, “cannot wait.”

This concept of politics as the sphere that does not tolerate passivity, does suggest some of the differences that would later separate Kracauer from Herrigel. To be sure, the admiration of the Führer principle does not sit comfortably next to the critical stance taken in “Those Who Wait.” Yet, it should be noted that Kracauer was not without some sympathies towards the Führer principle in the early 1920s when he appears to have been closest to Herrigel. At this time, he published two essays on the theme of political authority: “The Essence of Political Leaders” and “Authority and Individualism.” To be sure, these essays do not propose an uncritical admiration of authoritarian rule, but some of his remarks do tend towards a murky formulation of this concept that is not so distant from what Herrigel would later argue. “The soul of the leader,” Kracauer stated, “embraces at once beginning and end, his actual realm is the way itself; he is the Master of the way.” Such a leader, he continued, “resembles the artist.” These remarks were probably influenced by the sense of ongoing political and cultural crisis that afflicted the early Republic, in particular, the violent confrontations over political legitimacy between right and left. Kracauer, however, is careful to separate himself from a simple glorification of state power and stability for its own sake. What is at issue for him is the foundation of a legitimate political rule that moderated the extremes of both individualism and authoritarianism. This would,


80 Kracauer, “Autorität und Individualismus,” FZ, February 15, 1921, reprinted in Schriften 5.1, pp. 81-86; and “Das Wesen des politischen Führers,” FZ, June 12, 1921, Schriften 5.1, pp. 87-94.

81 Kracauer, “Das Wesen des politischen Führers,” Schriften 5.1, pp. 90-91. The italics are in the original text.
moreover, draw from what he saw as the positive side of contemporary utopian idealism and join this to a political pragmatism that did not simply affirm the existence of reality as it was found. Still, these essays are worth considering in reference to Herrigel, because Kracauer’s definitions of sacred and profane politics become blurred in ways that anticipate Herrigel’s more dubious formulations. Kracauer even outlined a role for the intellectual: the so-called “wise one.” This figure was complementary to the Führer, an individual who combined the qualities of the idealist and the realist, and who identified the communal goals that the leader would then bring to fulfillment: “the wise one and the Führer find completion … the one who spies out the last end and who longs for the way, and the other steps onto the path and masters it; in such fashion the affairs of God are best served in our world.”

In the work of Herrigel, religious flânerie emerges as a project beset by many risks. His interests in religion are eclectic and permitted a good degree of experimentation. According to one student of his writing, outside of his desire to challenge the idealist consensus, Herrigel did not have a firm and consistent philosophical point of view until after the 1920s. The attempt to define the boundaries that separated the sacred from the profane, and to identify the claims legitimate to both, led Herrigel to accept a radical political and cultural experiment. In this case, a positive religiosity legitimated political radicalism. As Hausenstein, his former colleague on the FZ warned him in 1934, his “religious theses” had given too much precedence to contemporary “ideas of the world.” A search that led Herrigel from the idealism of Natorp and Cassirer to the “new thinking,” eventually led to support for the German Christians and the Nazi state – perhaps, as a solution to the very religious eclecticism that distinguished his interests in the 1920s. This conclusion to his intellectual trajectory is a sobering comment on the limits of Weimar’s religious eclecticism, all the more so as Herrigel’s interest in the religious thought of Judaism was probably exceptional. That he finally chose a movement that sought to end this religious

83 Kracauer, “Das Wesen des politischen Führers,” Schriften 5.1, p. 94. The grammar has been modified slightly.
85 Wilhelm Hausenstein to Herrigel, July 20, 1934, HN, Ordner no. 1, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Stuttgart.
pluralism suggests that the spiritual and religious experimentation of the 1920s was a deeply ambivalent phenomenon.\footnote{Graf, “God’s Anti-Liberal Avant-Garde,” pp. 7-11.}

The relationship of religion to cultural modernity was also a crucial aspect to Kracauer’s reception of Catholic thought in the 1920s. His review of the correspondence between Cocteau and Maritain, discussed above, demonstrates that he did find at least some currents of Catholicism sympathetic.\footnote{Enzo Traverso, \textit{Siegfried Kracauer}, pp. 34-35. Also, it should be remembered that Elisabeth Ehrenreich, who married Kracauer in 1930, was from a family of Alsatian Catholics.} Where the church tried to reckon with the quotidian world of modernity and not demand the “positive word” of faith, Kracauer appears to have felt that the Church could maintain its relevance in modernity. During the course of the 20s, this belief altered, and he became more suspicious of the church’s direction as it attempted to negotiate the political instability of these years. The desires for a Catholic culture, he would argue, overshadowed the desire to connect with the real – the fusion of religion and culture hindering a connection to the realities of everyday life.

His ambivalence towards Catholicism has a parallel in his novel \textit{Georg}. Dispirited by the world around him, Georg visits the Jesuit priest, Father Quirin. The young man confesses his anxiety to him; he tells him of the endless parade of religious and political reformers whose points of view he presents in a leftist newspaper. He declares his admiration of Catholicism, and says he grasps the “facts of dogma.” When the priest affirms his views of modern society, he is almost surprised to find agreement so readily with a Jesuit; “Faith is easy,” he thinks. Yet, as the discussion continues it is this sense of ease that begins to disturb him. He declares his inability to accept the doctrine of Papal infallibility, to which Quirin simply replies that every one has a moment when the facts of faith appear in their true nature. Georg is disappointed that his attempt to create a barrier between himself and his entrance to the church has failed. As Father Quirin speaks more at length, however, Georg’s position becomes clear; when he hears the words “Lord’s supper” a chain of reflections is triggered in his mind:
The word sounded foreign to him, it came from a world that he did not know, shoved itself before him and grew and grew. The Lord’s Supper – faith was hard. One must remain at one’s post; the railway strike was still not at an end … Georg stared towards the floor and lost himself in the dull expanse, as if he were drifting alone over a frozen sea, toward evening.  

Within a few moments Georg thus progresses from a belief in the “ease of faith” to recognition of its overwhelming difficulties. Whereas to “grasp” the “facts of dogma” was easy, to know them in the light of religious belief was another matter. That this appears to pose no barrier to his entrance to the church causes Georg a sense of unease; “whereto, whereto,” he asks himself towards the end of his interview. As he takes leave of Quirin, the priest tells him that there exist “many ways.”  

Thus, in a sense Georg leaves his office just as much a flâneur as when he entered. “The way,” as Kracauer would later proclaim, is “through the profane,” and Georg is distracted by thoughts of the strike, of the political conflicts of the present. To emphasize this direction Kracauer frames Georg’s thoughts in language that may be interpreted as a profanation of biblical language; whereas in the Book of Genesis, “the spirit of God floated upon the water (der Geist Gottes schwebte auf dem Wasser), Georg, bereft of faith, “swept … alone over a frozen over sea” (schweife … einsam über einen zugefrorenen See), not towards holy communion, but merely towards an inscrutable evening.

Yet, in the subsequent chapter of Georg, the protagonist finds himself nonetheless impelled to defend a positive estimation of Catholic thought. Georg becomes the centre of a political intrigue in the Morgenboten – the newspaper for which he writes – on account of an article he has written on contemporary youth movements. He declares his hostility to this phenomenon, refusing to see in groups such as the Wandervogel, wandering about in packs with their guitars, the future of Germany. He contrasted their rampant individualism to the Catholic youth movement. In the latter, he argued, there was greater recognition of the bonds that transcended the individual, a

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89 Kracauer, Georg, Werke 7, p. 327.
90 Kracauer, “Travel and Dance,” Mass Ornament, p. 73, and “The Bible in German,” Mass Ornament, p. 201.
92 This was the view of one of the leading editors of the Morgenboten, Dr. Sommer; see Georg, Werke 7, pp. 331-338.
position that reflected a greater sense of responsibility and less emphasis on personal will. This position places Georg in conflict with the prevailing editorial line of the Morgenboten which is generally hostile to clerical politics. However, because his sympathy for Catholic youth suits the momentary tactical needs of the head editor, Dr Petri, Georg survives this mishap.\footnote{Dr. Petri is a rough and by no means flattering portrait of the FZ lead editor, Heinrich Simon.} Following immediately after Georg’s disillusioning encounter in Father Quirin’s office, this episode demonstrates the poles of Georg’s and, I would argue, Kracauer’s position towards both Catholicism and religion more generally: he profanes it, but he also confirms its value as a means of criticizing the more dangerous political tendencies in German society.

Kracauer’s qualified defence of Catholicism is probably due to the atypical radicalism that distinguished some of the Catholic milieu in Frankfurt.\footnote{On the subject of Catholicism in Frankfurt, see Heinz Blankenberg, Politischer Katholizismus in Frankfurt am Main, 1918-1933 (Mainz, 1981).} Among Kracauer’s friends and acquaintances were two of the more left-leaning Catholics whose record on social questions and anti-Semitism was probably exceptional. Werner Thormann, whom Kracauer must have met at the latest by 1923, was a journalist and editor, first of the Rhein-Mainischer Volkszeitung (RMV) and later of the Deutsche Republik, a voice for the Catholic circles around Joseph Wirth.\footnote{On Thormann, see Bruno Lowitsch, Der Kreis um die Rhein-Mainische Volkszeitung, pp. 28-30; and Blankenberg, p. 13 and pp. 109-111.} His family had been active in Frankfurt politics for several decades and had long registered their opposition to Prussian hegemony and militarism. Thormann also had many connections in Catholic politics, including Wirth and Ignaz Seipel. In general, he appears to have had a contrarian personality; he was cosmopolitan in terms of art and culture with a pronounced interest in French literature. He regularly used the Du form of address with younger friends, a practice that apparently extended to Kracauer. Under his editorship, both the RMV and the Deutsche Republik were critical of the rising tide of nationalist politics; according to one study of the RMV, the paper was one of the only ones in Germany to consistently and strenuously oppose anti-Semitism.\footnote{Lowitsch, pp. 12-14 and 126-128.}
Ernst Michel, who also wrote for the *RMV* was, likewise, among the most radical voices in Frankfurt Catholicism. Like Thormann, Michel professed views that placed him on the fringes of the Centre Party and even of the Church itself. His insistence on the increased role of the laity within the church and his belief that they should have greater independence in political questions led to the placing of his work, *Politics out of Faith* on the Catholic Index. Similar to Thormann, his interests were eclectic; his doctoral thesis was a study of Montesquieu and, for a short period, he worked as a reader in the Eugen Diederich and Teubner publishing houses. Of his relationship to Kracauer not much, however, is known. As discussed above, Kracauer claimed that Michel approved of his essay on Scheler before publication, and Kracauer appears to have been a visitor to the Friday evening gatherings at the Café Laumer where, according to Heinz Blankenberg, those influenced by Michel often met. Here they came into contact with other radically minded individuals (Blankenberg names, for instance, Adorno, Horkheimer and Tillich). In the case of Thormann, on the other hand, there is a patchy correspondence that suggests that their friendship was durable and survived into their mutual exile in New York. When Kracauer’s financial position became precarious following his flight from Germany, Thormann published his work in the *Deutsche Republik*. However, shortly afterwards he too would follow Kracauer into Parisian exile. In a condolence letter written to Charlotte Thormann, after her husband had suddenly died in 1947, Kracauer spoke warmly of their common struggles, of the assistance that Thormann had offered him, and of the fact that his mother and aunt had spoken of the many visits they received from Thormann when Kracauer was in Berlin.

Thus, personal connections to the leftist Catholic milieu may explain, in part, why Kracauer was a receptive observer of Catholic intellectual currents. The significance of Scheler’s work has already been discussed, but his contact with Catholic thought was much more extensive. He reported on the Catholic youth movement as well as the Catholic *Friedenbund*. Through these events, or perhaps through Thormann and Michel, Kracauer may have met other Catholic intellectuals, including a priest from nearby Mooshausen, Josef Weiger. As we have seen

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97 Lowitsch, pp. 37-39; and Blankenberg, pp. 88-94.
98 Kracauer to Charlotte Thormann, May 25, 1947, Thorman Nachlaß, Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, Deutsches Exilarchiv, Frankfurt am Main.
Kracauer claimed to have received support from Weiger for his Scheler article, and there is a brief correspondence between the two men from the years 1921 and 1922.\textsuperscript{100} Weiger’s letters suggest they had cordial relations and that he responded appreciatively to Kracauer’s work. Nonetheless, it does appear that Weiger had more reservations regarding Kracauer’s polemic against Scheler than Kracauer had indicated in his letter to Susman. Indeed, Weiger also wrote an essay on Scheler, defending him from his more severe critics. Though Weiger did not mention Kracauer by name, Kracauer may have understood this as a rejoinder of sorts, and he appears to have asked why Weiger did not send his essay to him.\textsuperscript{101} Weiger responded somewhat evasively, arguing that he doubted Kracauer would have found anything new in what he wrote so he thought it not worth sending to him. One suspects, however, that Weiger believed Kracauer would recognize that doctrinal matters had discouraged him from pursuing their differences too much further. Weiger took some pains to stress that he felt he and Kracauer had “basic views” in common, at least in philosophical terms. He also professed his admiration of Kracauer’s realism and his general “train of thought.”\textsuperscript{102} Yet, he added that he must view Scheler from a position of faith: “As a Catholic I take Scheler under protection.” Moreover, he argued that for the Catholic intellectuals, Scheler had to be applauded for the sheer fact that he was one of the few Catholic philosophers not devoted to “scholastic rationalism.”\textsuperscript{103} This, he argued, compensated for his problematic forays into “intuitionism” and phenomenology.

Still, in spite of these differences of opinion, Kracauer would have had good reason to think that his work was not viewed by Catholic intellectuals as hostile to their faith. Moreover, he could look at his essays on Catholicism as taking part in a conversation with progressive voices in the Catholic camp. Aside from Weiger, he also received signs of support from Romano Guardini, a close collaborator with Weiger, a prominent theologian and leader of the Quickborn youth movement. Kracauer probably met Guardini when he attended a conference of Catholic

\textsuperscript{100} Only the letters from Weiger have survived.
\textsuperscript{101} Weiger to Kracauer, December 29, 1921, KN, DLA. The essay in question is probably “Neue Menschen und katholisches Erbe: Ein Versuch über Max Scheler,” which appeared in the April 1922 issue of Die Tat. It appears that Kracauer knew of this essay earlier as Weiger’s letter to Kracauer, explaining why he did not send the essay to him, was written in December of 1921. Kracauer may have encountered the work in advance through Rosenzweig who sent him a review, written by a Catholic writer, which Rosenzweig argued compared favourably to what Kracauer had written. Rosenzweig said the essay was given to him by Michel who was the editor of the special issue of Die Tat in which the essay appeared. See Rosenzweig to Kracauer, December 12, 1921, KN, DLA.
\textsuperscript{102} Weiger to Kracauer, December 29, 1921, KN, DLA.
\textsuperscript{103} Weiger to Kracauer, December 29, 1921, KN, DLA.
academics in Ulm in 1923. A brief letter from Guardini in the Kracauer papers probably dates to this period. Guardini expressed his appreciation for the words Kracauer had written in regards to the Catholic “middle” (Mitte). This concept was, he stated, a decisive entry point for his own work.\textsuperscript{104} The letter was written in Lake Como, where Guardini was completing work on his \textit{Letters} that investigated the challenges posed to culture and religion by technology. Thus, Kracauer’s writings interested precisely those voices in Catholicism who were most engaged with the problem of mediating the differences between religion and modern society. To Kracauer, this was a problem that theology could only ignore at its peril; hence, he sympathized with Catholic attempts to wrestle with the chaotic material of reality without recourse to a flight into dogma.

As an outside observer of the Catholic world, Kracauer thought this was a position he could readily adopt. His report on the Ulm conference of Catholic intellectuals took care to stress his position as an “outside observer,” but one who had more than just a casual interest in Catholic thought. The article appeared in the university page and the editors included some brief remarks to frame the article’s intentions.\textsuperscript{105} According to this preface, the essay was the work of someone who was not a Catholic and did not want to propound a Catholic position; rather the article wanted to bring to light an “emergent spirit,” for which the “coming of a better future has been formed.” This spirit was identified with that of German youth and, especially “\textit{those individuals of the inner middle and the morning}.”\textsuperscript{106} To what extent, Kracauer agreed with these words is a matter of conjecture, of course, but he did allow his name to accompany the article. Moreover, this was a position that was not unsympathetic to his general attitude towards Catholicism; it allowed him to address the currents of religious reform from the more general perspective of “emerging spirit” rather than issues specific to Catholic doctrine.

However, the specific address to youth should not obscure Kracauer’s interest in the wider domains of Catholic theology. This emerges in his discussion of the “Catholic middle” that he

\textsuperscript{104} Romano Guardini to Kracauer, September 24 [1923], KN, DLA. The year is not indicated but the reference to Ulm suggests that it was written shortly after the conference which took place there from 10 to 16 August of 1923.\textsuperscript{105} Kracauer’s copy of this article in KN, DLA attributes this brief text to Erich Troß, a fellow editor on the Hochschulblatt in the mid-1920s. Nothing is known of the relations between the two men, but they must have worked closely in these years. Kracauer kept copies of all his articles for the \textit{FZ} in a scrapbook with annotations; see Thomas Y. Levin, \textit{Siegfried Kracauer: eine Bibliographie seiner Schriften} (Marbach am Neckar, 1989), pp. 13-29.\textsuperscript{106} “Der neue Werden,” \textit{FZ}, September 6, 1923 (A), \textit{Hochschulblatt}; the emphasis is in the text.
described in terms that have a close resemblance to his discussion of the “median zone” in *The Detective Novel*. The subject arose in Kracauer’s account of an address given by Ildefons Herwegen, a theologian and the abbot of an important locus of the incipient liturgical movement, Maria Laach.\(^{107}\) Herwegen, according to Kracauer, had demonstrated the formidable “capacity of regeneration” that resided in the Catholic Church. In particular, Kracauer admired the commitment to the real; what he understood to be one of the core tenets of the Catholic worldview. Thus, he drew attention to Catholicism’s direct engagement with material contingencies, rather than venturing into the fraught terrain of dogma. Still, the supernatural and the material were not to be understood as opposing principles, for the “life of individuals is only actual life (*wirkliches Leben*) when it has its place in the supernatural.”\(^{108}\) Kracauer did find the definition of these realms somewhat vague, but overall he suggested that the Catholic idea of the “middle,” as described by Herwegen represented a viable approach to modern reality:

> If [the life of the real] is to become truly actualized, it must not only take part in the supernatural, it must also remain persistently aware of its creaturely existence; it must, as it were, be suspended, from the contingent into the absolute. Expressed otherwise, it only gains reality and concreteness as a life of the Middle – more precisely, the provisory *Mitte* – that neither betrays heaven to earth, nor seeks to deny its earthly heritage.\(^{109}\)

Thus, both heaven and earth, sacred and profane could press their claims, and this meant that one could not ignore social problems. Indeed, the published version of Herwegen’s speech does include some references to industrial culture and the social question. This sensitivity to the conflicts in modern society was a point of connection for Kracauer; for it allowed him to write in support of Herwegen and to avoid areas of potential divergence that might have risked the alienation of his Catholic readers.\(^{110}\) A critical discussion of Catholic dogma, for instance, could

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\(^{109}\) Ibid.

compromise his support for the liberal wing of Catholicism. In comparison, three years later at a
subsequent conference in Recklingshausen, liberal Catholicism was in the minority. As a result
there was little benefit to be had by withholding his criticism, and hence, Kracauer pointedly
singled out Herwegen for his rigid insistence on dogma.\footnote{111}

In the long run, the efforts of Michel and Thormann, of course, did not triumph over the
conservative factions of the Church, and if Kracauer hoped his interventions would have some
effect, he was ultimately disappointed. The impulses he admired at the Ulm conference in 1923
were unable, so he later argued, to fulfill their intentions.\footnote{112} This was the case, he claimed, in
regards to the liturgy movement led by Guardini. Kracauer understood this movement as a
revival of Catholic symbolism, one that would attempt to wed symbols and rituals to the world of
everyday experience. Thus, the movement drew from the traditional repertoire of the Catholic
liturgy, but it also wanted to invest everyday objects with spiritual value. It was in this sense that
Herwegen had spoken of the tools of the engineer as symbols of “higher divine thoughts”; they
were still practical objects, of course, but they also possessed the “glimmer of mystery.”\footnote{113}
To allow such objects to become illuminated by the light of truth required a renewed “symbolic
capacity” (\textit{Symbolfähigkeit}), a sensitivity to the place of objects in a divine order embracing the
totality of human relations. This revived symbolic power created a \textit{Mitleben}, a second dimension
that accompanied the individual through all his or her actions, and that embraced the whole
person.

Kracauer found this idea sympathetic, but he clearly doubted that the liturgical movement could
resolve what he saw as the “antinomian tensions … between religion and culture.”\footnote{114}

\footnote{111} Kracauer, “Die Krise im deutschen Katholizismus: Zur Recklinghauser Sondertagung des Verbands katholischer
Akademiker,” \textit{FZ}, January 3, 1926 (M2).
\footnote{112} His disappointment corresponds with the views of some Catholic assessments of this period as well; cf. with
damningly titled essay by Walter Dirks, “Das Defizit des deutschen Katholizismus in Weltbild, Zeitbewußtsein und
\footnote{113} Herwegen, “Das Mysterium als die Seele katholischen Wesens,” \textit{Lumen Christi}, p. 128.
\footnote{114} Kracauer, “Die Tagung der katholischen Akademiker II,” \textit{FZ}, September 6, 1923 (A), Hochschulblatt.
understood religious ‘culture’ from the conditions of a bad ‘civilization.’” Such an approach, Kracauer thought, was not viable if one insisted on using only the resources of Catholic tradition. However, his criticism was muted at the time, because he chose to wait for Guardini’s forthcoming book that was to deal with the subject at more length.

However, when Guardini published *Liturgical Education* in the following year Kracauer was clearly disappointed, and his review of the book expanded upon his earlier objections. He recognized that Guardini was clearly aware of the problems posed by his insistence on traditional ritual, and he conceded that Guardini had removed himself from the “romantic” vision of medieval Catholicism. He was thus well aware of the potential for a renewed symbolism to lapse into a pseudo-religious “cultural pageantry” (*Kulturspieleirei*). Still, even if one could secure liturgical form from aesthetic contamination, Kracauer argued that other problems were more fundamental. For if one followed the path of liturgical education recommended by Guardini then much would “depend on how one judged the present and what consequences one drew from this judgment.” In other words, one had to account for one’s own position in a world of fragmentary culture. How could a renewed liturgical practice build upon this foundation? In the course of his refutation, he drew explicitly from the work of other Catholic writers, in particular, those who had spoken out against Guardini and the Quickborn movement that he led. This group of young Catholics, such as Robert Grosche and Albert Mirgeler, had opted for different path. They argued that every “isolated individual” first had to come to terms with themselves “as an individual (*Einzelnen*), that is, as a whole person in a suspended state.” Only on this premise could one envision a “common life within form.” Hence, there was an emphasis on the radical isolation of the individual and his or her decision in a contingent situation where the law appears uncertain:

Of course, wholeness of the person and obedience towards the law condition each other reciprocally; however, it is another matter, whether or not, in a time of

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115 Ibid.
116 Romano Guardini, *Liturgische Bildung: Versuche* (Berg Rothenfels am Main, 1923).
118 Kracauer, “Liturgische Bildung,” *FZ*, June 20, 1924 (A), Literaturblatt.
lawlessness, one takes one’s first steps in accordance with the law, or, in recognition of the situation, tries to penetrate to the source from which the law originates.\textsuperscript{119}

This is the territory that concerned Kracauer in \textit{The Detective Novel} and also writers such as Schmitt and Benjamin. In these zones, Kracauer argued, the forms of belief and traditional ritual could only help one so much. He did not mean to repudiate the viability of traditional forms, but only to point out that one could not “work outwards from them, but rather [one] must struggle with them as individuals who do not know, or do not yet know, how to efface their individual existence.”\textsuperscript{120} The important point for Kracauer is that these young Catholics refused to seek solutions that involved stepping outside of their own concrete situation – whether it was by way of dogma or by abstract thought. In their insistence on the real, Kracauer saw one of the more vital forms of Catholicism.

Thus Kracauer’s review of Guardini was notably interventionist. Whereas his assessment of the 1923 conference described the multifaceted range of Catholic opinion with some approval, the later review explicitly supported the more radical strands of modern Catholicism. In the course of his critique, Kracauer referred to a book edited by Ernst Michel entitled, symptomatically enough, \textit{Church and Reality}.\textsuperscript{121} The volume comprised essays drawn from issues of \textit{Die Tat} that were devoted to the present state of Catholic thought, including the work of Guardini as well as that of his critics. One of the latter, Albert Mergeler, contributed a sharply worded polemic against the Quickborns and their conception of “creative obedience” (\textit{schöpferischen Gehorsams}).\textsuperscript{122} The movement, according to Mergeler, was clothed in “lovely words” that could not disguise the realities that it failed to address. While Mergeler conceded that Guardini and others in the Quickborn movement were devoted to the problem of overcoming the gap between Catholic doctrine and modern reality, the movement was still mired in the unreal: “instead of recognizing the demands that the present situation of the church, economy, and family place upon the personal decision of every individual, one abstracts from them on the basis of the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[119] Ibid.
\item[120] Ibid.
\item[121] \textit{Kirche und Wirklichkeit: Ein katholisches Zeitbuch}, ed. Ernst Michel (Jena, 1923).
\end{footnotes}
adored and praised means of idealism.”

By supporting voices such as Mirgeler, as well as the views originating from the RMV, Kracauer was attempting to intervene within Catholic circles in order to support the stance taken by his kindred spirits in the Catholic camp.

By 1929, it was abundantly clear that the church would no longer tolerate the views of Michel and those who sympathized with him, but Kracauer’s disenchantment with Catholicism was clear long before. After 1923, Kracauer followed the subsequent conferences of Catholic academics with some alarm, attending two of these conferences in a professional capacity. In August, 1925, he published a polemical article on the meeting held in Innsbruck. Compared with what had transpired two years earlier in Ulm, Kracauer found the general tendency of the conference was to avoid discussion of social and cultural realities and to insist on the precedence of religious dogma. He explained this in part as a consequence of the time elapsed since the inflation years, the memory of which had cast a shadow over the Catholic academics who gathered at Ulm. In those conditions, one could not ignore social questions; but after a couple years of relative stability, the same individuals, with some exceptions, were now content to address such issues purely from a doctrinal point of view. Hence, according to Kracauer, the conference in Innsbruck did not resonate very far outside of Catholic circles as had the conference at Ulm. Indicative of this was the accompanying display of Catholic art. Aside from a few pieces of interest, Kracauer thought that most of the work was only striking on account of its consistent mediocrity. The point of view propagated at the conference seemed unable to recognize that “a coffeehouse scene by Van Gogh could have more religious meaning than a badly painted image of a holy subject.” Here he anticipated his rejection of explicitly “religious art” that appeared in his review of the letters between Cocteau and Maritain. This was also a position he shared with Thormann. In an essay protesting the conflation of religiosity and artistic expression Thormann quoted the admonitions of the romantic poet Joseph von Eichendorff: “We need no dogma on the stage, no moral theology, not even in an allegorical covering; we desire nothing other than a Christian atmosphere that we breath unconsciously and that lets the higher hidden meaning of earthly things themselves shine through in their purity.”

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123 Mirgeler, p. 183.
125 Ibid.
displayed at the Innsbruck conference had ignored the “things themselves” and tried to hide the fact with a veneer of religious piety. To his mind, this art unfortunately served as a barometer for the general mood of the Innsbruck conference. The only voices that reckoned with social and political realities were liberal figures such as Goetz Briefs, or surprisingly enough, the former Austrian chancellor, Ignaz Seipel, who Kracauer described as the only speaker to “take true steps into the realm of the practical and the profane.”

Thus, as a rule Kracauer was receptive to Catholic intellectual currents that embraced the profane world. This meant that they did not look upon the world as irredeemably hostile to religion, and that they did not insist upon the absolute need to displace secular existence through the “assertion of a clerical universal-culture.” In this respect, Kracauer appears to have foreclosed the potential of traditional religious forms to accommodate modernity; or at the very least, he argues that they must incorporate a reference point outside of themselves and in the profane world. To be sure, this is a secular point of view, one that sees adjustment to secular modernity as the only way to unite church and reality. Part of the problem is that Kracauer does not really address the question of what makes religion religious. For himself the answer rested on a conception of the real as a dialectical process, a perpetual encounter between a drifting subjectivity and the shifting phenomenal world; it also derived from his acceptance of negativity, a willingness to hold out in an improvised position that did not recognize an absolute truth. Yet, why should others accept this position? His approach was to elaborate a critical model that would attempt to extract some form of truth from the material and temporal bases of existence. As for religion, he seems to have felt that the churches could still be cajoled into a deeper engagement with modern life, and that this step toward secularization was essential. Afterwards, what remained of the churches would, as he said to Bloch, be left to their own devices.

Yet, in spite of this dire prognosis for the churches, Kracauer was ready to ascribe to them a measure of validity when compared with the so-called “vagabond religions.” Indeed, Kracauer may have argued that the churches were hamstrung by their misunderstanding of secular culture, but this did not mean that he privileged secularism in an uncritical fashion. Indeed, his hostility

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128 Ibid.
towards the new religions was at its most severe in those cases where he believed a presumptuous secularism had united with a kind of religious neo-paganism. Such movements seemed to blur the lines of sacred and profane, often seeking a new kingdom in the here and now. According to Nipperdey, such movements had grown in strength during the last decades before the war of 1914, and they continued to attract adherents through the post-war years. Indeed, though Nipperdey’s study was concerned mostly with the late imperial period, many of the movements and figures he discussed remained active during the Weimar era. Nipperdey suggests that these movements were a response to the loss of stability brought by modernization. Social and political transformations weakened the older patterns of belief, but at the same time, these disruptions provoked an increased desire for spiritual fulfillment. Often these movements brought together an “emigration from the church and a general interest in religiosity”; thus, rather than a retreat from religion they represented a gap between popular religious practice and traditional religious institutions. Nipperdey also pointed out that these movements were not ill-disposed to modern society as a rule; rather they should be understood as a rejoinder to modern scepticism. They sought to reinvigorate a fallen world that had been destroyed by abstract thought, encrusted by dogma and relativism.

For Kracauer the model of a revived or new religion was in itself deeply problematic. In an article written for Die Rheinlande in 1922, he drew attention to the recent resurgence in Catholicism that had attracted many converts from the Protestant fold. Yet, he cautioned that it was wrong to conclude from this that a revived Catholic church could aspire to the same levels of influence it possessed in the past: “every historical probability speaks against such an outcome.” On the other hand, he argued that it was still “presumptuous and not a little romantic to dream of a new church in our current situation … such may come or it may not, but one cannot make it happen; indeed, one must not even want to make it happen.” The numerous spiritual seekers that Kracauer saw as rampant symptoms of post-war malaise, readily created new homes for their religious longings, or they saw the old abodes with new eyes. “No region is too far afield,” he complained in a later article on cultural pessimism, “we play catch ball with

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129 Nipperdey, Religion im Umbruch, pp. 143-153.
130 Nipperdey, p. 149.
131 Nipperdey, pp. 151-152.
132 Braiterman, Shape of Revelation, pp. 252-254.
India, China, Japan, and dispose of continents and cultures … we measure the centuries with the speed of light. World history, always only world history, sounds the solution.” Against this rush into religious flânerie, Kracauer asserted his gesture of radical waiting; to counter the revival one had to withdraw into a life of “much scepticism … restful waiting (better too long than too short) … the veneration of the unspeakable.” So he wrote, in a long polemical letter to Löwenthal which he concluded with an ironic allusion to Luther – “Here stand I.”

Kracauer argued that the struggle between religious sobriety and religious excess took place at that point where there was no authority to distinguish the “legitimate from the illegitimate.” This was where the critical model of The Detective Novel could best be deployed: an indirect form of address that countered the “direct” mode of positive religion. This was the approach that informed his polemical reading of the Catholic academic conference in Innsbruck. Herein he speaks of the “inverted sacrifice of the intellect” that must be undertaken from the side of religion. The religious individual of today, he argued, must:

ascend into the present conceptions of the profane that are so powerful among the masses, because another possible way to the transformation of social structures is not and is never to be hoped for. Perhaps, this indirect method that gives to the world what belongs to the world, matters more than the direct method which wants to grasp the positively religious alone; however, in any case, this direct method requires completion through the indirect.

The indirect method then was seen as a necessary step, but not a fundamentally irreligious one. Yet, how was this indirect and invisible form of religious expression to be distinguished from the “vagabond” religions of the present that, likewise, plunged into the profane world?

Kracauer sometimes distinguished this modern wandering religiosity more by its waywardness and the seeming haphazardness of its convictions, rather than by its contents. The growing

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135 Kracauer to Löwenthal, December 16, 1921, Leo Löwenthal Archiv/ A 481, Johannes Senckenberg Bibliothek, Frankfurt am Main.
136 Kracauer to Löwenthal, December 16 1921, Leo Löwenthal Archiv/ A 481, Johannes Senckenberg Bibliothek, Frankfurt am Main.
interest in religions from other parts of the world, Asia in particular, caused some misgivings for Kracauer, but not because he objected to these religions in and of themselves. Instead, it was a matter of what the alleged infatuation with different religious traditions demonstrated about contemporary culture. Thus, in a scene from *Ginster*, this fascination is portrayed as mere whim, undertaken without any real conviction. The daughter of one of Ginster’s employers, Berta, draws his attention to a book on the Buddha that she first states is in accord with her own views, and then one moment later dismisses the knowledge to be had in such books. Since the religious flâneur has no necessary connection to the beliefs that he or she professes, spiritual wisdom is as easy to put down as to pick up. In this case, it is much more the European attitude towards other religions that is at issue, rather than the religions themselves. Thus, Kracauer found in Leopold Ziegler’s work, *The Eternal Buddha*, the lingering traces of Protestantism and European philosophy; Ziegler’s Buddha, he claimed, was one that had read Kant and Nietzsche. Similarly, a review of a work by Thomas Zenker on Chinese philosophy claimed that European thinkers often imposed their philosophical or religious preconceptions on other religious forms. This did not mean, however, that Kracauer believed that the current interest in the religions of China, India or elsewhere was a dead-end. It was not a matter of making Europe a fortress for the secular inheritors of the Judaeo-Christian tradition (a view that he pointedly challenged in his review of Zenker), but rather a way of questioning how such traditions were appropriated. Wherever he thought that the interest in other religions veered towards disengagement with the real he remained critical.

Kracauer was also unremittingly hostile to every religious or spiritualist movement that blurred the distinctions between *Wissenschaft* and faith, between culture and religion. The extent of his numerous interventions in this area forbids a comprehensive discussion, so the argument will confine itself to a few instances. In Kracauer’s campaigns against the “vagabond religions” some labelled him a dogmatist, and certainly his constant attacks on figures such as Rudolf Steiner and Count Keyserling do resemble an effort to assert dominance over the fringe movements that

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138 Kracauer, *Ginster. Werke* 7, p. 69. In light of Kracauer’s notoriously gendered conceptualization of the cinema audience in “The Little Shop-Girls go to the Movies,” one might suspect a gendered representation of the casual and unconsidered encounter with Eastern philosophy. Overall, this does not seem to be the case; most of his discussions of the East do not have this gendered aspect that emerges more clearly in *Ginster*.
139 Leopold Ziegler, *Der ewige Buddha* (Darmstadt, 1923); and, Kracauer, “Europasien,” *FZ*, June 23, 1922 (M).
challenged traditional religion. Thus, he attacks one of Steiner’s followers, Friedrich Rittelmeyer, by pointing out that he was once an admirer of the Protestant theologian Johannes Müller. He also accused Rittelmeyer of obscuring his connections to Steiner in order to entice listeners who might otherwise have dismissed him if his actual beliefs were known.\textsuperscript{141} He also publicized a lecture given by Ernst Michel, attacking the allegedly pernicious influences of Steiner and his followers.\textsuperscript{142} Even his obituary of Steiner is tinged with malice. “How fast this spook will be forgotten,” he wrote to Adorno in 1925.\textsuperscript{143}

Thus, his pugnacious attitude towards the vagabond religions was bound to generate some hostile responses. This was the case with one of his regular targets, Count Hermann Keyserling. Keyserling was born into a family of Baltic aristocrats living in the Russian empire in 1880. He studied geology and philosophy, and during his youth he travelled widely. These journeys and the impressions they left him with constituted the material for his work of 1919, \textit{The Travel Diary of a Philosopher}.\textsuperscript{144} During the twenties, he established the so-called School of Wisdom, an experiment in education founded on supposedly universal and democratic principles. The school attracted some renowned speakers including Max Scheler, Leo Baeck, Carl Jung and Rabindranath Tagore. His public persona, as a representative of pan-global cultural aspirations, and of Franco-German rapprochement also attracted some sceptical ire. Joseph Roth satirized him and his readers in \textit{Right and Left} published in 1929. The admirers of Keyserling, Roth implied, were those who had disconnected the reality of life from their ideals. Thus, they talked peace, but worked for war; they preached humanity, but profited by its destruction. They were “the wealthy, the cultured and pan-European, industrialists who produced poison gas in their factories and read Keyserling at home.”\textsuperscript{145}

When Kracauer attacked the School of Wisdom in 1921, he provoked a discussion in the pages of the \textit{FZ} that included a sharp rebuttal from Otto Flake.\textsuperscript{146} Flake was an Alsatian writer, close to

\begin{footnotes}
\item[141] Kracauer, “Welt-Erlösung,” \textit{FZ}, May 9, 1923, Stadtblatt. See also, Nipperdey, pp. 145-146.
\item[143] Kracauer, “Zum Tode Rudolf Steiner’s,” \textit{FZ}, April 18, 1925, (M). Also, see Kracauer to Adorno, April 16, 1925, Briefwechsel, 1923-1966, p. 47.
\item[144] Hermann Graf Keyserling, \textit{Reisetagebuch eines Philosophen} (Darmstadt, 1919).
\item[145] Joseph Roth, \textit{Right and Left}, p. 223.
\item[146] Kracauer, “Von der Schule der Weisheit,” \textit{FZ}, October 6, 1921 (M); see also the contributions from Kracauer, Flake and Erich Mosse in “Stimmen zur ‘Schule der Weisheit’: Schlußwort,” \textit{FZ}, October 20, 1921 (M).
\end{footnotes}
the circles around René Schickele with whom he had collaborated on a journal devoted to Alsatian culture in 1902.\footnote{The journal was entitled Der Stürmer, but it had no connection to the journal of the same name later edited by Julius Streicher.} He was also a friend of Kurt Tucholsky and a contributor to Die Weltbühne, and thus was known as a writer of the left. Still, he was later one of the 88 signatories of the notorious statement in support of the Hitler's regime in October 1933. In the twenties, Flake had been a vocal supporter of Keyserling, though not an altogether uncritical one. His objections to Kracauer's polemic derived, in part, from the use of the word Sinn – a term that Keyserling and Flake invested with deeper meaning than Kracauer was willing to allow.\footnote{I have not translated Sinn in this discussion as the variability of its meaning was at the root of the disagreement between Keyserling, Flake, and Kracauer.} As already discussed, Kracauer had described the vocation of the critic as one who interrogated certain terms, but he did not furnish them with definitive meaning. Therefore, he found the intentions of Keyserling and his school to be problematic from the outset.\footnote{See discussion on p. 220 above.} According to his reckoning, Keyserling thought it was legitimate to speak of an eternal “sense” or “mind,” because culture had progressed to a point where it was possible to imagine its eventual perfection. This capacity allowed us to speak of an “eternal essence” or ewige Sinn to which cultural progress must remain loyal.\footnote{Kracauer, “Von der Schule der Weisheit,” FZ, October 6, 1921 (M).} However, Kracauer believed that this was essentially a false proposition, and that the notion of an “eternal essence” was without content, a fact that he argued was demonstrated by the educational agenda of the school. Keyserling had boasted of the fact that he had no educational program to speak of and that there were no underlying premises that guided him; students developed according to their own path towards this “eternal essence.” The avoidance of dogma appeared attractive; yet, Kracauer asked, without some content of sorts how were the students to come to a point where they could evaluate and interpret their experiences without falling prey to whatever dogmas or ideologies prevailed in society?

Flake responded by arguing that Kracauer had misunderstood what Keyserling meant by Sinn, and that he had done so on account of his own dogmatic rigidity. Sinn, Flake countered, was no empty term, but rather it was to be understood as a fundamental strata, an “indestructible ground” that was the condition of all appearances in the world. This concept, he claimed, was readily comprehensible to both the religious believer and the philosopher, and it was from this
premise that Keyserling sought to connect appearances to the eternal, and thus provide an "abstract anchoring" (abstrakte Fixierung) for human action.\textsuperscript{151} This was the "core of the religious," he stated, and there was no reason why one could not "salvage" it from religion as "a new religiosity ... a relation – desirous of meaning – of the creature to the fundament, or the eternal relation." Moreover, if Kracauer insisted that this terminology required more content, or that Sinn could only be delivered by the "contents of faith," than he was nothing more than a dogmatist to whom one might respond with Spinoza that "thought consists in having liberated God from moral attributes – here philosophy begins."\textsuperscript{152}

However, what was at issue in the dispute between Kracauer and Flake was not a question of religious dogma, but rather a clash between different modes of religious flânerie. Kracauer, of course, was not trying to privilege one confession over another or to place philosophy beneath religious doctrine; but he was pointing out that dogma presented a problem to education as pursued by Keyserling. As he noted, Keyserling often quoted from Christ and Buddha, but he gave no sense of how his students should respond to a statement such as: "he who is not with me is against me." Any concept of Sinn as an "indestructible" ground must then offer valid means for distinguishing and deciding between similar contents of faith, to say nothing of political judgments. Otherwise, his school would simply devolve into ideological eclecticism: Catholics would become Catholics, Buddhists would become Buddhists, and Bolsheviks would become Bolsheviks. Recognizing this problem did not mean that Kracauer thought a fundamental grounding could only be derived from a religious creed, but rather that it could not serve the unifying cultural purposes that Keyserling and Flake intended for it. Moreover, he added that he did not deny the existence of some kind of essential base identified by the word Sinn; but he argued that it must reckon with the boundaries of knowledge. From this point of view, he argued that it could only be partially known by way of its manifestations in profane reality:

To be sure, Sinn is not the content itself, it is of the beyond, it is behind content and appearance. However, our human constraints are precisely such that we are unable to push away "Name and form" and proceed

\textsuperscript{151} Otto Flake, "Stimmen zu 'Schule der Weisheit': Schlußwort," \textit{FZ}, October 20, 1921 (M). This article contained, in addition to the letter from Flake, a contribution from Erich Mosse and a reply from Kracauer.

\textsuperscript{152} Flake, "Stimmen zu 'Schule der Weisheit': Schlußwort," \textit{FZ}, October 20, 1921 (M)."" Flake was referring to Spinoza in this instance.
Keyserling, so Kracauer thought, had stepped into regions about which nothing could be spoken, and in order to do so, he had resorted to an abstraction that betrayed his idealist premises. Rather than opening onto a “new land” of religious insight, Keyserling, he argued, remained stuck in a morass of idealism and mysticism.

Though Kracauer was more moderate in the tone of his rebuttal to Flake, he was not yet done with him. Kracauer does appear to have been intrigued by the conflict of identity that emerged in Flake’s work, a condition that he attributed to his Alsatian origin. A subsequent book by Flake, *The Modern-Antique Idea of the World* provoked some sympathy from Kracauer; yet, overall he was puzzled by what he saw as Flake’s tentative mode of religious flânerie: “What does Flake want then? The position of a mystic without the flight from the world, the religious approach to life without God and religion?” He was confused by this attempt to find a “new religion” rising out of the ashes of modern Protestantism – a “new kind of paganism” that accepted the relativity of appearances in the world, but still tried to unite “what cannot be united.” Kracauer found that this new paganism falsely erased the distinctions between “the creature and the created, and thought [and] existence.” In general, culture and religion were forced into too close of a relation. By doing so, Kracauer implied that Flake had hindered the distinct claims of both culture and religion. This was one point on which Kracauer indeed was dogmatic: if religion and culture had legitimate claims then they must be recognized as distinct spheres and not collapsed into a neo-pagan fusion. The widening gap was evident to him because the confessions were “no longer able to hold within themselves the image of the world [as experienced by] German individuals.” Yet, this did not mean that culture had stepped into the breach; on the contrary, “our culture lacks the strong formal structures possessed by the confessions, and it appears

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questionable whether or not it is able to imagine such forms."156 If culture were to fulfill its legitimate potential, he argued, it must not pretend to the functions of religion.

This position emerged clearly in his dispute with the cultural philosophy of Rudolf Maria Holzapfel and his followers. Holzapfel, though more or less forgotten today, enjoyed some influence before and after the Great War.157 His magnum opus, Panideal was published in 1901 and brought out again in a revised edition by Eugen Diederichs in 1923. The second edition was accompanied by some fanfare, including a collection of essays written by his acolytes (also published by Diederich) and eventually a biography.158 Among his professed admirers were Arthur Schnitzler, Christian Sénéchal, Romain Rolland and Ernst Mach. Holzapfel had, in fact, studied for a short period under both Mach and Richard Avenarius. Later, Mach supported Holzapfel during periods of financial difficulty, and he even contributed an introduction to the second edition of Panideal. Beyond this small number of intellectuals, he appears to have exerted some influence among German youth, particularly those who were dissatisfied with the philosophy taught in German and European universities. One follower, the cultural philosopher, Hans Zbinden, later wrote that Holzapfel had been a “decisive experience” in his life. After encountering his work, he devoted “all his passions” to the promulgation of his world view.159 Another disciple, Otto Hausherr, enthused over his mentor in a lecture given at the invitation of the Deutschen Freistudentenschaft in Hamburg and Berlin. According to Hausherr, the discoveries of Holzapfel meant that the waiting was over: “the dreamed of fiction, full of longing – it is a consummated act. It is Rudolf Maria Holzapfel, the great investigator of the soul and the creator of the Panideal, who has given us the solution to those problems we have recognized as decisive for the formation of a new intellectual culture.”160

156 Kracauer, “Die Krisis der deutschen Kulturbewegung,” FZ, March 24, 1922 (M2). This article reported on a speech given by Gertrud Bäumer on the subject of school reform.
157 He is not entirely forgotten. A page on the World Wide Web is devoted to his work and a number of his books remain in print.
158 Hans Zbinden, ed., Ein Künder neuer Lebenswege: Einzelbilder zur Seelenforschung Rudolf Maria Holzapel (Jena, 1923); Wladimir Astrow, Das Leben Rudolf Maria Holzapel (Jena, 1928).
Undoubtedly, it was the alleged influence among younger students that provoked Kracauer to attack Holzapfel early in 1924. His work on the FZ university page meant that he was often occupied with issues pertaining to German youth. In the eyes of the editors, this was all the more urgent given the rise of a political extremism that had only abated slightly after the Munich putsch attempt of the previous autumn. Erich Troß, Kracauer’s colleague on the university page had written to Thormann, also in early 1924, speaking of the need to counteract the “siren-tones” of the Hitler movement, especially among younger voters. To counter these influences, the FZ editors were planning a special number of the university page to coincide with the election campaigns of that year. By such measures they sought to lead the young away from extremism and back to the path of “holy sobriety.”

Therefore, Kracauer’s polemic was an attempt to define the relationship of religion and culture in light of these political intentions. He wanted to instil a more sober sense of what it was possible to accomplish via cultural means. In the case of Holzapfel, he argued that an inordinate faith in culture had exceeded its possible bounds, for culture was always a “work of human labour,” and as such it was subject to the same contingencies that influenced all human existence. Therefore, instead of imagining that it was given to individuals, to actualize an ideal perfection of culture, arbitrarily and according to their own estimation, the individual must recognize that, on the contrary, “the imperfection of human conditions confirms that culture neither today nor tomorrow, nor even at some final point, signifies finality (Abschlußhaftes).” To demonstrate his position Kracauer gave a short theoretical sketch of the individual’s relation to culture. This he argued proceeded from recognition of one’s “exact place” (richtigen Orte) in a contingent situation; however, this is a position that has roots outside of oneself. One does not set one’s own foundation, so the individual must concede his or her “created existence” (Geschaffensein), and acknowledge the dependency that stems from this. This “negative” insight forbids the idea that an individual has the resources to “press the seal of Caesar upon the world.” Indeed, “to accept culture as the last word and the highest value is forbidden to individuals once and for all.” Such a position, Kracauer suggested, would be the equivalent of Munchhausen pulling himself up by his

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161 Erich Troß, letter to Thormann, April 3, 1924, Thormann Nachlaß, EB 97/145, Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, Deutsches Exilarchiv, 1933-1945, Frankfurt am Main. Kracauer and Troß seemed to have agreed on the need to bring a “holy sobriety” into German political culture.

own hair. However, culture does not become insignificant as a result, and Kracauer argued that within bounds, one could and should affirm it; nonetheless, one had to avoid the cultural optimists just as much as the pessimists.

Behind Kracauer’s refutation of Holzapfel there was a definite theological dimension. To Kracauer, the “possibility” of culture only exists if it “stands perpetually in question.” This meant that “the consciousness of human limits alone demonstrates to the individual the place that is appropriate to him.” Elsewhere he spoke of the “expropriation” of God, and he positioned his critique by alluding to the author’s alleged antipathy towards religion in general. His essay opens by drawing attention to Holzapfel’s travels during which the author came to the conclusion that the diverse forms of life were too complex to be accounted for by the dogmas of existing religion. As a result, religion was to be absorbed by the categories of cultural philosophy, a conclusion that Kracauer implied was blasphemous: “Yes, even Religion!” he exclaimed, “Because for Holzapfel it is self-evident that it too would be annexed by the Cathedral of culture.”

Readers of Kracauer’s article responded to the religious dimension of his argument. The writer and cabaret artist, Klabund, sent a letter to the FZ fully in sympathy with Kracauer, bluntly calling Panideal a “blasphemous” work. The supporters of Holzapfel also drew attention to the issue of religion. Wladimir Astrow, a follower and later Holzapfel’s loyal biographer, wrote an extensive rebuttal that appeared shortly after the letter from Klabund. Astrow claimed that Kracauer misread Holzapfel’s intentions in respect to religion. Furthermore, he implied that Kracauer, in his use of concepts such as grace, betrayed a religious orthodoxy that would lead to a quietist position: “Neither Moses nor Christ desire of men and nations that they should leave the future to God alone … and lay their hands in their laps.” Astrow stressed that for Holzapfel religion was not a subject of attack, but on the contrary, he sought the “spiritualization of religious feeling.” Kracauer responded by claiming that this formulation was vague to the

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163 Ibid., p. 259.
164 Ibid., p. 251.
165 Ibid., p. 256.
166 Klabund, “Zu Holzapfels Panideal,” FZ, February 20, 1924 (A).
point of emptiness, and moreover, did not escape his primary objection that religion was reduced to a function of culture – perhaps, the highest function of culture, but it remained something derivative nonetheless. That Holzapfel proposed a so-called “Academy of the Exceptional” to instruct and educate the cultural geniuses who would formulate the coming religion only aggravated the matter for Kracauer who clearly recognized in this proposal a project akin to that of Keyserling.169

It would have to be conceded that Astrow was correct in his assumption that Kracauer was asserting the authority of traditional religious concepts in this respect; yet, he did so in a fashion that was not intended to buttress the authority of traditional religious institutions. He did plainly state that to interpret theological concepts one had to move from “above to below,” a procedure that he equated with an orientation towards “last things.” To demonstrate his point, he referred (somewhat oddly) to the definition of conscience offered by the 19th theologian, Franz von Baader: “a knowing certainty of the existing knowledge of God (Gewiß-wissen des Erkanntseyn von Gott).” This is a puzzling reference in this context, and it appears that Kracauer wanted to suggest that a conviction of faith can stand on its own as such, that is, within certain bounds that do not aspire to empirical certainty. Holzapfel, in contrast, submerged religious convictions into a science of culture. To Kracauer, von Baader trumped Holzapfel as the former accentuated the antinomies of existence that the latter tried to resolve through a misplaced faith in cultural perfectibility. In Kierkegaardian terms, the claims of the contingent and the absolute both had to remain in force. The individual must persist in his “negative knowing” and in the “perpetual tragedy of his position.” If the individual was:

to step out of the merely tragic realm into the associations of confessional life as a Jew or Christian, than he admittedly may still act in the world, but he does not enter and work through it; he may be certain of redemption, however, he will never build towards his own redemption.170

The interpretive validity that religion retained was thus not to be found in the institutions themselves, or even in their dogma, but rather in the theological contents that they preserved –

the hidden meaning in words such as grace, redemption, and immortality. Here resided the authority that Astrow thought Kracauer had given to religion; but for Kracauer, this was an issue that had to be confronted in terms of individual interpretation not dogma.

Thus, there are two movements that emerge in Kracauer’s critique of Holzapfel. On the one hand, he insists upon the historical specificity of the individual; he or she must work within the confines of contingent reality – the so-called “worm’s point of view” that he spoke of in connection to Simmel. However, he also insisted that one had to interpret the material of the world in reference to concepts derived from “above to below.” Holzapfel, to his mind, failed on both counts; he shorted the claims of the material world, and he also betrayed God to culture. Yet, one might ask how Kracauer reconciled these two seemingly contradictory positions; or if he chose not to reconcile them, what justified his approach?

In this respect, Astrow was correct to draw attention to Kracauer’s deployment of the concept of grace. In his usage of the term, Kracauer seems to allot it a quasi-redemptive force, but he does not openly state this. In general, grace is not a common word in his vocabulary, but it does appear in a number of significant places. First, as the title of his early unpublished short story discussed above.171 In this instance, the act of grace manifests itself in the form of a redemptive sexual encounter with a prostitute. Their chance meeting dissuades both of them from their suicidal drives; spiritual fulfillment and brute physicality are thus united under the rubric of grace. Further, in his programmatic essay, “Artist of this Age,” Kracauer again referred to grace in connection to the moment of artistic creativity when the artist successfully produces the forms that give to his or her materials the “grace of self-witness,” when the impenetrable nature of the world is given meaningful content.172 In the Holzapfel polemic, grace appears again, but in an unclear fashion. He chastised Holzapfel for moving the “idea of a perfect culture into the middle-point” of life, and thereby denying creaturely existence its “allotted share of grace.” The former is of a secondary order, he claims, for the perfect culture will always flee from those who attempt to realize it. As a function of grace, it appears only to those who do not desire it.173

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171 See pp. 48-49 above.
It is difficult to see what place the concept of grace is supposed to occupy in Kracauer’s critical venture, and given the scarcity of its use, it is tempting to consider it as simply idiosyncratic, a residue of his theological concerns that disappeared as he became more enmeshed in the critique of ideology. Yet, I would argue that the theological meaning of grace, as of redemption, had more significance for him though this altered in the course of the twenties as it became less embedded within a religious framework. Grace might be understood as that “flash” of insight that Walter Benjamin discussed in his theses of history, “a memory … an image of the past that is seized as it presents itself unmistakably to the historical subject in a moment of danger.”

Thus, the necessity of the present and the past overlapped in a reciprocating moment of historical recognition; the historian, in this instance, answers to both and evades a purely chronological sense of time. It is to this alternative structure of time that Kracauer appealed when, much later in his life, he wrote to the historian Henri-Irénée Marrou, that it indeed would be surprising if in the course of secularization “the humanly impenetrable tangle of the ‘time of nature’ and the ‘time of grace’ had dissolved into thin air without leaving a trace.”

Though he would not deal with these themes at any length until he began his final work on history, he clearly had begun to formulate such ideas much earlier. As he wrote to Löwenthal in early 1922, “there is today a deep lack of understanding for the uncanny nature of history.”

It is in Kracauer’s understanding of this “uncanny nature of history” that his idea of the secularization becomes perceptible. Grace becomes a moment where the “antinomies” of time are recognizable, a point of view that Kracauer often discussed in terms of extraterritoriality. The “extraterritorial” has clear affinities to the outsider, and also to the flâneur. Kracauer’s position as a German Jew, of course, also tended towards this self-conception of “extraterritoriality.” From this point of view, it is therefore significant that in the same letter

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174 Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” Kairos: Schriften zur Philosophie (Frankfurt am Main, 2007), p. 315. To be sure, Kracauer also expressed misgivings about concepts of redemption and reconciliation, especially in the context of Benjamin’s work. See Kracauer to Adorno, June 7, 1931, Briefwechsel, 1923-1966, p. 282. Nonetheless, they persisted in Kracauer’s work, re-emerging in the subtitle to his Theory of Film and, of course, in his final work, History.

175 Kracauer to Henri-Irénée Marrou, May 18, 1964, KN, DLA.

176 Kracauer to Löwenthal, March 1, 1922, In steter Freundschaft, p. 38. He mentions this essay in a letter to Susman as well (January 17, 1922, SN, DLA).

177 Martin Jay, “The Extraterritorial Life of Siegfried Kracauer,” Permanent Exiles, pp. 159-164 and 189-193. In his letter to Marrou of May 18, 1964 (KN, DLA), Kracauer referred to the “antinomy at the core of time.”
where Kracauer informed Löwenthal of his plans for an essay on history he also spoke of a renewed interest in Judaism, or at the very least, a recognition that he had not broken entirely with its legacy. The context of this letter is not entirely clear, but Kracauer was responding to his recent encounters with the work of Thomas Mann and Martin Buber. Mann he had heard lecture on the subject of Goethe and Tolstoi. Buber he had met at his home in Heppenheim and, unfortunately, there is no record of what was discussed. However, shortly before this meeting, Kracauer had written on a lecture given by Buber, in the course of which, Kracauer described Buber’s position in terms similar to his Holzapfel critique: culture was not a precondition of religion, but rather the other way around. In any case, Kracauer declared himself at the time to be more inclined towards Buber than towards Mann, thus demonstrating a scepticism towards “revolutionary culturalism” and a renewed interest in Jewish thought. His antipathy towards the presumptions of “cultural progress” may be connected with this post-war engagement with Jewish tradition. As he told Löwenthal, “evidently, one cannot just push Jewishness aside.”

Still, this was not an uncritical encounter. Kracauer’s upbringing in a partially secularized Jewish milieu appears to have been a dispiriting experience, marked by ambivalence towards the Jewish faith. Nonetheless, he laid claim to a deep sense of Jewish identity and history. In 1921, he wrote to Susman:

To be sure, I also feel the riddling nature of the history of the Jewish people in all its depth, but would you just once be able to explain to me what specifically Jewish spirit is – without fabrications – and what remains of the Jewish religion … when one removes from it the “law.”

Judaism thus presented itself to him more as a historical identity rather than a confessional one. Indeed, an occasional remark regarding Jewish texts betrays a definite antipathy. Of the Hebrew Bible, he stated that he found it both “too moralizing and too foreign”; he even referred to it as a “Jewish book for robber-barons.”

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178 See his article, “Die Frankfurter Goethe-Woche. Die akademische Feier,” FZ, March 1, 1922 (M).
180 Kracauer to Löwenthal, March 1, 1922, In steter Freundschaft, p. 39.
181 Kracauer to Susman, February 10, 1921, SN, DLA.
182 Kracauer to Susman, May 2, 1920, and April 2, 1920, SN, DLA.
Yet, this is only side of the story, as his remarks to Löwenthal suggest. Two years later, for instance, he reported to Susman his plans to read Talmud (at the time he was also reading Augustine) and that, having met again with Buber, he found they agreed on many subjects.\footnote{Kracauer to Susman, January 17, 1922, SN, DLA.} Even his relations to Franz Rosenzweig have more ambiguity than the later dispute over Rosenzweig and Buber’s translation of the Bible would suggest. To be sure, he was unreceptive towards The Star of Redemption, though this was just as much on account of its allegedly hidden idealism as its religiosity. To his mind, the book was a work of “supra-idealism,” a new species of thought that wanted to create a science of God.\footnote{Kracauer to Susman, February 10, 1921, SN, DLA; and Kracauer to Löwenthal, December 16, 1921, LLA/A 481, Leo Löwenthal Archive, Johannes Senckenberg Bibliothek, Frankfurt am Main.} “I feel uneasy with this type of pathos, saturated with Talmudic understanding,” he explained, “because I fear that the whole thing runs into a philosophically allegorical interpretation such as that practiced by Philo.”\footnote{Kracauer to Susman, February 10, 1921, SN, DLA.} Further discussion of the validity (or lack thereof) of Kracauer’s criticism would be out of place here, but suffice to say that he clearly felt the book could not become a springboard to religious revival. Hence, he was out of step with one of the most significant movements in contemporary German Judaism.

Kracauer’s hostility towards the Star of Redemption did not, however, preclude a wider exchange of ideas between himself and Rosenzweig. A small number of letters suggest that they debated a number of themes relevant to Kracauer’s conception of religion and history. Thus, even if Kracauer was unable to accept the tenets of religious faith, or even enter into a sustained dialogue with contemporary Jewish thought, it does not follow that the encounter, or the dispute, with Judaism left no important traces on his work.

The two men had clashed near the end of 1921 over Kracauer’s essay on Max Scheler. The essay implied a repudiation of the religious revival in general by belittling those who had made their homes in the safe havens of a superficial religiosity. Thus, they escaped the stoic rigor of a life spent waiting in suspense and doubt.\footnote{Kracauer, “Catholicism and Relativism,” Mass Ornament, pp. 203-211.} Rosenzweig was alarmed by the tone of these remarks and he alluded to them specifically in his rebuttal to Kracauer. More significantly, he argued that
Kracauer had not fully appreciated the double meaning that resided in the word “to wait” and as a result, his criticism did not hit its mark. “There was,” he stated, “also in waiting ... a living value in which one makes out the beautiful double meaning of the word (not simply to wait upon one thing or another, but on the contrary, to wait as an appointed watchman), not simply that waiting with constrained hands – hands constrained behind one’s back.”¹⁸⁷ We do not know how Kracauer responded, or if he did respond; but certainly the subsequent essay “Those Who Wait” declared his intentions to persist in his own concept of waiting as a space that remained outside of both radical scepticism and positive religiosity. Moreover, in contrast to Rosenzweig, he did not see this as identical with passivity or quietism.

However, in spite of this inauspicious beginning, a measure of rapport did develop between the two men. In 1922, Rosenzweig asked Kracauer to give a number of lectures on contemporary religious trends at the Free Jewish School and Kracauer attached himself to the circle of intellectuals around Nobel. The following year, Rosenzweig responded appreciatively to Kracauer’s article, “Creative Dialogue” and a brief correspondence between them followed.¹⁸⁸ Rosenzweig did, of course, have other motives in establishing a connection with Kracauer, for he hoped that by doing so he might draw some of the writers from the FZ to his school. He also hoped that he might be able to help Kracauer overcome some of his inhibitions, in particular, his speaking impediment.¹⁸⁹ Nonetheless, this was a relationship in which Rosenzweig clearly saw himself as the intellectual superior. Thus, upon reading Kracauer’s review of Buber’s I and Thou, he described Kracauer as a “wren,” even though conceded to his annoyance that he was not entirely in disagreement with him.¹⁹⁰ Given these circumstances, the relationship was likely to be fraught. Kracauer was over thirty years old when they met and while he recognized that Rosenzweig had a deeper knowledge of religion and philosophy, he probably found it difficult to accept the role of pupil.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷ Rosenzweig to Kracauer, December 12, 1921, KN, DLA.
¹⁸⁸ Rosenzweig to Kracauer, March 31, 1923, KN, DLA.
¹⁸⁹ Rosenzweig to Rudolf Hallo, December, 1922, Franz Rosenzweig: Der Mensch und sein Werk, 1.2, p. 861.
¹⁹⁰ Rosenzweig to Buber, July 16, 1923, Franz Rosenzweig: Der Mensch und sein Werk, 1.2, p. 912.
¹⁹¹ Kracauer to Löwenthal, December 4, 1921, In steter Freundschaft, pp. 33-34.
Two further letters from Rosenzweig to Kracauer have survived and these give some idea of the points of contention that existed between them. Without Kracauer’s part of the correspondence, one can only guess the content of his replies, but there are some clear indications of the problems that he addressed. Rosenzweig attempted to correct a number of errors of which he thought Kracauer was guilty. While he stated his agreement with Kracauer in so far as he too found the present times chaotic and spiritually vacant, he argued that it was meaningless to say of an age that it was either near to or far from God; the divine could cross any distance, and thus such judgments were of no significance. Moreover, though modern phenomena such as the growth of capitalism and nationalist sentiment prevented many individuals from finding a relationship to the religious sphere, this was not sufficient reason to make a distinction between a fallen present and an ideal past. In this respect, the medieval period was no haven of religious immediacy, for feudalism too had its own constraints; and had not the medieval church also presented some barriers to true faith? A further problem with the idea of an age removed from God was that it was, according to Rosenzweig, derived from a cosmological vision that did not fully account for the fact that God did not enter into a world that was foreign to him, but rather into one that he had created. In the new theology that he identified with Karl Barth, the world appeared as a place that God seemed to have forgotten; while in his own conception the autonomy of the world preserves the divine relationship, as an actualization and confirmation of the world as his creation. As we have seen, Rosenzweig believed, at times, that Kracauer had been unduly influenced by the new dialectical theology, so these barbs directed towards reformed Protestantism were probably intended to steer him away from these murky waters. In so far as this also meant a repudiation of the “blithe cultural theology of the last decades,” this message may have had some impact on Kracauer; for as we have seen, he was sceptical of any fusion of culture and religion. Finally, according to Rosenzweig, Judaism when properly understood was a “metahistorical” religion; it stood “in a critical tension with culture and history.” Thus, Judaism could be viewed as an embodiment of the “extraterritorial” relation to culture and history.

192 Rosenzweig to Kracauer, May 25, 1923, and June 6, 1923, KN, DLA.
193 Rosenzweig to Kracauer, May 25, 1923, KN, DLA.
194 Paul Mendes-Flohr, German Jews: A Dual Identity, pp. 82-83.
To be sure, the critical distance to culture that was a dimension of Rosenzweig’s conception of Judaism may have evoked some sympathy from Kracauer. His adoption of the “extraterritorial” point of view has some affinities to this, but as is clear from these letters, there were also a number of differences that would have influenced how this extraterritoriality was understood. At root, the “extraterritorial” remained for Kracauer a theologically derived concept, but not, strictly speaking, a religious one except in a negative sense.

The main differences that existed between Kracauer and Rosenzweig emerged in a discussion of “prophetic speech” and its significance. In his first letter, Rosenzweig had addressed this problem by agreeing with Kracauer’s fears that its current usage was often inappropriate. This would only change, he argued, when it was recognized that prophecy was nothing “exceptional” (with the exception of the Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament). Prophecy, he elaborated, was not derived from the qualities of the individual, and thus it was not dependent on the rare occasion of genius; rather it was an intervention of God communicated and constituted through language. Hence, wherever there was language, prophecy was possible, and language, as he pointed out, was “not at all ‘exceptional,’” but rather “universal to all (All-allen-gemein).”

Given the tone of Rosenzweig’s following letter, Kracauer must have objected to this idea of prophetic speech with some vehemence. “I ought not to abandon you any longer to your fears,” Rosenzweig wrote, though he thought it should have been clear to Kracauer that he “did not mean such harsh things.” Kracauer appears to have believed that Rosenzweig had denied human agency. This Rosenzweig denied, stating that what he said of prophecy applied only to the specific case of prophetic speech. To be sure, the prophetic was solely the province of the divine; it was a matter that human agency could not influence, but as this was not the only way that God related to his creation it did not necessarily bear on other spheres. Moreover, to say that the human is always dependent on the divine does not say anything against human agency; rather it is what makes possible the “connection” existing between the transcendent realm of God and the contingent realm of the human.

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195 Rosenzweig to Kracauer, May 25, 1923, KN, DLA.
196 Rosenzweig to Kracauer, June 5, 1923, KN, DLA.
It is difficult to imagine Kracauer would have been satisfied by this answer as parts of these letters would have awakened Kracauer’s ingrained suspicion that logical and religious concepts were being problematically blended together. In the first letter, Rosenzweig had described the potential for a “becoming absolute” (Absolutwerden), a situation where an “age” or “nation” might become an absolute value. One could know the absolute, but one had to relinquish forms of knowledge that sought to prove or demonstrate; strictly speaking, it did not depend on evidence, and it was beyond the distinctions of rational and irrational. Its subject was the “not yet there.” “Therefore,” continued Rosenzweig, “logically spoken (in the sense of the new logic) it comes not to a question of evidence, but one of the probationary (Bewährung).” He concluded this part of the letter by noting that what he said was no matter of subjectivism, for it was possible to actualize “mathematical, rigorously adhered to, objective ideals.” After having read Kracauer’s “essay on dialogue,” an essay that he interpreted as a logical investigation, he believed that Kracauer could push further into this domain.

However, the appeal to a “new logic” and the possibility of a universal “ideals of objectivity” would probably have caused Kracauer some alarm. His reading of the Star of Redemption had led him to the conviction that Rosenzweig was still ensnared in idealist thinking, and these statements might have confirmed him in this belief. While he may have sympathized with the notion of the “not yet there” as a lingering but unknown utopian promise, he would almost certainly have rejected these references to a new form of logic that could offer a tentative account of this.

In the course of this discussion Rosenzweig had drawn attention to Kracauer’s recent criticism of the renowned historian of Christianity, Ernst Troeltsch. Here Kracauer had argued that Troeltsch had falsely tried to bridge the gap between a subjectively held faith in religious truth and a system of knowledge. Thus, Kracauer criticized Troeltsch for entertaining the idea of the Kierkegaardian leap of faith, but then trying to buttress this position by an appeal to the forms and rules of knowledge. In so doing, he thought Troeltsch had forfeited the value of any subjective insight. Rosenzweig had tried to persuade Kracauer that the “new logic” that he

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197 Rosenzweig to Kracauer, May 25, 1923, KN, DLA. Rosenzweig uses the expression Tum and Tümern by which he appears to have meant some form of national entity as in Judentum or Deutschum.
described as “no subjectivism,” would be able to find a way across this gap between the absolute and the particular. His response is not preserved, but it seems improbable that he would have found Rosenzweig’s position more convincing than that of Troeltsch.

However, if Kracauer rejected Rosenzweig’s idea of prophetic speech and the relationship between the divine and human that it presupposed, what did Kracauer want to salvage from the idea of prophecy? To be sure, he and Rosenzweig agreed on one count, that the excessive preaching style and self-proclaimed prophecy of someone such as Rabbi Emil Cohn was to be rejected. Rosenzweig had criticized Cohn on account of the rhetorical excess found in his book of 1923, Judaism: a Call for an Age. According to Rosenzweig, Cohn seemed to equate an exaggerated style with the language of prophecy, an accusation that Cohn appears to have rejected with some vehemence. Rosenzweig mentioned this dispute in his letter to Kracauer who later wrote a review that more or less followed the lines of Rosenzweig’s critique, dismissing the rhetorical style of the book while recognizing some of its theological value.  

Kracauer reviewed the film in the following year, but it is possible his earlier discussion of prophecy with Rosenzweig may have still informed the essay. The divide between prophetic speech and cultural (or filmic) expression re-emerges in the essay; the former served only a negative function that clarified the distance between a language that was fully commensurate with experience, and the failed intentions of cultural expression. Art could only orient itself towards the desired reconciliation of cultural form and existential need, but it could not bring this union about. In a sense then, the limitation of human agency argued in Rosenzweig’s letter was preserved here.

Thus, in spite of the better known conflicts between Kracauer and the leading figures of the Jewish revival in Frankfurt, there is reason to think that Kracauer’s debate with the revival was...

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201 This, of course, supports Miriam Hansen’s argument that Kracauer was influenced by the Jewish messianic tradition.
not unimportant to his later work. His subsequent dispute with Buber and Rosenzweig over the publication of their Bible translation has already received considerable attention from scholars, so I will not go over the details of this dispute here.\textsuperscript{202} It will suffice to mention that Kracauer’s most serious objections were that Buber and Rosenzweig had fallen into a linguistic archaism, a mode of expression that could not meet the spiritual needs of the present. More seriously, he suggested that it betrayed a \textit{völkisch} tendency in their thought.\textsuperscript{203} The merits and demerits of this critique have also been discussed at length, Martin Jay taking a more favourable position towards Kracauer, while the recent work of Peter Eli Gordon has pointed out that Kracauer’s position was a distinctly minority one.\textsuperscript{204}

Given Kracauer’s position on the Bible translation, it is improbable that he would have accepted Rosenzweig’s meta-historical construction of Judaism. However, this is not due solely to its alleged \textit{völkisch} tendencies, but also because it would have conflicted with his claims for a more indeterminate kind of “extraterritoriality.” The meta-historical, in some respects, resembles the extraterritorial in so far as they both suggest a point of view that is grounded in distance, but for Kracauer this perspective remained outside of positive religiosity or a concrete political agenda. The religious flâneur must refuse both a secular and a metaphysical home; hence, Zionism could not solve what Kracauer saw as the enigma of Jewish history, nor could religion offer a safe haven in the world.\textsuperscript{205} Thus, Rosenzweig’s argument that a “collective” (\textit{Tum}) could become absolute would have had little resonance for him in either a material or metaphysical sense.\textsuperscript{206} In contrast, he had an affinity for the Jewish wanderers, buffeted by events and the history of persecution, figures that exposed the deceptions behind the ideals and ideologies that surrounded them. These could be found in the writings of Joseph Roth or in lesser known works such as \textit{Fischbein lays down his Arms} by Matwej Roesmann, or \textit{A Little Prophet} by Edmond Fleg. The

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\textsuperscript{205} Kracauer, “Der Stand der zionistischen Bewegung,” \textit{FZ}, September 20, 1927 (M2).
\textsuperscript{206} Rosenzweig was not a strong supporter of Zionism; indeed, his views of it were mostly negative though there is some debate over his later position on the subject. See Paul W. Franks and Michael Morgan in Rosenzweig, \textit{Philosophical and Theological Writings}, p. 93, note 11.
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former was the story of a Jewish trader in Russia who is unable to adjust to the demands of the revolution and is eventually executed; the latter told the story of a young man negotiating the religious currents of Judaism and Christianity. In this book, a Jewish youth in Paris first is tempted to convert to Catholicism in order to marry the woman he loves; but a sympathetic priest, recognizing his lack of true faith, refuses to convert him. He then enters the Zionist movement, studies the work of the Jewish prophets, and comes closer to his ancestral religion; after these episodes he joins the Pathfinders before finally proclaiming his vocation as a “pathfinder of humanity.” Of this work Kracauer wrote: “in our German-American climate, such a youth, who is more for the messiah of peace than for the ocean-trip, would certainly go to ruin. He breathes the atmosphere of the hothouse, closed off from the outside, and has no contact with the profane – an overly sensitive youth, who will later find life unbearable.”

This sympathetic predilection for the stories of Jewish wanderers recalls Kracauer’s somewhat jarring evocation of the “wandering Jew” towards the end of his unfinished work on history. To Kracauer Judaism is predisposed to historical flânerie, a situation that he also experienced as he travelled in 1926 from the Zionist conference in Basel to the torchlight processions in Lourdes. The position of the flâneur accords with the one who waits, the one who reads and interprets and points to the incompletion of human intentions and desires. The flâneur does not possess what sits behind the glass, and he knows that he should never possess it, just as Kracauer never grasps for a religious creed. In theological terms, modernity is the place of “love at last sight,” a scarce perceived glimpse that cannot be recovered in the here and now. The flâneur does not find the absolute, but tries to decipher those points where the “time of nature” and the “time of grace” are still entangled. In this case, the problem with the flâneur is not one of restlessness; it is not the flâneur who endlessly looks that is the problem, but the one who claims to have found an end to looking. The flâneur who gives up wandering and comes to rest is akin to the society in The Detective Novel that tries to escape from the contradictions of existence; as a result they sink into the unreal, into ideology as Herrigel did when he embraced the German-Christian movement.

207 Kracauer, “Privatschicksale in Sowjetrußland,” FZ, May 31, 1931 (M) Literaturblatt; and Kracauer, “Ein pariser Junge,” FZ, August 14, 1927 (M2) Literaturblatt. Matjew Roesmann’s novel was translated from the Russian and was published by the Bruno Cassirer Verlag in 1931. L’enfant prophète by Edmond Fleg (1874-1963) appeared in France in 1926, and it was translated into German the following year.

For Kracauer, a secularized theology was a potential point of resistance, a means of trying to prevent the lapse into ideology and myth. To his mind, religious institutions had failed to confront this problem, and the new religions were more of a danger than a solution. Religion was slowly barring the door between itself and a true engagement with the real. By 1926, when he attended a further conference of Catholic academics this was evident in the general drift towards a restorative Catholicism. Thus, one of the speakers was a supporter of the Rembrandt-Deutschen, an extremist conservative group inspired by Julius Langbehn. The year before in 1925, he had heard a lecture on the conversion of the Jews.\textsuperscript{209} Thus, it was not only the provocations of modernity that compelled him to turn his attention to the critical interpretation of culture and history, but also a disenchantment with the nature of contemporary religion, a belief that it had betrayed its utopian impulses.

Chapter 7
Conclusion: Criticism in the Negative Church

Does film displace the old Gods, the cinema the gothic dome, the Moorish synagogues and the mosques of Allah? I think film is an idea, a primal element of the mind, as old as every God and, perhaps, even an old God in a new house. Film is ... a matter of the eyes and, I believe, it is as old as our eyes.¹

As for film, it was only a hobby for me, a means to make certain sociological and philosophical statements.²

What is modern, asked Max Rychner in the pages of the Neue Schweizer Rundschau (NSR) in 1930. Of the modernists, Rychner spoke with some suspicion, as if they were simply cultural provocateurs: “from where comes this modernist fear that the world might stand still if it is not constantly whipped and spurred onwards by clichés?”³ Was the modern then a creation of criticism? Or was it the product of a boom in historical consciousness accompanied by an anxiety before the vast expanses of empty time and the “infinite multiplicity” of the world?⁴ To be sure, the early Kracauer was among the many critics who tried to integrate these phenomena into a critique of modernity. Infinite multiplicity and empty time were drawn together in what Kracauer called the “negative church.” In a chapter of The Detective Novel, he used this phrase to describe the hotel lobby, but his statement was meant to have a much wider relevance. The hotel lobby was the place where ratio displayed its rule, a site where reason without purpose rendered itself aesthetically and demonstrated the utmost effects of its power. The depiction was stark, an exaggeration perhaps, but the power it portrayed was nonetheless real for Kracauer. If one were to find some means of orientation in the world then one had to learn how to interpret the negative church, in a situation where distortion and disfigurement were the rule.

The “negative church” is, however, different from a negated church. In other words, it required the counter-model of the church for its meaning, for the house of God had not vanished, but

² Kracauer to Wolfgang Weyrauch, June 4, 1962, in Belke and Renz, Siegfried Kracauer, pp. 118-119.
⁴ On this point Rychner quoted from the Swiss Werkbund member, Peter Meyer.
rather it had turned against itself, had become its own negative image (*Kehrbild*). It had been displaced, but it remained as a phantom presence. This reference to the church as a model was not a trope that Kracauer abandoned and, in fact, its origin comes much later. For in the original typescript of *The Detective Novel*, Kracauer discussed the hotel lobby only as a “reversed image” or “counter-image” (*Kehrbild, Gegenbild*); he did not speak directly of a “negative church.” Only later, when he revised parts of the work for publication in *The Mass Ornament* in 1963, did he add the phrase. Therefore, it would appear that with the passing of time, Kracauer was prepared to give more emphasis to the theological motives underpinning his earlier study.

In the negative church the functions of ritual refer to their opposites. Whereas the church of the past was where the community gathered for the purpose of representing and creating its link to the higher spheres, in the negative church of modernity individuals coagulated in spaces that had no purpose. Such locations were just transit points, places that existed only in order to channel a meaningless social traffic. The only purpose it served was the preservation of its own system. The images of the sacred were now images of the profane, and “those who waited” found solace in the cults of distraction. Kracauer was well aware of the attractions of this negative reality where kitsch took the place of redemption, and thus removed the melancholy sorrow from life. With this in mind, it is of interest that Kracauer enjoyed working in such places. Just as Ginster enjoyed spending time in railway stations, Kracauer later confessed that he had always worked best in such places, in cafes and hotel lobbies where he was saturated by the “inarticulate noise” that his criticism tried to decipher.⁵

By the middle of the 1920s, the “inarticulate noise” that interested him most was film, and thus it is surprising that he speaks so casually in regards to the importance that film had for his work as a whole. However much his status as a film theorist has been contested, his name is nonetheless firmly connected with the formation of film studies and the critique of mass culture.⁶ Yet, he was not in truth disavowing the fact that film had provided a central impetus to his work; rather he wanted to situate this interest in a more general framework of investigation, one that sought to

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⁵ Kracauer to David Riesman, June 30, 1958, KN, DLA.
decode the ephemera and fragments of culture, to ascertain something of the tenuous relationship between truth and appearances.\textsuperscript{7}

Thus, Kracauer may have expressed himself differently than the contemporary essayist Leo Hirsch, quoted above, but he would have agreed with his general argument that the problem of film aesthetics belongs in a wider and older philosophical frame of reference. Film was certainly modern, but for Kracauer it crystallized a set of problems that were not in every respect new; indeed, film was the historical guise by which certain problems became apparent.\textsuperscript{8} On account of the photographic medium, the surface order of things acquired an objectivity, or outward expression, that provoked further investigation into the relationship between a chaos of appearances, modes of representing them, and the elusive contents of truth. The crisis of reason, of science, of the modern subject, of history – such labels identified the seemingly inescapable intellectual drive to put all certainties to question.\textsuperscript{9} After the disruptions of war and revolution, as Kracauer struggled to find a foundation for his critical ambitions, the fear of relativism had been one of his primary concerns as it vitiated every claim to truth, leaving in its wake a formless anarchy of opinions. There was indeed no absolute, merely perspectives, and as Paul Valéry wrote in his reckoning with the post-war intellectual malaise, “every point of view is false.”\textsuperscript{10} World history, relativism, the siren songs of religious revival, the arrogance of science – all these forms, customs and patterns of thought argued for some means of clarifying the relationship between culture, society and truth. To some, however, such ways of thinking represented the burdens of intellect rather than its means; they led the individual to an insoluble conundrum, trapped, to quote again from Valéry, between “order and disorder.”\textsuperscript{11} Between these two poles, Kracauer situated his hopes for criticism.

The objective of this study has been to show how Kracauer responded to this dilemma by conceptualizing a specific form of critical practice, and how this practice was informed by the

\textsuperscript{7} For an argument that Kracauer’s final work represents a significant break with his earlier thought in this regard, see Inka Mülder-Bach, “History as Autobiography: The Last Things before the Last” \textit{NGC} 54 (Autumn, 1991): pp. 139-157. Petro comes to a more moderate conclusion that there is a ‘shift of emphasis’ that does not exclude continuity in his general concerns; see Petro, “Kracauer’s Epistemological Shift,” pp. 137-138.

\textsuperscript{8} See on this topic, Dagmar Barnouw, \textit{Critical Realism}, pp. 53-103.

\textsuperscript{9} Rychner, “Was ist Modern?”


discourses of secularisation and religious revival. Kracauer’s criticism sought to define a space between a materialist scepticism, on the one hand, and religious or metaphysical determinations of truth on the other. It was framed around the potential for a tentative or “hesitant openness,” the operative space of a “free and liberated consciousness.” Historian Dagmar Barnouw has discussed this potential in relation to Kracauer’s concept of the “secular openness” of history, its “incompleteness” (Nicht-Vollendung). To be sure, Kracauer directed his critiques against a resurgent religiosity, but nonetheless, such concepts do have their correspondences in contemporary religious discourse, and this correspondence should not be underestimated when reckoning with Kracauer’s work. As we have seen, Kracauer believed that the utopian longing for redeemed time was often conflated with historical teleology. This conflation was engendering a confusion that seemed to characterize modernity, producing a situation where, as Valéry wrote, the historian was beset with the same problems as the prophet. For Kracauer, the hopes that accrued around both the idea of redemption and of historical teleology could not be fulfilled. Conclusive and meaningful statements about either were forbidden, and they were both characterized by a “fundamental ambivalence” of interpretation. From this ambivalence, however, an idea of freedom arose and it is here, according to historian Andrew Benjamin that Kracauer’s belief in a “liberated consciousness” comes into effect. Wherever interpretation displays an ambiguity that derives not simply from the relative nature of scientific knowledge, but rather from recognition of the incompleteness of existence “under the sign of redemption,” it is at this point that the possibility of a momentary and distorted glimpse of the truth arises. It is the “here” with which Kracauer ended his Kafka essay, a point where, in Kafka’s words, one may see a star “brighter than” and “adjacent” to the sun – a place where Kracauer tells us we must remain waiting with “unconfirmed longings.”

16 Kracauer, “Franz Kafka” Mass Ornament, p. 278. It was this final sentence that deeply impressed Dolf Sternberger when he read this essay; see Sternberger to Kracauer, September 11, 1931, KN/DLA.
In this respect, Inka Mülder notes the recurring motifs of escape and recapture that appeared in his work of the 1920s. The individual oscillated between moments of free interpretation and a stasis of meaning imposed by the rational ordering of the world.\(^\text{17}\) In his Weimar writings, the “sinister edifice” of the latter almost always triumphed, and the desire to seize the elusive “truth contents” of religion was repeatedly foreclosed by a re-entrenched \textit{ratio}. Thus, the threshold of the absolute could be recognized, but never crossed. “As if,” so he wrote to Bloch, “the reality of truth lies at exactly that point past which we have just proceeded (and, to be sure, at the point just ahead of us as well).”\(^\text{18}\) However, in Kracauer’s final work, there were glimmers of hope. Here Kracauer suggested that the so-called “interstices” of history offered a real chance of escape.\(^\text{19}\) The desire to position himself within these interstices led him to disavow all definitions and labels that assigned him a fixed place in history. The designations of “Weimar Intellectual” or even of “film critic” jeopardized the insights that could be gained from chronological anonymity. It was as if in order to search for the “gold of time” one had to avoid being exclusively defined by it.\(^\text{20}\)

“Chronological anonymity” then was a way of remaining in a paradox, of holding out the possibility of redemption while denying its potential for historical actualization. On this point, Kracauer was not always consistent; thus, he admonished Adorno for not giving substantial content to the idea of utopia, but he hardly attempted to do so in his own work.\(^\text{21}\) Though, as Gertrud Koch warns, one should not reduce Kracauer’s writings simply to a kind of “revelatory critique,” the tropes of redemption and utopia persist throughout his work, even if he tried to modify them to a more materialist and secular project.\(^\text{22}\) However, what is striking about Kracauer, especially when compared to his contemporaries, is that the adjustment to secular modernity did not result in an unqualified support for utopian political agendas; nor did he allow himself to speak of utopia and redemption in religious terms. His position is caught between

\(^{\text{18}}\) Kracauer to Ernst Bloch, June 29, 1926, \textit{Briefe} 1, pp. 280-281. Here I follow Gail Finney’s translation of this letter included in Mülder-Bach, “History as Autobiography,” p. 147.
\(^{\text{20}}\) The phrase comes from André Breton, \textit{Break of Day} (Lincoln, 1999), p. 3 (originally published as \textit{Points du jour} in 1934).
\(^{\text{22}}\) Koch warns against this kind of reading; see Koch, \textit{Siegfried Kracauer}, pp. 17-18.
contrary motives, and in this respect he does resemble the figure mocked by Schopenhauer who clings to concepts that he cannot rationally accept on account of an anxiety over death. I referred to this figure, drawn from Jean Paul’s Selina, in the opening chapter, but now some qualifications should be made; for it was not so much the matter of death that required redemption for Kracauer, but rather the problem of suffering. Adorno described Kracauer as a “man without a skin,” one for whom the problem of suffering was decisive: “what pressed for philosophical expression in him was an almost boundless capacity for suffering.” Modernity in much of his writing is typified by suffering and violence: the protagonists of his books fantasize about destruction even as they suffer from the violence of their age; the world of the detective novel is conceived of as one of atomized individuals, reduced to a collection of aimless drives. The consequences were not just a matter of literature; his critique of detective fiction was also consistent with his reading of the perplexing violence which he encountered in the course of the murder trials of Angerstein and Lieschen Neumann. Kracauer believed that the explanations put forward in the course of these trials left the most important issues entirely ignored; his criticism was a means of giving “philosophical expression” to the suffering that was effaced by such explanations. Such expression was not to be equated with the supposedly limited explanations of science, with aesthetic reconciliation, philosophical theodicy or religious palliatives. Moreover, suffering seemed to be an inescapable outcome, an accompaniment to the inevitable decay of social and cultural forms; for the revitalization of culture often demanded the sacrifice of the old for the sake of the new. A photograph in the FZ Stadtblatt strikingly illustrated this premise: over the heading, “Victims of the New Sobriety” a photograph appeared of two severed heads lying in a rubble heap of stone and masonry. Upon closer inspection it is clear they are the heads of two sculptures destroyed in the course of building renovations – the masonry ornaments of the past, relinquishing their place to an expanse of concrete and glass. Through their destruction, the traces of thought and expression that they preserved are banished into oblivion. The utopian hope that “nothing shall go lost,” expressed in his final

24 See Chapter 5, pp.191-193 above.
26 Frankfurter Zeitung, June 6, 1930, Stadtblatt.
27 For a discussion of Kracauer’s interpretation of architectural ornamentation, see Henrik Reeh, Ornaments of the Metropolis: Siegfried Kracauer and modern urban Culture (Cambridge, 2004).
posthumously published work, was meant to cover this suffering that inhered in cultural and social transformation just as much as the material suffering caused by violence.

To what extent then was Kracauer still fundamentally indebted to theological concepts and does this justify discussing his thought in terms of “political religion”? By way of an answer to this question, I want to briefly consider a controversial pair of essays he wrote in the last years of the Republic. Both of these essays, “What should Herr Hocke do?” and “The Minimal Demands upon Intellectuals” were provoked by the publication of a polemical work by Alfred Döblin in 1931.\(^\text{28}\) With the rise of Nazism as a threatening background, this debate concerned the possibilities open to intellectuals, what they could and should do when they felt themselves trapped between the extremes of right and left, but still felt drawn towards socialism. Kracauer’s essays illustrate how his critique of religion became less overt, and his work became more concerned with the exposure of ideology. In the fallout from his clash with Döblin, theological motives do reappear, but in a different guise that illuminates the stakes behind Kracauer’s method of criticism. In his writing from the later twenties onwards, he connects himself increasingly to Marxist theory, while religious themes recede from view; yet, his idiosyncratic variant of revolutionary theory never becomes a political religion. Indeed, the remnants of theology make this impossible, and hence his work suggests some of the limitations of the concept. Finally, I shall consider these conclusions briefly in relation to a quixotic dimension in Weimar culture, an obsession with the critical reading of the modern landscape that led to the interpretation of windmills as giants, but also more problematically of giants as windmills.

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Appearing in 1931 at a time of deepening political and economic crisis, the publication of To Know and to Change! Open Letters to a Young Man by Alfred Döblin provoked heated discussions. On account of the acclaim and success of his novel, Berlin Alexanderplatz, published two years earlier, Döblin had become a literary celebrity. This was one of the reasons that a young student by the name of Gustav René Hocke wrote to him in the name of Germany’s

\(^{28}\) Alfred Döblin, Wissen und Verändern! Offene Briefe an einen jungen Menschen (Munich, 1931).
wayward youth. Aside from his literary fame, Döblin also had a reputation of personal integrity derived from the circumstances of his life. He worked as a physician, primarily serving the poorer denizens of Berlin from his office in Lichtenberg; he was also a member of the union of Socialist doctors and of the Gruppe 1925, a collection of left-liberal and socialist intellectuals that included Bertolt Brecht. As a radical both in his art and life, Döblin seemed to refute the distinction between thought and action.

Politics and confessional identity were a dilemma with which Döblin also struggled in the 1920s. He was the son of Jewish parents, but he appears to have had a weak connection to Judaism as a confession. Later, he married a Protestant, and thus furthered his distance from the faith of his parents. Nonetheless, the shock caused by outbreaks of anti-Semitism in the 1920s spurred his engagement with Zionist politics. He refused, however, to visit Palestine, arguing at first that the natural home of European Jews was in Poland, where he visited in 1924 in search of an authentic Jewish identity. Despite these involvements, he still remained aloof from Jewish belief; yet, as one commentator has argued, there is an unmistakable “religious undercurrent” in his work from an early age onwards. Sometimes he exhibited an aggressive atheism, but he was still reluctant to accept the purely materialistic attitudes of Marxism. The spiritual and intellectual potential of humanity, he wrote, was “explosive material... we are able to have positively messianic hopes.”

By 1935, he was immersed in the religious writings of authors such as Kierkegaard and the 14th-century Dominican mystic, Johannes Tauler. Five years later, while in exile in Paris, he shocked many of his Jewish and socialist friends by converting to Catholicism; twenty seven years before, he had defended the German army’s destruction of the cathedral at Reims. Thus, Döblin was, in some respects, representative of the collision between secularism and religious revival that interested Kracauer. He embodied the religious flânerie that emerged as one of the typical forms of postwar religiosity.

29 A number of useful sources on the origins and reception of Wissen und Verändern! can be found in Alfred Döblin, 1878-1978, ed. Jochen Meyer (Marbach am Neckar, 1978), pp. 296-314.
34 Koepke, “Döblin’s Political Writings,” p. 184.
Though Döblin did discuss religion at points in *To Know and to Change* it was not the impetus for the book. Instead, it was the question of political action and how an individual was to find a direction in the fraught political atmosphere of 1931 Germany. The book consisted of a number of letters in which Döblin offered advice to a hypothetical young intellectual who wanted to contribute to the creation of a new political order, but who found the current political climate too foreboding. The letters were addressed then to a broad intellectual community of German youth, though the hypothetical individual was, in fact, Hocke whose letter to Döblin was also reprinted at the beginning of the volume. Hocke had been perplexed by a lecture that Döblin had given the year before in Bonn. At the time, Döblin had spoken on socialism, but in a fashion that had left Hocke confused as to what political direction he should pursue. In response, Hocke addressed an open letter to him in the pages of *Das Tagebuch*, asking for both clarification and guidance:

> Because for us ... nothing can be more binding than the word of leader who has helped us to shape the spiritual face of the age, we turn to you out of inner need ... because you are just, we have trust in you, because you abhor dogmas, we may readily believe in you.\(^5\)

Clearly, Hocke wanted his appeal to be understood as a collective yearning for moral leadership, not just an individual’s cry of angst. To be sure this was a controversial step. While Döblin did, in fact, receive a number of such letters, not everyone welcomed Hocke’s intervention.\(^6\) In his memoirs, he recollected that:

> Overnight, I had become a kind of celebrity. A few friends embraced me, others walked wide around me. A couple of loafers no longer greeted me. Extreme right-wing students felt it an evil that I had addressed Döblin, a Jew, as a leader in the intellectual forum of the nation ... One person reproached me for romantic “Indecisionism” – an awkward word that soon became a slogan.\(^7\)

The range of reactions that Hocke provoked would find its correlate in the acrimonious and mostly dismissive reception of the book. If Hocke’s gesture had intended to elicit

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\(^5\) Hocke in *Das Tagebuch* 11, no. 27 (July 5, 1930), partially reprinted in Jochen Meyer, *Alfred Döblin*, pp. 297-298; the letter was reprinted in its entirety at the beginning of *Wissen und Verändern*, pp. 13-16.


practical instruction in politics, it had the opposite effect: that of exposing the deep angst
that many intellectuals felt when they confronted the growing politicization of everyday
life in Germany.

Indeed, the reception of To Know and to Change was probably more negative than that given to
Hocke’s original letter. Hocke had at least received gestures of sympathy, but Döblin felt bereft
of attentive readers and attacked from all corners. “O this madness, to want to “help” in this
land,” he lamented in the pages of Die neue Rundschau. Döblin was not exaggerating, as some
scholars of his work have remarked. Hocke also noted that the “echo in the press” was
significant, but hardly supportive:

My teacher Ernst Robert Curtius wrote ... that Döblin was an enemy of education
(bildungsfeindlich) even if otherwise of a good sort. The big bourgeois papers
took up his pedagogical action with mixed feelings. Every party responded sourly
because Döblin had warned of the increasing one-sidedness of humanity.

Hocke was undoubtedly correct in his assessment that given Döblin’s rejection of all party
allegiances, he was bound to provoke animosity from all sides. Yet, the issues that were raised
by the work and its reception went deeper as Hocke’s comments likewise suggest. When it
appeared, the book was, in fact, widely reviewed by both literary journals and the larger
newspapers; it also led to two roundtable discussions in Die Literarische Welt and Die neue
Rundschau. The impact of these discussions left some with ambivalent feelings. One of
Döblin’s few supporters, the music critic Viktor Zuckerkandl, expressed his dismay to Döblin
over the roundtable in Die neue Rundschau: “It says nothing, is without character, wretched ... It
is a demonstration of the rarity of intellectual freedom in Germany and, following from that, its

39 Hocke, Im Schatten des Leviathen, p. 71. See also, Wolf Köpke, “Alfred Döblins Überparteilichkeit: Zur
Publizistik in den letzten Jahren der Weimarer Republik,” in Weimars Ende: Prognosen und Diagnosen in der
deutschen Literatur und politischen Publizistik, 1930-1933, ed. Thomas Koebner (Frankfurt am Main, 1982),
pp. 318-329.
40 See the bibliography compiled by Louise Huguet, Bibliographie Alfred Döblins (Berlin and Weimar, 1972).
Wissen und Verändern received 38 reviews by her count; among the reviewers were Gertrud Bäumer, Rudolf
Arnheim, Walter Benjamin, Axel Eggebrecht and Béla Balázs (see pp. 327-330).
readiness to be provoked to unfruitful anger.”41 If Kracauer later referred to Döblin as a “nucleus of the manifold trends that obtained under the Weimar Republic,” it was probably episodes such as this that he had in mind.42 Kracauer was, in fact, among the less severe critics of To Know and to Change and he welcomed the public discussion he thought the book would inaugurate.

A comprehensive overview of Döblin’s intentions cannot be undertaken here, and a brief summary will have to suffice in order to give some context for the book’s reception and Kracauer’s response as well. Döblin’s advice for Hocke, and to disenchanted youth more generally, was to hold themselves aloof from party politics, but to align themselves “next to” the working classes.43 In keeping with his socialist leanings, Döblin argued that one could not position oneself with those who held political and economic power. Bourgeois politics, moreover, were reflected in bourgeois culture, and Döblin suggested that young intellectuals should distance themselves from the prescribed paths of cultural edification. The bourgeois ideals of education embodied the spirit of German servility, a trajectory in German thought and education that led back to Luther and was perpetuated by Goethe, Wagner, Nietzsche and George.44 Hence, the politics of the bourgeois parties were a dead end for Döblin. However, he was just as sceptical of the parties on the left, arguing that they had misinterpreted the works of Marx, and had merely turned “class struggle” into an institution that served party interests rather than humanity. One had to reach back to the promise of “liberation” preserved in a primordial “Ur-communism” that had long since been obscured by the extraneous theories of doctrinaire Marxists. “Reality,” he warned, “had no obligations to theory.”45 While the Soviet experiment intrigued him and provoked his sympathy, the turn to brutal “state capitalism,” he argued, was unmistakable and had little to do with true socialism.

This repudiation of theory, of course, did not mean that Döblin did not have one of his own. This had been formulated in his earlier essay, The I over Nature, and was later continued in a largely

42 Kracauer to Louise Huguet, December 28, 1958, KN, DLA.
43 Döblin, Wissen und Verändern, pp. 81-86.
44 Ibid., p. 71.
ignored work of 1933, *Our Existence*.\(^46\) In general, Döblin rejected the notions of structure and superstructure, arguing that these concepts led to a false understanding of the role of the spirit (*Geist*) and to ignorance in regards to actually existing reality.\(^47\) Doctrinaire Marxism had mistakenly privileged the economic and material existence of humanity at the expense of thought; in this sense, he argued, it was not even in accord with Marx himself.\(^48\) Instead, Döblin proposed what he called a “dialectic Naturism” wherein thought occupied a determining role alongside material nature; thought both shaped conditions and was shaped by them. Ultimately, he argued, that “the transformation of consciousness and of the will preceded the transformation of [our] situation and of being.”\(^49\) He attempted practical advice in this regard: one should work in a factory to gain knowledge of proletarian conditions; or one should regenerate the domain of private life in order to prepare the way for a new social consciousness and true socialism. This latter would involve the “dismantling of the public sphere” that, in any case, was too contaminated by the bureaucratic institutions of the capitalist state.\(^50\)

Thus, Döblin attempted to resolve a quandary that was perceived by many intellectuals: should they direct their critical energies towards the transformation of social conditions as a means of transforming consciousness, or vice versa? As we have seen, Kracauer’s position on this question fluctuated during the 1920s, and in his Picard review of 1929 he conceded some ground to a position very similar to that of Döblin. The direct route of transforming thought, feelings and perceptions was legitimate, Kracauer had argued, and he had framed this position in theological terms. At the time, his editor, Max Rychner, had found the article still too full of revolutionary phrases, and he gave scant attention to Kracauer’s theological positioning. Rychner was similarly dismissive of Döblin, and he heaped his scorn on what he saw as Döblin’s intellectual “vandalism.”\(^51\) Rychner was perhaps correct in his suspicion that intellect would play a subordinate role given the hostility to traditional education that was evident in the book. In


\(^{48}\) Döblin, *Wissen und Verändern*, p. 42. Also, see the comments in Wulf Koepke, “Döblin’s Political Writings,” pp. 189-190.


\(^{50}\) Ibid., p. 170.

\(^{51}\) Max Rychner, “Döblin warnt: Weg von den Gebildeten!” *NSR* 24, no. 5 (1931): pp 321-325. Though Rychner evinced a minimum of respect for Döblin as an individual, his tone was more than a little condescending: “Nietzsche once wrote that thoughts that come on pigeon’s feet will one day conquer the world; he did not yet so clearly perceive that thoughts that come with dogs’ noses will undertake the conquest of Germany” (p. 322).
contrast, Rychner remained more sympathetic to the revived humanism advocated by his friend, Ernst Robert Curtius, and he reacted harshly to what he saw as a narrow definition of the spirit implied by Döblin’s broadside against German cultural traditions.

Yet there was a common motive between Döblin, Rychner and Kracauer, in so far as they all wanted to defend intellect against any kind of rigidly materialist determinism. They thus took a position that gave considerable weight to the transformation of consciousness as a precondition to social and political change; it was a priority for any meaningful cultural political agenda. This is true of Döblin just as much as Rychner, even if their approaches differed considerably. Moreover, as was the case in Kracauer’s review of Picard, there is in To Know and to Change a religious and metaphysical undercurrent. While dialectical thought, Döblin argued, should in no way bind itself with the religions of the past, there were still “powerfully effective ingredients preserved” in the latter that should not be ignored.\(^52\) In his naturalist conception of reality, he described God as “devoured” and “absorbed” into the world. “It is childish of us to demand Religion and norms,” he remarked, for “we incorporate religiosity from head to toe!”\(^53\) The social and political tasks, for which the present generation was accountable, were indeed to be understood as religious ones, but ones framed within a secular world.\(^54\)

Kracauer’s initial discussion of To Know and to Change did not address the book’s recurring strain of religiosity, but rather he considered the polemic in light of the intellectual predicament from which the book derived. In general, he argued that Döblin had correctly reckoned with the problems that confronted a young intellectual generation who wanted to work for socialism, but found no clear path to do so.\(^55\) Döblin, so he stated, was justified in warning Hocke against the working class parties, for their attachments to abstract theory, their economic determinism, and their misconceived collectivism were all hindrances to effective social and political engagement. These insufficiencies left many who wanted to work towards socialism in an intellectual cul-de-sac, as was clearly demonstrated by Döblin. As a result, many either retreated into a purely inner position, or fell prey to the prevailing radicalism, often of an irrational character. In 1931, this, of

\(^{52}\) Döblin, Wissen und Verändern, p. 104 and pp. 136-137.
\(^{53}\) Ibid., pp. 138-139.
\(^{54}\) Ibid., p. 94.
\(^{55}\) Kracauer, “Was soll Herr Hocke tun?” FZ, April 17, 1931(M).
course, meant Nazism. To Kracauer, the position represented by Hocke was a “hole” or “gap” that accommodated every kind of social and political idea:

[his] letter is a sign of that fearful neutrality that has spread in Germany. Out of an impotence that penetrates and castrates nearly every manifestation of public life, this neutrality no longer seeks to somehow bring balance between contending forces, but instead simply tries to escape from confronting them dialectically.  

However, in terms of answering the question (Gretchenfrage) that Hocke had posed to Döblin, Kracauer was in some disagreement. Döblin, he noted, responded to Hocke as a “doctor and physiognomist” and by implication not as a social or political theorist. Thus, if Döblin had advised that one must stand next to the working classes, Kracauer complained that this position was un-dialectical. It did not reckon with how the encounter with proletarian reality would or would not alter the intellectual’s position. Indeed, it was not clear what would arise from this encounter and how it would generate the consciousness that anticipated socialism. If one concentrated one’s energies on reclaiming the private life of individuals and smaller groups for the purposes of socialism, how was this to then relate to a wider social and political reality whose influence could not be ignored? One could very well further the “dismantling of the public sphere” in their own lives, but this did not mean that the process of dismantlement would continue to spread itself “without interruption” in society more generally. He did not repudiate Döblin’s advice in its entirety, but he did note that in the current situation it could lead to an ideology where one “in the name of socialism did not concern oneself with socialism, that one involuntarily demands more romanticism than enlightenment, and does not so much activate self-reflection but awakens contemplation.”

How one should then come out of the cul-de-sac that Hocke found himself in was difficult to ascertain. Still, he concluded the review with an acknowledgement of what the book had accomplished and an invitation to further discussion.

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56 Kracauer, “Was soll Herr Hocke tun?” FZ, April 17, 1931(M). Kracauer also described Chaplin as a “hole” (Loch), a figure that represented the predicament of the individual after the destruction of the subject. See his review, “Chaplin” FZ, November 6, 1926; reprinted as “The Gold Rush” in, Kracauer, Der verbotene Blick, pp. 291-293.

57 Kracauer, “Was soll Herr Hocke tun?” FZ, April 17, 1931(M).

58 The roundtable in Die neue Rundschau may already have been foreseen when Kracauer wrote his review; the final line certainly made a direct appeal to continue the discussion in another venue, and he was at that time acquainted with the editor of the Neue Rundschau, Rudolf Kayser.
That Kracauer referred to Hocke’s quandary as the *Gretchenfrage* draws attention to some of the unstated assumptions regarding religion and secularization that informed his critique of Döblin. In his subsequent essay, “The Minimal Demands upon Intellectuals,” this dimension is further clarified. His essay was one of the most substantial contributions to the discussion of *To Know and to Change* that took place in *Die neue Rundschau* (a circumstance that certainly displeased Döblin who disagreed with much of its content). The primary thrust of his argument was to define and legitimate the role of the intellect and its critical tasks. As has been pointed out, the specter of National Socialism and the KPD was largely and surprisingly absent from this discussion; but it is nonetheless alluded to, and it is clear that the hostility towards intellectuals associated with Nazism influenced Kracauer’s desire to redefine the tasks of the intellectual.

Briefly stated, Kracauer argued that the “Herr Hockes” of the present had the responsibility to deploy their intellectual capacities, and, more specifically, to deploy them in what was their proper task: “the destruction of every mythical existence ... the dismantling of natural forces.” This involved the exposure of ideology and the readiness to “throw radically into doubt all preconceived positions.” In terms of method, one had to test all concepts and ideas against the “results of revolutionary theory ... and then in accordance with this reckoning, lay out what still remains of these concepts.” The so-called “revolutionary theory” was a Marxist inspired dialectics, but one which he intended to be more flexible than the doctrinaire variety that guided the working class parties. For he stated that the confrontation of theory and inherited ideas was by no means pre-determined in favour of the former; it was possible that “under some circumstances” the latter retained “a measure of reality” that then provoked a “correction” of theory. Socialism, however, still maintains its place in this conception as a final destination, even if its content is subject to potential modification.

59 Döblin and Kracauer did know each other during his time in Berlin, but there does not appear to have been much rapport between them. When Kracauer was approached by the Döblin scholar, Louise Huguet, he confessed that he did not “feel attracted by his personality, by his cast of mind. But I greatly appreciated his “Alexanderplatz” and, with reservations, his fecund, sprawling, almost vegetative imagination.” See his letter to Huguet, December 28, 1958, KN, DLA.

60 Kracauer, “Minimalforderung an die Intellektuellen,” *Die neue Rundschau* 42.1 (July 1931); reprinted in, Kracauer, *Der verbotene Blick*, p. 251. Also, see Koepeke, “Döblin’s Political Writings,” pp. 189-190.

61 Kracauer, “Minimalforderung an die Intellektuellen,” *Der verbotene Blick*, p. 249.
The confrontation of theory and the accumulated mass of opinions, ideas and concepts was the point where the question of religion reinserted itself into the debate. Kracauer prefaced his claims regarding the destructive role of the intellect with a short anecdote recounting a discussion he had had with a young man whose situation resembled Hocke in most respects. The youth was in his twenties, intellectually gifted, and inclined towards the goals of socialism. He understood these in the broad “primordial human” (urmenschlich) sense that Döblin had intended, but at the same time, he was unable to align himself with any of the working class parties. These he saw as just one part of the chaotic Weimar system. Moreover, Kracauer stated, that whenever their discussions drew close to that “sphere of religious reality and the rights of the existential individual who was aligned with it” the young man began to speak with a “passion that in no way stemmed from the intellect.” His conversation partner, so Kracauer suggested, was particularly wedded to what he called “uncontrolled contents,” and if he “naively” wanted to place such contents over and above revolutionary theory, he was then no different than “those people who wanted to take the slogan of a nationalist art as their motto.” Yet, what was meant by “uncontrolled contents” was more than just religion, and Kracauer’s agenda is not directed simply at the belief in a religious sphere. That he quickly subsumes religion and its existential claims under this label takes the direction of his attack away from religion itself and towards a more nebulous array of potentially irrational and anti-intellectual sentiments. What is more at issue then, is neither the religious sphere, nor its existential claims, but rather a particular attitude towards it. This will be discussed further below.

The debate initiated by Döblin, however, did not end here for Kracauer. His account of the allegedly uncritical position that some youth were taking towards certain “spiritual possessions” did not go unchallenged. The model for the young man described by Kracauer readily recognized himself, and he wrote to him to protest against the way in which Kracauer had represented their disagreement. The young man was a mostly forgotten writer named Egon Vietta. He was primarily a writer of plays and essays, though he also penned two short novels, The Angel of This Side and Corydon. He had trained as a lawyer, but had wide interests in contemporary literature and philosophy. Today, he is remembered less for his plays and fiction than for his essays.

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62 Ibid., p. 248.
63 Ibid., p. 250.
64 Egon Vietta was the pen name of Karl Egon Fritz (1903-1959).
including an important early article on the work of Kafka. He was also a vocal admirer of the writing of Hermann Broch (with whom he had a substantial correspondence), one of the earliest German interpreters of Sartre, and a supporter of Heidegger before and after the war. His book length study of Heidegger was an attempt to rehabilitate the philosopher after he had disgraced himself by his early support for the Third Reich. Later, he also was in contact with Carl Schmitt and, thus, more generally engaged with intellectual trends that emerged from the war deeply entangled by their relationship with Nazism.

These biographical details are of interest here, as his relationship to Kracauer appears to have turned on a disagreement that placed the legitimacy of the intellect on one side along with Marxist theory; and on the other, a growing attraction to the philosophy of Heidegger and his radical critique of the humanist tradition. The surviving correspondence between the two is small, covering the years 1930-1931. They probably met after Kracauer was transferred to the Berlin office of the FZ in 1930. Kracauer, the older man by fourteen years, appears to have played the role of mentor to Vietta who had just published his first novel in 1929 and a short pamphlet entitled The Collectivists in 1930. Vietta solicited Kracauer’s opinions on his work, and indeed, he even credits Kracauer for the stimulus behind the The Collectivists.

Nonetheless, their brief correspondence is characterized by numerous disagreements, though the letters do suggest a degree of intellectual intimacy that allowed for direct and open criticism of each other’s views. Kracauer appears to have tried to influence Vietta’s intellectual sympathies, encouraging him to consider the motives that resided in Marxist theory, and to discourage his growing fascination with Heidegger. Vietta’s interest in the latter, already apparent in The Collectivists, became more pronounced by 1931. However, alongside his enthusiasm for Heidegger, Vietta was also discovering numerous authors who Kracauer admired or had admired in the past: Kierkegaard, Scheler, Stendhal, Kafka and Ortega y Gasset. Vietta also was impressed by Kracauer’s work, in particular Ginster and The Salaried Masses; but he argued that

65 Egon Vietta, Die Seinsfrage bei Martin Heidegger (Stuttgart, 1950).
66 Egon Fritz to Kracauer, October 20, 1930, KN, DLA. In his published writings, Vietta appears to have avoided his original surname. In the DLA, however, his letters are sometimes filed under “Vietta” and sometimes under “Fritz.” In the Kracauer papers his letters are filed under “Fritz” so I have adhered to this practice.
67 Egon Fritz to Kracauer, July 5, 1931, KN, DLA. Also, see Vietta, Die Kollektivisten (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1930); and Vietta, “Martin Heidegger und die Situation der Jugend,” Die neue Rundschau 42, no. 2 (1931): pp. 501-511.
some of the premises behind these works were in contradiction to some of the positions adopted in his journalism. Near the end of 1930, shortly after publishing The Collectivists, he wrote to Kracauer to express his reservations. While he admired Ginster with his “body and soul,” he believed that his own work was developing in a way that was contrary to Kracauer. In particular, he objected to Kracauer’s position regarding collectivism and its relationship to “last things.” By this term, Vietta referred to his belief in a dimension of reality that was not reducible to the determinations of reason – a kind of pre-rational substratum to reality. On this point, he implied that Kracauer appeared to restrict the independence of this reality, and he had bound it too closely to ideology:

You still always think that the last things will be taken as a pretext to avoid concerning oneself with pressing necessities. I hold that both of these are fully separated and only by chance thrown into the same pot... why should it not be possible in the completion of one’s daily labour to hold open a view to the final, the eternal, or whatever one calls it...  

He was puzzled by this since he believed that Kracauer had, in fact, expressed a similar position in parts of his work (the last chapter of The Salaried Masses, for instance), but he felt that it was at odds with much of his journalism. In the latter, Vietta was suspicious of Kracauer’s interest in dialectical theory and his support for a vaguely defined socialism. Indeed, he felt that there was a noticeable divide between Kracauer’s artistic and journalistic work. Given these positions he found Kracauer’s intentions uncertain: if a space was to be “held open” for “last things” then he thought that one had to investigate it more explicitly than Kracauer had done. For his part, Vietta had pursued this subject in his pamphlet, The Collectivists. Here the terminology of “last things” was displaced by that of “other reality,” a formulation derived from his attempt to work through the ideas of Heidegger, whose Sein und Zeit had made a strong impression on him. As Vietta later told Döblin, Kracauer had utterly rejected this concept; but Vietta remained firm in his

68 Egon Fritz to Kracauer, November 31, 1930, KN, DLA.
69 Egon Fritz to Kracauer, October 20, 1930, KN, DLA.
convictions that the “worn out foundations” of socialism were incompatible with any meaningful conception of the spirit or reality (Geist, Wirklichkeit).\footnote{On Kracauer’s rejection of this concept, see Egon Vietta to Alfred Döblin, August 3, 1931, Döblin Nachlaß, DLA. Vietta appears to have written Döblin in order to justify his own response to Döblin’s work and to express his dismay that his conversations with Kracauer had been used as an entry point to criticize Wissen und Verändern. Also, see Egon Fritz to Kracauer, February 1, 1931, KN, DLA.}

Kracauer responded in a fashion that demonstrates his propensity to mix indirect and direct forms of communication. In a letter written to Vietta in January of 1931, he warned his friend not to be deceived by the apparent differences in his artistic and intellectual work; on the contrary, he claimed, they formed a coherence that was quite deliberate.\footnote{Kracauer to Egon Fritz, January 12, 1931, KN, DLA.} He did not elaborate on his intentions in any detail, but claimed the differences in his work were not a matter of “doing something different with one hand than one does with the other” – a common reproach against journalists. He also argued that Vietta had misunderstood his attitudes to socialism and collectivist thought. He had not argued that one must become a collectivist, but rather that one must reckon with the “factual motives” that lead towards collectivism. These must then be incorporated “dialectically” in one’s work.\footnote{Here Kracauer was apparently referring to a conversation between himself and Vietta that had taken place shortly before Vietta had left Berlin; see Fritz to Kracauer, November 31, 1930, KN, DLA.}

Vietta was probably not satisfied with Kracauer’s plain assertion that his cultural-political intentions were in accord with his artistic ones, for as will become clear below, he still believed that Kracauer had not reckoned fully with the potential clash between his adherence to dialectical theory and his desire to “hold open” a space for “unverifiable” contents. In this respect, Vietta was not alone, and as Ingrid Belke has pointed out, his attitude towards the collectivist thought emanating from the USSR caused some misgivings among his friends and readers alike, though for different reasons than Vietta.\footnote{Belke, “Siegfried Kracauer als Beobachter der jungen Sowjetunion,” pp. 17-38.} According to Bloch, many were confused by his seemingly contrary positions.\footnote{Bloch to Kracauer, April 29, 1931, and June 1, 1932, Briefe 1, pp. 353-355 and pp. 362-365.} On the one hand, he attacked the Soviet writer Sergei Tretjakow on account of his allegedly doctrinaire conception of proletarian literature, a conception that he claimed gave a distorted image of individualism; simultaneously, he also chastised Brecht’s Three Penny Trial (an account of litigations arising from the film version of the Three Penny Opera) for its
adherence to an “individualist position.” However, Kracauer was probably justified in claiming that he was not trying to play two hands at once. During this period he was in fact attempting to think through a reorientation of concepts such as “collectivism” in light of the transformed conditions of modernity. As he wrote to Hans Flesch, a Frankfurt radio programmer, the popular conception of “collectivism” was derived too heavily from notions originating from the Soviet experience and from contemporary innovations in the theatre (Brecht is probably meant here). “On the contrary,” Kracauer argued, “the collective represents no fundamental innovation.” There were earlier conceptions of the collective to be found even in the works of Goethe and Schiller. This was a minor but by no means insignificant example, he claimed, as these authors were often associated with concepts of individual genius that were held to be hostile to collectivist thought. The merits of this argument are not at issue here, but it does show that Kracauer wanted to construct an alternative configuration of the individual and the collective, one that would recognize the claims of both. The project, however, was never fulfilled, and at the time he wrote to Flesch he confessed that his thought on the matter was still only an outline. Its partial formulation may explain why Vietta and others found Kracauer’s attitude to collectivism confusing or untenable.

Such notions of the collective and the individual were not unrelated to Kracauer’s theological motives. A renewed idea of the collective that avoided the crudities of the Soviet model was needed, so he argued. Against this vulgar construction, he asserted the claims of what he called the “hollow spaces,” the gap held open for the “everywhere and nowhere Verifiable-Utopian.” As he wrote to Bloch, who was deeply upset by Kracauer’s essays on Tretjakow and Brecht, he was still committed to a “revolutionary Marxism” that would further this idea of utopia; but he nonetheless insisted that the visions of Brecht, and at least some of the views of Tretjakow, were hindrances to any truly utopian project. His loyalty was more to his own dialectical method, rather than to what he saw as the party line on questions of philosophy, religion or social theory. Indeed, Kracauer claimed that he was working with a “real dialectic” that did not simply mingle

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77 Kracauer to Hans Flesch, February 16, 1932, KN, DLA.
78 Kracauer to Ernst Bloch, June 4, 1932, Briefe 1, pp. 365-368, esp. pp 367-368.
79 Kracauer to Ernst Bloch, June 4, 1932, Briefe 1, pp. 367-368.
the transcendent realm with the material one in an unconsidered way. On the contrary, this was a
dialectic that arose out of a “labour of enlightenment” (Aufklärungsarbeit) achieved through the
“exposure of the self” (Selbstentäußerung); it was a process that truly opened the “hollow space”
in which utopian longings could still dwell. His language on this point is loaded with theological
implications. Hohlräumen has already emerged in his writing as the undefined place where the
“unspoken positive” might one day be pronounced, while Selbstentäußerung also has the
religious connotation of self-mortification. Such motives, however, were almost never stated
openly. Given that Kracauer preferred to leave such motives unstated, Vietta’s recognition of
these, suggests that he was actually one of Kracauer’s more sensitive readers.

Yet, Vietta and Kracauer found it increasingly difficult to come to any agreement on what
content should fill these vacant spaces. After the publication of his essay in Die neue Rundschau,
the differences between them sharpened considerably. Kracauer had implied that “uncontrolled
contents” or, what Vietta called the “other reality,” was bound to the religious sphere. Vietta
disputed this position and in a letter to Döblin, he claimed that he had not once mentioned
religion to Kracauer – that the choice of the word had been entirely his. Further, he explained:

I am, just as you are, for the most extreme here and now position, as wide-
reaching as it is in Heidegger’s investigations, where all religious haziness is
exposed as illusory. Uncontrolled contents need not be religious. To me it seems
that the historical role of the creative does consist of such uncontrolled contents,
but only a few religious communities have taken over the error that Kracauer
persists in, that everything is to be controlled: God himself.

Writing to Kracauer, Vietta used the term geistig to indicate these contents, and he stressed that
the geistig was in no way “identical with intellect, even less with religion or myth.” He also
tried to reverse Kracauer’s arguments by pointing out that his dialectics were not a privileged
method of philosophical or social analysis. If Kracauer wanted to challenge all received opinions

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80 See Chapter Four, pages 152-155 above. The Hohlräumen may be compared with what Kracauer called a
“hesitant openness” (zögerndes Geöffnetsein) in “Those Who Wait” (Mass Ornament, p. 138), and the concept of
the historical anteroom in History. For a discussion of this theme, see Dagmar Barnouw, “An den Rand geschriebene
and Thomas Y. Levin (Stauffenberg, 1990): pp. 5-12.
81 Egon Vietta to Alfred Döblin, August 3, 1931, Döblin Nachlaß, DLA.
82 Egon Fritz to Kracauer, July 5, 1931, KN, DLA.
and values, then he had to submit the dialectical method to the same test. If he would not do so then he had only formulated a new dogma, and he had no right to challenge the religious dogmas of others.83

Kracauer’s response to Vietta’s rebuttal took a similar form to his earlier letter responding to Vietta’s objections in regards to collectivism. In general, he referred only to points of method and not to content. Thus, he found Vietta’s attempt to undermine the legitimacy of dialectical thought to be an empty and relativist argument. It did not suffice, he claimed, to simply point to the relative premises of one’s opponent and by so doing think that one had voided their argument. If Vietta, as a “pupil of Heidegger” wanted to refute his dialectics, he must state his own premises and proceed from there. This seems to miss the point of Vietta’s attack, but it should be stated that Kracauer had already conceded the “historical contingency” of intellectual positions in his Rundschau article. From his point of view, that the critic was enmeshed in historical contingency was a basic fact and not a decisive means of argument in and of itself.84

Kracauer also argued that Vietta had ignored the framework of his statements.85 He was not speaking into “empty space,” and he had never intended his remarks to apply to intellectuals in general; rather he was referring only to those who felt themselves drawn to socialism in the sense that Döblin had defined it. The legitimacy of socialism as a goal was not a subject of discussion and would naturally have required far more investigation. The title of the article supports Kracauer’s claims and it went unnoticed by Vietta and also by Döblin. Kracauer was only concerned with the “minimal demands” to which intellectuals were answerable. He did not mean the essay to be a comprehensive summation of the role of the intellectual. Indeed, the only point where he refers to this task more generally is at the point where the essay abruptly ends. As soon as he mentions the possibility of a more expansive understanding of intellectual vocation, he terminates the discussion, as if he only wanted to suggest further possibilities, rather than state them explicitly.86

83 Egon Fritz to Kracauer, July 5, 1931, KN, DLA.
84 Kracauer, “Minimalforderung an der Intellektuellen, Der verbotene Blick, p. 248.
85 Kracauer to Egon Fritz, July 12, 1931, KN, DLA.
86 Kracauer, “Minimalforderung an der Intellektuellen,” Der verbotene Blick, p. 252.
Thus, in a fashion that is consistent with the notion of “indirect communication” Kracauer left Vietta to his own interpretive devices, and more or less refused to debate any of the issues the latter had raised in terms of content. The only point in his letter where he deviates from this is his insistence that he did not mean to use intellect as a weapon against the *geistig*. He did not even acknowledge the distinctions that Vietta had drawn in regards to these two terms. The intellect, Kracauer claimed, was a “practical instrument of the socialist intellectual,” but he had not spoken of the destruction of the spirit. Moreover, dialectics in the sense that he intended, was not the same as “philosophy in the old sense.” By this, he probably meant that he was not trying to revive the ideal of an autonomous rational subject, and, as a result, that he and Vietta were not as far apart as Vietta appeared to believe. However, Kracauer declined to expand on what he meant by “uncontrolled contents” and how these related to the intellect, and I would argue, that this is consistent with what he understood by this term. They were “unverifiable” and thus did not permit of positive statements. To speak of their content would begin the slide towards ideology, and it was ideology, he argued, that would benefit most from the abandonment of intellect.  

87 Kracauer to Egon Fritz, July 12, 1931, KN, DLA.

88 Vietta, *Die Kollektivisten*, pp. 11-12.

It is difficult to imagine that Vietta was satisfied by Kracauer’s reply and his later shift into the orbit of Heidegger suggests that Kracauer did not persuade him. Indeed, Kracauer’s description of intellect as a “practical instrument” may have only confirmed him in the belief that it was of a different order than the spirit. It was to the latter that Vietta turned in order to consider “uncontrolled contents,” while the former was given a more functional task. This was very much in line with his understanding of Heidegger, and Vietta quoted from *Sein und Zeit* on this point.

The intellect was the tool of *das Man*, the word Heidegger used for the technocrat, the functionary, the one who avoided any situation where “existence is forced into decision.”  

Thus, the confrontational boundary that separated the philosophers around the Frankfurt School from those influenced by Heidegger is already to be glimpsed in this debate. By repudiating Vietta’s concept of the “other reality,” Kracauer was anticipating the Frankfurt School’s hostility to Heidegger’s fundamental ontology. By 1931, Kracauer was already arguing against what he saw
as an illegitimate annexation of death and nothingness – an attempt to revalue the void, and to construct a “metaphysic of death.”

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What implications are to be drawn from this debate between Vietta and Kracauer? At the root of their disagreement is a dispute over the meaning, extent and consequences of secularization. The outlines of this dispute emerge more clearly if one discusses secularization as a form of translation, a notion that is discussed in Vince Pecora’s study of cultural criticism and ideas of the secular. Translation is one of a number of terms used to conceptualize one of two lines of thought that have emerged on this question, to which I have already referred briefly in the introduction. On the one hand, secularization is viewed as a “carrying over,” or “worlding” of religious concepts and institutions, and it is in this sense that the term “translation” emerges for Pecora. The second interpretation, in contrast, suggests that secularization represents a more substantial break with religious thought, that is, that it generates its own content and cannot be fully understood if it is thought of only as a simple transference of religious concepts into a secular framework. Pecora is interested in how cultural criticism has shuttled between these two interpretations which he readily concedes are slightly reductive. However, the devil does emerge in the details of his study, demonstrating that neither line of interpretation has been able to fully reckon with the persistence of religion. Drawing on the work of Habermas, Blumenberg, Löwith, Said and Talal Asad, his work suggests that the construction of the “secular” is unable to extricate itself entirely from religious concepts and values. These often are incorporated into the secular, and persist there in a sometimes antagonistic relationship. Ultimately, Pecora wants to open up the question of the nature of secularization, as well as the role of cultural criticism in disseminating the idea of the secular; what results is a model that blurs the border between religious and profane, and that suggests a process of secularization that is “ongoing...

89 Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” Telos 31 (Spring, 1977): p. 123. Kracauer remained hostile to Heidegger and his work after 1945. After having participated in a seminar in hermeneutics at Columbia in 1964, Kracauer wrote to Adorno that “after this experience of profound chatter over and around Heidegger, the necessity and full beauty of your Jargon of Authenticity has become fully appreciated … I have by way of Werner Marx reckoned with the later development of Heidegger which is just as revelatory as it is abominable” (Kracauer to Adorno, January 16, 1964, Briefwechsel, 1923-1966, pp. 640-641. The reference is to Werner Marx, Heidegger und die Tradition (Stuttgart, 1961).

90 Pecora, Secularization and Cultural Criticism, p. 1.
and paradoxical.” He draws conclusions that are significant to an understanding of Kracauer’s early work: that the secular was no “neutral” concept, but rather it comes “with certain historical and religious strings attached.” Therefore, the idea that criticism is normatively secular, as in the definition once offered by Said, overlooks the religious motives of criticism and its responses to religious patterns of thought. For Pecora, Kracauer is situated more within the second of his interpretive frameworks, and is thus aligned with Blumenberg’s position that secular modernity represents a more substantial shift from religious views of the world. Thus, he argues that Kracauer’s rejection of teleological history is in agreement with Blumenberg’s idea of modernity as “an infinite yet open-ended and not inevitable progress.” His conclusion is born out by Kracauer’s conflicts with the religious revival and his discomfort with messianic ideas of redemption.

Still, I would argue that the concept of secularization as translation does have relevance for Kracauer’s work, though I agree with Pecora that Kracauer sees more of a break between the secular and the sacred. In this sense, translation should be understood as representing a more fundamental alteration, that the original contents are, in fact, transformed in their move from one language to another. We have seen that Kracauer referred to his detective study as an example of the “translator’s art,” and in his Döblin polemic he spoke explicitly of the transfer of “valuable contents” from their original home in the mythical hulls of religious tradition into a modern and secular context. Yet, the result was not simply a product derived from these religious contents, as Löwith later suggested in his *Meaning in History*, nor was it a self-foundation of the secular

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91 Ibid., pp. 204-205.
92 Ibid., p. 2.
93 Though, as Pecora points out, Blumenberg was careful to stress that this does not constitute a radical break where the secular is established anew on its own foundational principles. See Pecora, pp. 61-62.
94 Ibid., p. 67.
95 Indeed, Kracauer and Blumenberg were in correspondence during the period that Blumenberg was working on his major study, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Their letters are in KN/DLA. In his letter December 24, 1964, Blumenberg told Kracauer that he hoped he would find traces of their discussion in his work.
96 Kracauer, “Minimalforderungen an der Intellektuellen,” *Der verbotene Blick*, p. 251. In this respect, Kracauer anticipates the dilemma that Pecora finds in the work of Habermas: a problem of reconciling a secular idea of modernity with its genealogy that is in some sense dependent upon the ethical impulses of religion. When Habermas speaks of “semantic potentials” in religious thought, one is reminded of Kracauer’s idea of “truth contents” to be recovered for secular modernity. Habermas writes: “As long as religious language bears within itself, inspiring, indeed unrelinquishable semantic concepts which elude (for the moment?) the expressive power of a philosophical language and still await translation into a discourse that gives reasons for its positions, philosophy, even in its postmetaphysical form, will neither be able to replace nor to repress religion.” See Pecora, p. 49.
that had fully dispensed with its religious genealogy.\textsuperscript{97} Rudolf Pannwitz’s condemnation of contemporary German translators suggests something of the change that is being addressed here. German translators, he argued, did not properly allow their own tongue to be decisively moved by the language they translated from; hence, they prevented their translations from having any contact with that point where a language can transform itself, where the native tongue has the capacity to “expand and deepen” itself. \textsuperscript{98} Of course, this analogy does not say anything concrete about what happens to religious contents that undergo this process, but it does suggest how the process of secularization could be viewed as a means of conserving (or extending) what was considered valuable in religious traditions, while also generating new potentials.

Still, the analogy to translation cannot avoid the issue of derivation. What a translation owes to its own language and what it owes to the language of the other is not readily resolvable. If the analogy is used for religion it readily becomes a thorny issue. Hence, the argument between Vietta and Kracauer has no discernible resolution. In his \textit{Neue Rundschau} essay, Kracauer had argued that “since the violent move from one form of society to another does not take place in a day, some especially valuable contents must be put into storage. Otherwise one gets in the way of the movers.” From this perspective, he claimed, that “packing is an art.”\textsuperscript{99} Though the rhetoric has an unmistakable revolutionary tone, Kracauer is still frustratingly vague in terms of what happens to the contents thus put into storage. Moreover, he does not speak here of secularization as “negation” or transformation, but more as a displacement and one that still leaves the final destination of displaced contents unmentioned. This, I would argue, was a deliberate choice on his part and one that was consistent with his general avoidance of theological language and a preference to speak around this issue rather than to it. Vietta, on the other hand, in spite of his secular intentions still had a demonstrable predilection for rhetoric steeped in the language and imagery of religion, as one of the few studies of his work has demonstrated.\textsuperscript{100} Religious motifs

\textsuperscript{97} Karl Löwith, \textit{Meaning in History} (Chicago, 1949).
\textsuperscript{99} Kracauer, “Minimalforderung an der Intellektuellen,” p. 251. According to Vietta’s letter of July 5, 1931, Vietta had discussed the issue raised in this passage with Heidegger, but I have not come across any indication that Heidegger responded directly to this. According to Löwenthal, Heidegger did know of some of Kracauer’s early writing, a piece on Scheler which he judged unfavorably. See Löwenthal to Kracauer, \textit{In steter Freundschaft}, p. 18.
determine the structure of his novel, *The Angel of This Side* – the figure of the eponymous angel becoming a catalyst of secular revelation. According to Gregor Streim, such imagery was meant to suggest the profanation of religious concepts; Vietta intended to stimulate a deepened relationship with the everyday rather than a transcendent flight from it.\(^{101}\) Kracauer appears to have appreciated this direction in Vietta’s work. “I do not think,” he wrote to Vietta, “that you want to change from an angel of the here and now into a collectivist.”\(^ {102}\) Nonetheless, Kracauer may have thought of his inclination toward religious imagery when he implied that Vietta’s reception of Döblin and Heidegger reflected more of a persistence of religion and myth, rather than a use of one’s *geistig* capacities. To Kracauer Vietta had once written that “scarcely have I eliminated God and the Church, then there emerges considerations in regards to the individual, to the concept of the nation, [and] to socialist doctrine.”\(^ {103}\) Vietta probably intended to similarly eradicate collectivist thought; his statement suggests that he viewed religion in terms of nebulous social energies that readily migrated from one social or political form to another. As a result of such statements, Kracauer may have come to the conclusion that his younger friend was among those who “naively” toyed with the sacred and thus did an injustice to the profane. This was not a trivial issue to him as he clearly believed that such sentiments might find their political niche in Nazism. Here the unsheltered soul would finally feel at home.\(^ {104}\)

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Having extended Kracauer’s critique of religious revival and secularism into the last years of the Republic, I now want to briefly address what this case study suggests about terms such as political religion and secularization, as well as what Kracauer’s engagements with these issues might tell us about the cultural politics of Weimar.

If we consider the work of Kracauer in relation to concepts of political religion, it suggests that the concept remains viable but needs limitations. As Philippe Burrin has pointed out, the concept

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\(^{102}\) Kracauer to Egon Fritz, January 12, 1931, KN, DLA.

\(^{103}\) Egon Fritz to Kracauer, April 8, 1930, KN, DLA.

\(^{104}\) Kracauer, “Minimalforderung an die Intellektuellen,” p. 251. Vietta did join the NSDAP in 1937. He had worked as a civil councilor after 1932, and he continued in this position until 1944 when he did not return to Germany after a work-related trip to Italy (Streim, pp. 260-261, note 5).
of political religion has been fraught with political overtones ever since it first began to be used more commonly in the 1930s. One of its early proponents, Eric Voegelin, associated political religions with a specific philosophy of history, one that viewed the Enlightenment as a crucial stage in a general movement of social and cultural decline. The religious societies of the past had been gradually eroded by secular Gnosticism, and the Christian community had been displaced by the idea of the collective. The final result was the triumph of “anti-Christian religious movements” such as National Socialism.  

Similarly, according to Raymond Aron, secular religions are “doctrines that in the souls of our contemporaries take the place of a vanished faith, and that locate humanity’s salvation in this world, in the distant future, in the forms of a social order that has to be created.” Such definitions stress the functional equivalencies between political religions and their supposedly more apolitical counterparts. Thus, the social forms of the religious community, its hierarchical structures, and the belief in a transcendent but distant purpose were all appropriated for political ends.

This was a potential that Kracauer, in general, rejected and feared. As we have seen, he condemned Bloch’s *Thomas Münzer* for what he saw as its confusion of chiliastic religiosity and political revolution. Even after he reconciled himself with Bloch he still contrasted his own dialectical method (a “real” dialectic) with Bloch’s uncritical mingling of spheres that could not be united. Similarly, he criticized Holzapfel’s theory of cultural perfectibility, as he felt it arrogated to culture a function that only religion could perform. There is a reasonably consistent adherence in his work to the idea that the existential needs of the individual were best approached through indirect discourse and not by means of an agenda that uncritically equated “last things” with politics ends. In this sense, his *Münzer* review anticipated his final work on history; messianic redemption was not to be accomplished in time, but rather, if it had any meaning at all, it was an eruption into time. This could in no way be equated with political utopias, or with cultural progress. By stressing this distinction, Kracauer attempted to pull the rug out from under any political movement that claimed to represent an absolute form of salvation. In this sense, he was aware of the potential for political ideologies to take on the aura

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107 Also, see the discussion of Voegelin in Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers*, pp. 4-7 and pp. 9-10.
of religion, and he believed that such phenomena had to be resisted. Similarly, his attempt to re-conceptualize the relationship between collectivist thought and individualism was not well suited to the emerging “sacralisation of the political.”

Yet, though Kracauer’s work suggests that a functional interpretation of political religion has validity, his writing also suggests the need for some qualifications. For Kracauer, it was still clear that however much politics tried to appropriate religious energies and structures, or at least in some of its forms resembled them, ultimately politics and religion were based on different social desires, and one could not simply displace the other. This meant that politics and religion still occupied different spheres of engagement, and, at least in principle, religious belief and radical politics were not mutually exclusive; hence, he preserved the space for the “unverifiable.” Similarly, in his 1929 essay on Picard, the economic sphere has legitimate claims that do not crowd out the legitimacy of theological ones, and hence, revolutionary theory could still be entertained without conflicting with a religious point of view. It is for this reason that Kracauer in spite of his hostility to religious revival still argued that religion was not merely ideology, and that secular culture could not simply assume its functions. In *The Detective Novel*, modern culture is thus portrayed with a fundamental ambivalence; culture may become more important wherever religious belief subsides or accommodates secular world views, but it does not fulfill the spiritual needs that religion did.

Thus, there is no reason to assume that secularism must always displace religion, and this can also be said of radical politics. As historian Neil Gregor has recently argued, there is abundant evidence to the contrary, and it is clear that religious belief did not necessarily preclude a commitment to the political programs of the 1920s and 1930s. Political religions did not just step into a void, sometimes they entered into a partnership. As a result, if political religion is to be useful as a conceptual model, it needs to be sensitive to the fact that the ideologies of these decades did not always push aside religious institutions, nor did they simply appropriate social energies that had been left homeless by secularization. On the contrary, in spite of the seeming

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110 Kracauer, “Zwei Arten der Mitteilung,” *Der verbotene Blick*, p. 222.
contradictions, religious faith could permit political radicalism. Thus, in 1937, the future Pius XII responded with astonishment that the 800,000 Germans in Romania, many of whom were Catholic, could believe that Nazi doctrines were “compatible with the Catholic faith.”

This, of course, cuts both ways. Thus, some of Kracauer’s Catholic friends were both devout Catholics and staunch leftists, arguing that the laity should be more politically independent of the church. However, their embrace of radical politics, though ineffectual in the crisis of the early thirties, did not facilitate the spread of political religions, but rather it resisted them – hence, why Kracauer wrote in support of the efforts of reformist Catholics such as Ernst Michel and Goetz Briefs.

Recognizing that political religions do not necessarily uproot the traditional varieties should serve as a caution towards the more tendentious interpretations that may arise when one adopts a linear model of displacement. Such interpretations have arisen where a comparative approach is rigidly employed that does not fully take into account the possibility that individuals might identify themselves as both a Christian and a Nazi, or a socialist and a believer. Moreover, such approaches do not convincingly account for the ambiguous terrain where religions themselves become political just as politics become religious. This is a significant issue for, as Burrin points out, it is just as probable that political religions were successful precisely in those countries where the process of secularization was relatively weak. Hence, the presence of a vital and politicized religious culture may have aided the establishment of political ideologies.

This does not deny the fact that religious institutions and beliefs often struggled against Nazism or Communism; but it does point out that if we want to know why these movements attracted so many adherents, including those who considered themselves to be religious, one needs to be aware of the potential synergy between politics and religion. In the case of Kracauer’s colleague, Hermann Herrigel, the politicization of religion, its alignment to the state and to the Volk seems to have in no way hindered his faith and probably increased it. Indeed, as Mark Lilla has recently argued, the Protestant radicalism of the early post-war period may have facilitated the acceptance

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112 Peter Godman, *Hitler and the Vatican: Inside the secret Archives that reveal the new story of the Nazis and the Church* (New York, 2004), p. 149.
113 Burrin, “Political Religions,” p. 331. Burrin cites as examples of this tendency the work of Voegelin, Norman Cohn, and Alain Besançon.
114 Burrin, “Political Religions,” p. 329.
of völkisch politics. In other words, some may have accepted Nazism on account of their religion, not in spite of it. In a sense, what this point raises is that most religions are political, and that in assessing the genealogies of Fascism and socialism both secular religions and traditional ones need to be considered as potential tributaries to these movements. In the twenties and thirties, it may be the case that the “complicity of discourses,” was a significant contributor to the rise of ever more radical visions of politics and society.

The politicization of religion raises the difficult issue of how do we legitimately distinguish between the “religious” and the “political”: to what extent might an idea, a pattern of thought, or social organization be derived from either religion or politics? This question is complicated by the fact that the terrain of political religion is often viewed as a one-way street; that is political religions appropriate from the treasure horde of religion. The possibility that religion accommodates itself to politics, or politicizes itself is less often part of the discussion. This is assumed in the term “political religion” itself, which suggests that normally religion would be apolitical – a conclusion that few would probably accept. Burrin’s discussion opens towards this area when he discusses the “politicization of elements inherited from Christian culture,” a direction that is derived from Voegelin’s work. He cautions, however, that a phenomenological definition of what is actually religious is a potentially irresolvable question, and that it may be best to accept the “metaphoric nature” of the concept and place more emphasis on the adjective rather than the noun. I would accept this position but would only add that disputes over precisely this question often help us to define what is at stake in arguments over the meaning of secularization. As one critic stated, “at the heart of many disputes about the definition of secularization ... lie differences about the very notions of religion and the sacred.”

Thus, if one cannot draw a line between the religious and the political, one can nonetheless extract why these determinations were significant in a particular discourse. In a sense, one must adopt the tentative definition offered by Luhmann that “religion is what can be observed as

116 This phrase is borrowed from Derrida, see “Force of Law,” p. 63.
118 Ibid., p. 326.
119 Rowan Ireland, quoted in Michael P. Hornsby-Smith, “Recent Transformations in English Catholicism: Evidence of Secularization?” in Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis, ed. Steve Bruce (Oxford, 1992), p. 120.
religion” and then reckon with how such perceptions worked in different social and political contexts.  

From this point of view, it is remarkable how often conflicts over the definition of the religious and secular emerged in Kracauer’s work. In the early twenties, this was manifest in his disagreement with Scheler over the alleged affinities of phenomenology and Catholicism, as well as his clash with the religious revival in Frankfurt. The issue emerged again in his critique of Holzapfel, whose cultural progressivism he viewed as an irreligious proposition. He collided with a number of his friends and acquaintances over this issue as well, including Rosenzweig, Buber, Susman and Ernst Simon. By the last years of the Republic, religious themes were less overt in Kracauer’s work, but as his dispute with Vietta demonstrates, he was still concerned with the boundaries of sacred and profane. This was the crux of his dispute with Vietta: were “uncontrolled contents” to be understood as religious in nature, or were they mythological? Or were they geistig as Vietta had claimed? Where such issues are contested, the concept of political religion may come into play. As Burrin suggests, it provokes investigation into the dynamic processes of both secularization and of religious life and the ways in which these participate in the formation of cultural movements and social institutions. In this respect, Kracauer resisted the move to institutionalize the remnants of religion; rather he allowed it to emerge negatively in his critical practice. Hence, Kracauer’s work demonstrates the complicated, uneven or “messy” process of secularization and its persistence in the interwar years. This is a process that defines the secular not as a sphere existing independently over and against the religious, but rather in a persistent tension with it. As Pecora argues, the concept of the “secular critic” needs to fully reckon with its religious genealogy rather than assume that this has been overcome.

This is not to deny that Kracauer viewed secularization as intrinsic to modernity, but rather to complicate our understanding of this process and how it was reflected in his work. In a 1922 review of Ferdinand Tönnies’ study of public opinion and media, Kracauer accepted the view that the enlarged sphere for public opinion was locked into a zero-sum game with religion;

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120 Luhmann, *Die Religion der Gesellschaft*, p. 308.
121 Burrin, “Political Religions,” p. 328.
122 Pecora, pp. 202-205.
matters that once were considered sacred were now the subject of profane discussion.\footnote{Kracauer, “Kritik der Öffentlichen Meinung,” \textit{FZ}, November 24, 1922 (A), Literaturblatt.} As a journalist then, he was well aware of the potential conflict between what he saw as the premises of his own occupation and religious belief. His vocation as a critic thus had to reckon with his own imbrications with the encroaching sphere of the secular. Similarly, as a sociologist he was deeply interested in the transmission of ideas within and between groups, a subject for which, he found the religious community to be of special relevance.\footnote{Kracauer, “Group as Bearer of Ideas,” \textit{Archiv für Socialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik} 49, no. 3 (August, 1922); reprinted in \textit{Mass Ornament}, pp. 143-170.} As we have seen, his early writings on religion and his efforts to understand the place of religion in modernity suggest that Kracauer was deeply shaken by the ongoing debates concerning the crisis of culture. The assertion of a crisis is visible in much of his early work, refracted from the perspective of intellectual discourses that emphasized the decline in belief, the destruction of social bonds, and a resulting existential anxiety at the individual level. Indeed, these two aspects of crisis were viewed as inseparable in ways that sometimes are not far removed from more \textit{völkisch} discourses – in his earliest writings especially, the individual was to find fulfillment in a relationship to the collective. Though, as discussed above, the precise relationship between the individual and the collective remained to be worked out, and he was increasingly careful to distance this notion from either Soviet models or nationalist sentiments.

The process of secularization left its traces on Kracauer’s work, most evidently in the inconsistency that some of his commentators have noticed. His seemingly decisive renunciation of religious convictions between 1920 and 1922 do not mean a break with religious concepts, though these do seem incongruous in the context of his later work. Thus, his affirmation of theological language in the Picard essay of 1929 seems out of place. Yet, if one conceives of Kracauer’s work as a site of secularization then it would seem that this process is, as much recent scholarship suggests, one that is neither univocal nor linear. It is, as Pecora states, “messy and paradoxical.” Moreover, it is evident that the discourse of secularization cannot avoid the legacy of its Judaic and Christian past. In this sense, Kracauer occupies both sides of Pecora’s schema. He wants to preserve the content of theological truths, though in a secular form transposed into modernity; yet, he recognizes that this transposition is irreversible and decisive, a turn towards
the secular that cannot be undone. His model of secularization is thus one of translation. It sees the secular as both a break with the past, but not a radical beginning or re-foundation

In this respect, Kracauer’s critical motives have some affinities with recent work on secularization such as that of the sociologist Niklas Luhmann. Luhmann, likewise, sees secularization as a non-linear process that does not displace religion, but rather exists in tension with it. Secularization, he claims, derives from social structures that allow for “polykontextural observations... in which the contextual frameworks (Kontexturen) of the observer are no longer identical with those of being or of God.”

Religion then becomes one mode of perception amongst a multiplicity of perspectives. Kracauer, with his background in architecture, sociology and literature, his reliance on the form of the essay as a means of concrete situation analysis, represents a kind of intellectual mobility that seems to have adjusted to this new mode of observation. Indeed, many within his intellectual milieu (Adorno, Benjamin, Haas, Mannheim, Musil, for instance) demonstrated this polymath sensibility. Often writing against the constraints of their disciplines, often chased into exile, they came to embody the “intellectual mobility” that Edward Said argued was decisive for the emergence of what he called “secular criticism.”

In contrast with Said, however, the intertwining with religious discourse, at least in the work of Kracauer and many of his contemporaries, should be recognized.

For Kracauer two problems resulted from this polykontextural structure of the secular: an expanded idea of culture and a proliferation of different modes of analysis that sought to reckon with it. According to Luhmann, the expansion of culture resulted in a “doubling” of phenomena, a “re-description of descriptions that oriented one to the world.” In the course of the nineteenth century these “doubling” discourses resulted in a number of analytic modes that eventually became (at least in some cases) synonymous with terms of reproach: historicism, positivism, relativism. The end result was what Luhmann calls a “symptomatology” that sought to elicit from every artefact a different level of meaning. This could involve on the one hand the augmentation of the secular, an incorporation of the real into one or another system of

125 Luhmann, p. 284.
127 Luhmann, pp. 311-314.
128 Ibid., p. 311.
knowledge; on the other hand, it could view the surface appearances of culture and nature as a means of decoding lost origins, what the painter Franz Marc identified as a “second sight” that found hidden meanings in the material world. This faculty, so Marc believed, would be the basis of a “new Europe.” Such impulses were not unrelated to the work of the philosophers of life and their “laborious efforts” to establish a “cult of immediacy, authenticity and genuineness.” In either case, absolute enlightenment in rational terms is not the desired result, and as Luhmann suggests, the rational pursuit of a “symptomatology” may, by way of its failure, still yield a form of secular religion. In this case, the religious reconstitutes itself at that point where the limits of human reason are recognized. The “inscrutability” of God becomes the inscrutability of the system, embodied in the fact of the “unavoidable opaqueness of the system to itself.” Here again we are in the territory reckoned with in The Detective Novel; it is the “negative church” of the modern where the workings of ratio find their total fulfillment. Similarly, this is the world Kracauer found in the work of Kafka, not just in the famous Kafkaesque nightmare of a world bureaucratized and rendered rational but without purpose, but also in the language that Kracauer had described as an opaque surface that obliterates the world in order to recover a fragment of the truth. The will to truth was to be found in this “holding out in the negative,” not in the perfection of culture or in an aesthetic construction that sought to redeem the real by its own power; culture’s true function was as a means without an end. Hence, why Kracauer was so often hostile to the idea that culture could annex religion; on the contrary, the truth content of religion may need to be recovered from myth, but it was decidedly not a “cultural good.”

Of religious concepts, redemption remained the one to which Kracauer referred most often and most consistently throughout his life. Given his negative conception of the critical vocation, redemption appears to be an imperative. The rule of ratio was violent; it was one under which the atomized individuals possessed no meaningful subjectivity. Emotions were de-personalized and individual drives were bundled impulses shared by the collective; they assaulted the individual instead of originating from him or her. In its worse guise, during the war, the opacity

130 Luhmann, p. 311.
131 Luhmann, p. 313.
of ratio demanded total subordination.132 No longer was individual fate disposed of by the inscrutability of chance; instead, the state imposed its inscrutable command over the fate of the individual; it did so by rational means but with no sense of “last things.” Suffering under reason thus became confused with suffering under fate. In Max Brod’s words, the modern had confused “noble” and “ignoble” misfortune.

Ginster as he reflects on the son of one of his mother’s friends, burned alive in an action on the Eastern Front, or on the death of his close friend Otto, can only marvel at the inscrutable fact that he is still alive while they are dead.133 When he is for no apparent reason shifted from one group of recruits slated for infantry duty, and placed into the artillery, he knows he has, in secular terms, passed from the camp of the sinners to that of the elect.134 The war itself thus appeared as the opacity of the modern in its most destructive guise, a “monstrosity” in the words of his friend Joseph Roth; or Max Weber’s disenchanted gods working their magic under the guise of the modern ratio.135 Against these implacable forces, the Chaplinesque Ginster does not really resist. Indeed, part of the irony of the novel stems from the fact that Ginster survives the war not because of any gesture of resistance, but rather through a collusion of passivity and chance. He survives because the opacity of the modern is just as indifferent towards his life as towards his death. The world of emancipated ratio, inhabited by the atomized individuals of the detective novel, finds its material fulfillment in the destructiveness of war – a Kantian “purposefulness without purpose” supported by a religious fervour that shocks Ginster.136 Thus, the inversions that characterize the negative church become visible in the ritualized workings of reason, a kind of “black mass” in which ratio is the only celebrant. It displays itself as an impenetrable surface, blocking access to a reality that it can never itself discover.

How effective was Kracauer’s criticism? By 1930 the demands upon cultural criticism, whether they were self-imposed or otherwise, were increasingly urgent. Given the shocks of the Great

132 This is a reversal of the situation that Kracauer believed he saw in the novels of Julien Green, where fate determined the course of all characters, and most especially, those who sought to manipulate it. See his review of Green’s Leviathan, “Betrachtungen zu Greens: Léviathan,” FZ, December 1, 1929; reprinted in Der Verbotene Blick, pp. 214-219.
133 Kracauer, Ginster, Werke 7, p. 81 and p. 97.
134 Kracauer, Ginster, Werke 7, p. 148.
135 Roth quoted in Belke and Renz, Siegfried Kracauer, p. 52.
136 Kant quoted in Kracauer, Der Detektiv-Roman, p. 40.
Depression and the dramatic electoral success of National Socialism, a cultural critical approach that wagered much upon the “reversal of negativity” appears, in retrospect, to be both too subtle and too ambitious. In the latter case, the emphasis on interpretation and indirect method, an address to the existential position of the individual, may have fallen on deaf ears. Kracauer’s disinclination towards open polemics was intended to have a more decisive pedagogical effect; his aims were thus more wide-reaching as they required more engagement from his reader. This, he hoped, would facilitate a more concrete relationship with social and political reality. It would also, so he thought, be incompatible with the ideological morass that aggravated the Republic’s final years. Yet, did this approach not also forsake the smaller political victories that still might have been won by a more quotidian approach to politics? One need not go so far as to condemn Kracauer’s efforts in order to nonetheless find his response to the crisis problematic. His work does not amount to a “desertion” of the Republic, but nor is it a bold and overt defence; if Nazism was ready to use parliamentary politics to undo democracy, its opponents were less likely to pursue all democratic options as a means of defending either the Republic or the values it claimed to represent.\footnote{137} Kracauer appears to have remained fixed upon what he believed could be accomplished within the sphere of his critical method. To a remarkable degree, he seems to have possessed what Coleridge once referred to as a “negative capability,” the capacity to persevere within a state of crisis that negated most of the traditional footholds that culture and politics could provide, and without any recourse to a stabilizing notion of truth – neither the materialist idea of progress, nor the second Jerusalem.\footnote{138} Still, given his portrayal of modernity as social violence, as a crisis provoked by an inevitable secularization, his pedagogical intentions might appear too muted to be effective. To be sure, he was most often identified as a “man of the left,” but his position, often stated obliquely, was unclear to some – hence, the confusion between himself and Vietta and the accusations brought against him by Bloch that his political attitudes were too obscure, a blend of directionless radicalism and intellectual complacency.\footnote{139}

\footnote{137} Even his later complaints about the weak line that the FZ took against Nazism were guided more by a need to counter that threat, rather than a vigorous sense of loyalty to the Republic. See Kracauer to Reifenberg, February 12, 1933; February 18, 1933; and February 25, 1933, KN, DLA.


\footnote{139} Bloch to Kracauer, June 1, 1932, \textit{Briefe} 1, pp. 363-364.
In a sense, Kracauer’s interventions were doubly hindered as he sought a deep, root and branch transformation of political consciousness, one which he recognized required a corresponding transformation of social and political conditions; but at the same time, he often refused a polemical approach in favour of pedagogical one that was meant to cultivate his readers’ critical faculties, rather than simply instructing them. The wager was that truly meaningful change would come only if individuals were able to read their situation in a radically different way – a strategy that he had begun to develop in *The Detective Novel* and that led to the dialectical situation-analyses that he proposed in the “Minimum Requirements of the Intellectuals.” In 1922, Kracauer had implied this kind of strategy in connection to the gesture of radical “waiting”, conceived as a form of engaged preparedness, directing one’s energies towards tasks not yet recognized. His critical agenda needed time, however, and by 1933 time was something that the Republic could not afford.

In his riposte to Döblin and Hocke, Kracauer spoke of the “frightening neutrality” that prevailed in Germany, particularly among German youth, and he clearly intended that his work should fight against this trend. It is questionable whether or not his work offered readers a clear view to an intellectual position that would allow them to escape from their predicament. If some participants in the debate provoked by *To Know and to Change* thought that the ensuing discussion had only demonstrated the “pitiful” state of intellectual debate in Germany, there were outside observers who confirmed this view. “It is a type of madness,” wrote the French diplomat and writer Pierre Viénot, “to live in a world without law, and the fear of this madness wards off destruction – but what does one do if this madness is actually there?” In other words, can one actually hold out in chaos? In answering his question, Viénot who lived in Germany from 1925 to 1930, argued that many Germans persisted “with courage and a raw will to survive ... virtuousness, manly fortitude, a shrewd attentiveness to the state of affairs, self-confidence and even joy in risk ... in short, a type of heroism stands at the top of the table of values in modern

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140 Kracauer, “‘Was soll Herr Hocke tun?’” *FZ*, April 17, 1931(M).
141 Pierre Viénot, *Ungewisses Deutschland: Zur Krise seiner bürgerlichen Kultur* (Frankfurt am Main, 1931), pp. 87-88. Viénot (1887-1944), a diplomat who served in Morocco and later a member of the French resistance was acquainted with Kracauer. They probably met when Viénot was living in Germany during the late twenties. *Ungewisse Deutschland* first appeared in French and then was translated and published by the Frankfurter Societäts-Druckerei which suggests more extensive contacts with the *FZ*. During his exile in Paris, Kracauer appears to have received some assistance from Viénot, and it was to him that he applied when he tried to bring his mother and aunt to Paris from Frankfurt.
Germany.” Nonetheless, Viénot could not entirely exclude from this “heroism” a distinct “pleasure in chaos” and a wide-spread “fatalism.” He was stirred by the resilience displayed by many Germans in the face of material and spiritual crisis, but he noted with misgivings that these qualities were now found just as often among the supporters of Hitler and the communists. Germany, he contended, was increasingly becoming a land where morals “had no positive content,” that is they “gave no answer to fundamental ethical questions, because they lacked ... a positive norm.” Whether or not one accepts Viénot’s emphasis on normative morality, he nonetheless identified a view common among the German intelligentsia: that morality had become entangled by the habit of making a virtue out of uncertainty and hesitation. It was to such individuals that Döblin sought to respond in To Know and to Change. Kracauer also drew near to this territory in “Those Who Wait.” In contrast to the possibilities set out in these works, one could embrace “chance” as an almost metaphysical premise as did Ernst Jünger in his 1929 work, The Adventuresome Heart. Such responses were precisely what Kracauer hoped to fend off with his criticism, and after 1933, he began to lose faith in this project. In exile, he seemed to distance himself from his past cultural political interests. Writing to his friend Fränze Herzfeld in 1934, he lamented over the fact that the whole German “nest of literary vermin” with all its “hateful” problems had relocated to Paris. It was as if he had already begun to distance himself from the intellectual quagmires and controversies of Weimar; or perhaps, it would be better to say that he had begun to pursue similar problems, but outside of a specifically German context.

The focus of Kracauer's work had centered on problems that he believed were most especially felt by intellectuals and professionals, but also the “white collar classes.” It is difficult to determine to what extent Kracauer correctly reckoned with the concerns of this imagined readership. As Mülder-Bach points out, if there is continuity in his work during the Weimar years, it is his preoccupation with these segments of society; – from those people who refuse religiosity and nihilism in “Those Who Wait” to the “unsheltered” Angestellten who were the basis of his sociological work of 1931. This was the readership he wanted to address which is

142 Viénot, pp. 89-90.  
144 Kracauer to Fränze Herzfeld, November 14, 1933, KN, DLA.  
why he refused the offer to write for *Die Weltbühne* despite the fact that many friends and admirers thought that he would be more at home there. However, this was precisely what he wanted to avoid, he preferred to write from the mainstream, from a position where he was not truly at home.\(^{146}\) As his concluding remarks in *The Salaried Masses* demonstrate, Kracauer was alarmed by the political consequences that might arise from this part of German society, spiritually adrift, their existential needs, by and large, untended.\(^{147}\) This was a pool of discontent from which the extremist parties could readily draw. As Vietta wrote to him in an admiring letter, the white collar classes were the “the point of least resistance in the bourgeois dam.”\(^{148}\) Later in 1931, Vietta wrote Kracauer again from his home in Schopfheim, expressing some of the angst of this median position, trapped amidst competing forms of radicalism:

> I am once again in a reality shot through with demonstrations, dealings with communists. It is difficult speak of these things ... besides collectivism will carry the world just as Christianity once did.\(^{149}\)

However, later studies of voting patterns during the last years of Weimar suggest that this was not actually the case and that the white collar workers remained relatively immune to Nazism, at least until 1933.\(^{150}\) Thus, his diagnosis would appear to have missed the mark. On the other hand, however, it suggests that he was not out of sympathy with his intended readership, though this potential sympathy is not enough to warrant speculations regarding the possible consequences of his work. Whether or not the problems of secularization and the attractions of religious revival were as significant as Kracauer argued is a question that is outside the scope of this study; rather I have wanted to show how these rival discourses functioned within a specific intellectual milieu and how it related to a particular idea of what criticism should and could do. The broader implications of these rival discourses, how far they extended into other areas of German society would require further research into contemporary theology and the plurality of religious communities.


\(^{147}\) Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, pp. 102-106.

\(^{148}\) Egon Fritz to Kracauer, April 8, 1930, KN, DLA.

\(^{149}\) Egon Fritz to Kracauer, November 31, 1930, KN, DLA.

\(^{150}\) See the discussion of this issue in the review article by Peter Fritzsch, “Did Weimar Fail?” *Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 3 (September, 1996): p. 640.
However, one should note that Kracauer and his milieu were not unique in thinking that such questions mattered. When in July of 1937, the exhibition of *Degenerate Art* opened in Munich, the curators of the exhibit devoted an entire room to the alleged outrages that art during the Republic had perpetrated upon religious feeling. One of the first works that confronted visitors to the exhibit was a large expressionist crucifixion by the sculptor Ludwig Gies. This work had already provoked controversy fifteen years earlier in Lübeck and then again in Munich. (Indeed, the head of the Christ figure had been struck off from the sculpture when it was placed in a Lübeck Cathedral; the sculpture was restored but eventually removed). The message was clear: the Republic that allowed religion to be insulted by Bolshevists, Jews and the “party system” was now at an end. A new era was beginning in both German politics and art, and presumably, in religion too.
Afterword: From Don Quixote to Sancho Panza

There the soul of Don Quixote, light as thistledown, snatched up in the illusory vortex, goes whirling like a dry leaf; and in its pursuit everything ingenuous and sorrowing still left in the world will go forevermore.

Ortega y Gasset (1914)\textsuperscript{151}

If today our Nation lacks the force of Don-Quixoticism in its conduct of life, it will lack the power to resurr

tect itself.

Paul E. Kipper, \textit{Frankfurter Zeitung} (1921)\textsuperscript{152}

The detective, the spy, and the confidence man were the figures that Kracauer believed were representative of the crisis of modernity. They were ciphers of hidden truths that had been lost through secularization, and they were potential dynamite that might explode the superficial reality of everyday existence. To these figures one should also add two more from literary tradition: Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. These characters share with the others a capacity to exist in an ambivalent zone, where concrete reality is viewed as a code – what Carlos Ginzburg called an “conjectural paradigm.”\textsuperscript{153} The detective reads the random chaos of the world according to the interlocking categories of \textit{ratio}; he draws out the \textit{Hochstapler} who hides behind the mere appearance of order created by social conventions and the customary patterns of thought. The detective reads an encrypted world, while Kracauer the critic reads the detective for his potential to negatively illuminate the conditions of modernity. Quixote is related to these figures as he too is an interpreter; according to one of Kracauer’s contemporaries, he is a model of “the reader \textit{par excellence} ... the original model of the literary man” in terms of both his pitfalls and promises.\textsuperscript{154} It is with this ambiguous position of Quixote and Sancho that I want to conclude as it sheds light on the problems that confronted Kracauer and his intellectual milieu. By inserting figures from the baroque era here, I do not mean to diminish our sense of Kracauer as a figure who engaged with modernity; but rather too deepen this engagement by emphasizing

\textsuperscript{151} José Ortega y Gasset, \textit{Meditations on Quixote} (New York, 1963), p. 133.
\textsuperscript{152} Paul E. Kipper, “Don Quixotes,” \textit{FZ}, January 19, 1921 (M2).
\textsuperscript{154} Wilhelm Hausenstein, \textit{Zwiesprach über den Don Quijote} (Munich, 1948), p. 12.
the contradictory tendencies that distinguish the modern – the juxtaposition of old and new that was remarked upon by Döblin. Hence, Quixote, as was the case with Kierkegaard, is much closer to modernity than might at first seem, and indeed, some of Kracauer’s contemporaries appreciated this fact.

The more conventional interpretation of Quixote and Panza views the former as the arch-idealist who transfigures the world according to his overwrought imagination. He has read too many romances, and he now projects what he has read onto the world. As Dolf Sternberger wrote in 1928 (in an article that he may have discussed with Kracauer) Quixote represented a form of “comic existence” whereby the “I” devoured all reality, absorbing it into its own inwardness. This formulation is very near to Kracauer’s view of the detective as a model of the transcendental subject who subordinates all traces of the real to the autonomous ratio. In contrast, Sancho Panza is then understood as the voice that rises up in protest from the hard ground of reality with which Quixote constantly collides.

However, this reading of the Quixote story was rendered in a more complex fashion in the literature of the 1920s. On this point, one can look back again to Kierkegaard who also deployed the Cervantes characters in a poly-vocal fashion. As was the case with the spy, the figure of Quixote takes on very different meanings at different points in his writing. In Either/Or Quixote and Sancho are included amidst a category of mythological paired figures (King/Fool, Faust/Wagner, for instance) whereby the “grand dialectic of life” is represented, with one figure representing the “totality” while the other “compensates for the disproportionate greatness of the [former] in actual life.”155 Here, it is the relationship between Panza and Quixote that is more significant than the symbolic meanings derived from them separately; the two become different aspects of a whole, or at least two entities that strive to become a whole. Elsewhere in his work, Quixote is emblematic of the “passion of inwardness” that “grasps a particular fixed finite idea.”156 He verges towards lunacy, Kierkegaard states, but his inwardness endows his madness with more validity than the lunacy that leads the modern “assistant professor” towards absolute scepticism. However, not only scepticism is questioned by means of Quixote, but also theology;

156 Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, pp. 195-196.
for Kierkegaard suggests an analogy between the end of chivalry and the demise of “literalist theology.” To Kierkegaard Quixote represents both of these fading values, and in him they both come to an end. 157 With the figure of Quixote as a touchstone, one thus arrives at a position that is not without some affinity for the position of waiting described by Kracauer in 1922, with positive theology on one side and modern scepticism on the other.

The problem of interpretation is similarly important for Kierkegaard though, to be sure, his radical Christianity separates him from Kracauer. At times, Kierkegaard seems to welcome an almost quixotic confusion of reading and misreading. As Pattison has argued, for Kierkegaard the “eternal and the merely momentary are so folded together that each place and each time retains the memory of the possibility of the other.” 158 Thus, when Kierkegaard proposes reading the Bible as a travel guide in order to discover that the modern café where you smoke your cigar was once a hideout for robbers and murderers, he suggests, that it is the modern age that is deluded by denying that no connection exists between the imagined past and the concrete present. Thus, in one sense, the windmills actually may have been giant monsters; just as the modern café is still related to the den of thieves.

To the extent that Quixote’s radical subjectivity places him at odds with his world, the early Kracauer appears to have identified with this “knight of the tragic countenance”; yet at some point during the twenties his identification altered. He begins as Quixote but ends as Sancho Panza (though this is by no means a straightforward transformation). 159 In “Grace,” a story that has been discussed above, the protagonist Ludwig Loos is identified with Quixote. A close friend accuses him of possessing a faulty relationship with reality; he is one whose imagination and intellect blocks his access to life, and thus he becomes a victim of his own “Don-Quixote nature.” 160 His disconnectedness from the world is only overcome by the successive shock of his failed intent to commit suicide and a sexual encounter. Thus, the story ends with a gesture of crude sentimentalism. Indeed, Kracauer himself was not entirely liberated from this quixotic romanticism. In a letter to Susman written seven year later, he described his life as that of a Don

157 Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p. 35.
159 See the comments on the significance of Quixote in Oschmann, Auszug aus der Innerlichkeit, pp. 28-29.
Quixote – a solitary life, devoted to philosophy (“the most severe of all the goddesses”) just as the knight-errant was devoted to Dulcinea. There is a further resonance between these two references to the Quixote figure. In “Grace” Ludwig has an ambiguous but platonic relationship with a woman of religious convictions who was unhappily married, and to whom he confides his ambitions and troubles. While Susman does not match this character exactly there are some resemblances. She too had an uneasy marriage and her religious views were the cause of some friction between her and Kracauer.161 Their relationship in general, based on the letters to her that have survived, suggests that Kracauer was eager to impress her with his intellectual labours on behalf of the “severe goddess” of philosophical rigor. Indeed, in his letters to her he twice referred to his “quixotic” labours in the intellectual arena.162 Since the story was written before these letters, it is not a matter of a portrait of his relationship with Susman, but rather one of inserting his aesthetic constructions into reality.

This overly presumptuous aestheticizing impulse is one of the aspects of the Quixote myth that Kracauer abandoned in the shift towards Sancho Panza. That art could somehow subsume a totality of human experience was regularly denied by Kracauer. As a theme it emerged in the superficial aesthetic unities permitted by ratio in The Detective Novel, in his programmatic manifesto, “The Artist of this Age,” and, most directly, in his Holzapfel polemic. Similarly, artists could not become prophets. Culture could reveal the world in its negativity; it could gesture towards a vanished truth, but it could not take over the role that religion had once occupied, for all roads backwards were blocked. This meant that culture had to be accepted in its present fragmentary state; moreover, that it should not be condemned for its seeming superficiality and incoherence, but rather must be interpreted for what it reveals about the society that created it. In this way the vanished “truth contents” of religion might yet be glimpsed, disfigured and scattered throughout the multiplicity of cultural forms. This privileging of religion over culture is, thus, not a position that is meant to short-change culture, but rather to restrict it to certain bounds. Nonetheless, it is remarkable that Kracauer was still voicing this position in 1924, two years after he had distanced himself from the pioneers of religious revival. The reference to grace in his review of Holzapfel is all the more striking when one compares it with

161 Susman separated from her husband, the painter Eduard Bendemann in 1928.
162 Kracauer to Susman, February 10, 1920, and May 2, 1920, SN, DLA.
his earlier usage in his novella of the same name. “Do you not believe in something like an inner grace that at some moment steps into the life of every individual?” asks Frau Ilse, the protagonist’s ambiguously platonic friend. This theological sub-text persisted in Kracauer’s work, and, I would argue, determined his position in his dispute with Vietta. I would also argue that this was what Joseph Roth meant when he said that Kracauer wrote out of sense of obligation that was meant “no longer for this world.”

This was not the result of a concealed duty to one or another confession; but rather a theological impulse to secularize what was valuable from religion, to find its secular components where they lay fragmented in modernity. In a sense, it is a theology of the flâneur who finds no shelter in the churches and synagogues, but also rejects the promises of material progress and secularized versions of the messianic. In this sense, as Pecora has argued, Kracauer can only be described as a purely “secular critic” if one allows for some modifications.

This means that secular criticism was intertwined with theological undercurrents and that the relationship between culture and religion remained unresolved. As the philosopher Ortega y Gasset wrote in his 1914 study of Quixote:

Faced with the problematic character of life, culture ... represents a treasury of principles. We can argue about the principles best suited to solve that problem, but whatever they may be, they must be principles; and a principle, to be a principle, must begin by not being a problem. This is the difficulty with which religion is faced and which has always kept it at variance with other forms of human culture, especially with reason. The religious spirit links the mystery of life with still darker and higher mysteries, whereas life appears to us to be potentially solvable or, at least not unsolvable a limine.

163 Roth to Stefan Zweig, August 30, 1930, in Joseph Roth: Briefe, pp. 175-176.
164 Ortega y Gasset, p. 99.
165 Kracauer was close to the Spain correspondent of the FZ, Fritz Wahl who knew Ortega y Gasset. After Kracauer’s flight to France, Wahl tried unsuccessfully to find work for Kracauer writing for the Revista de Occidente. See Wahl to Kracauer, January 4, 1934, quoted in Belke and Renz, Siegfried Kracauer, pp. 77-78. While Meditations on Don Quixote was not translated into any other language before World War Two, Ernst Robert Curtius referred to the work in a more general discussion of Ortega y Gasset in 1924; see “Spanische Perspektiven (Ortega y Gasset)” Die neue Rundschau 35, no. 2 (1924), pp. 1229-1247.
references to a connection with the higher mysteries (spheres in Kracauer’s preferred terminology) suggests that the nexus of religion and culture remained a thorn in the side of critical discourse more generally, and indeed, it is reminiscent of the already mentioned division between “noble” and “ignoble” misfortune. Culture can be deployed against the latter, but not the former. From Ortega y Gasset’s perspective the entrance of religion in cultural criticism would be a complicating factor, a confusion of unsolvable mysteries with the quotidian problems of society; in Kracauer’s terms it would run the risk of allowing the forms of culture to be masked by an aura of timeless mystery, and therefore, to become naturalized. Thus, Kracauer directed his critical efforts against “natural forces” and “myth,” where the aura of religion threatens to become ideology. Yet, what remains surprising is that the theological problem persisted as a negative condition of his criticism, as if he could not dispense with theological concepts as a necessary spur to his writing.

This is most evident in his critique of the rational autonomous subject that was elaborated in *The Detective Novel*. The detective is the representative of *ratio*, an unreflective or “clouded reason” that subordinates reality, but never actually grasps it. To Kracauer the real was conceptualized in material and theological terms, as a sphere that resists the quantifying impulses and categories of instrumental reason. As a result the door is opened for a different kind of reason, what he referred to as a “genial cleverness ... that in no way was identical with capitalist *ratio*.“ For Kracauer, the representative of this “genial cleverness,” was Sherlock Holmes, whom he described as a “knight” or a “Don Quixote in reverse” (*umgekehrten Don Quichote*). However, the quixotic figure was incomplete in itself, Kracauer argued, which was why Conan Doyle invented the complimentary figure of Dr Watson. The close connections between the genial form of reason and the claims of reality were expressed in this partnership with Watson, whom Kracauer described as the most “striking” demonstration of Conan Doyle’s “powers of intuition.” Watson, he stated, “circled around Holmes as the earth circles around the sun”; the duo were “twin stars.” The valorization of Quixote is still visible here, but in a more complex variation; now he incorporated the earth-bound dimension of Watson/Panza even as he retained its orientation to the Quixotic or utopian element. This orientation towards the quixotic is why,

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as Dagmar Barnouw has argued, Kracauer was adamantly opposed to Adorno’s understanding of Panza as an uncritical allegiance to empiricism.  

It is only after 1945 that Kracauer conceives of the Quixote/Panza relationship in terms that emphasize the decisive significance of Panza. To Adorno, he wrote near the end of 1963, that “there is, as you know, a good bit of Sancho Panza in me.” Similarly, he contrasted himself to the quixotic impulses of his friend Bloch. “Your tempestuousness,” he wrote to Bloch in 1965, “takes the breath away from the Sancho Panza in me.” Bloch countered by pointing out that Cervantes never allowed Panza to appear without Quixote, that Panza was no “proxy” for Quixote (Stattholder), and, moreover, that he doubted that Panza on his own could have written a novel such as Ginster. Kracauer conceded this point, but also noted that the “utopian impulse” was not reserved to Quixote, but resided in Panza as well. Indeed, he identified himself with the vision of Panza that appeared in a short tale by Kafka published in 1935. In the Kafka parable, Quixote is a “devil” created by Panza who then has adventures in the world and who Panza follows out of a sense of obligation. As Oschmann has pointed out, this attitude towards the Quixote figure allowed Kracauer to distance himself from the problem of Quixote’s fraught relationship with reality; instead the crux of the problem is an internal conflict in the individual in which Panza represents the contact with the real that, for instance, Kracauer’s protagonist in “Grace” was unable to support. Quixote was then conceived of as a representative of the utopian ideal, the negative ground that spurred the critical approach to the material world. Thus, he draws out of Panza the “genial cleverness” that was expressed in his proverbial wisdom and pragmatism; the two figures thus become part of an inner dialectic akin to the one suggested above by Kierkegaard. In this respect, Quixote has a function that is reminiscent of Kracauer’s view of photography, whereby the photographic image exposed the “natural order” as something

170 Kracauer to Adorno, December 23, 1963, *Briefwechsel, 1923-1966*, p. 633. In this case, his identification also serves the purpose of placing him at odds with both Hegel and Heidegger, and expressing his sympathy for Kant and his “aversion to ontological remnants.” He declared himself to be in complete sympathy with the Adorno’s polemic against Heidegger in his *Jargon of Authenticity*.
172 Bloch to Kracauer, September 11, 1965, *Briefe* 1, p. 404; and Kracauer to Bloch, September 15, 1965, p. 405. He also stated that his Eras mus interpretation in *History* corresponded to Panza’s utopian motives, concluding his remarks on Erasmus with the reflection that “the middle way was the direct road to Utopia” (*Kracauer History*, pp. 9-14).
fundamentally provisional and temporary.\footnote{Kracauer, “Photography,” Mass Ornament, p. 62.} As one of his fellow German émigrés stated, the madness of Quixote “illuminates everything that crosses his path and leaves it in a state of gay confusion.” In the fallout of this chaos, Panza “lives into” Quixote.\footnote{Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature (New York, 1957), pp. 309-310.} Therefore, the shift from Quixote to Panza should not be understood as a simple abandonment of the utopian, but rather it was a means of redefining utopian desires.

The relationship of Quixote and Panza, with its shifting emphases, was readily amenable to different interpretations. As Carl Schmitt wrote in one of his earliest essays, numerous writers had tried to resist the conventional readings of Quixote in order to connect his legendary persona to a specific philosophical or political agenda.\footnote{Carl Schmitt, “Don Quijote und sein Publikum,” Die Rheinlande 22 (1912), pp. 348-350, esp. 349. Schmitt expresses some disdain for these “learned interpretations.”} As one study of the reception of Cervantes in Weimar Germany has argued, the figure of Quixote was burdened with very different meanings in the cultural politics of Weimar.\footnote{Kindt and Müller, p. 230.} Ernst Jünger, for instance, read Cervantes with what he called a genuine “Spanish earnestness” that found little humour in the novel. He revered Quixote for his desire to coerce hidden meaning from a disenchanted world. In the fight against the windmills, Jünger saw a “real and, at the same time, magical experience” in which Quixote revealed our absolute subordination to chance (Zufall). In the moment that the supreme rule of fortune is uncovered, Jünger imagines himself as a “knight upon the cusp of the divine error of life and the divine truth in which this error meaningfully expires.”\footnote{Jünger, Briefen eines Nationalisten, quoted in Kindt and Müller, p. 234.} Within this framework the quixotic impulse was not simply madness, and he lamented that Cervantes chose to end his novel with Quixote’s final submission to the church – a “deplorable concession to lower morality.”\footnote{Jünger, Briefen, quoted in Kindt and Müller, p. 233.} Instead, the quixotic impulse to find deeper meaning hidden behind the real was nothing less than the “transformation” of the “will to power” into a “will to interpretation.” For Jünger then, Quixote is a heroic model for the modern subject.\footnote{Kindt and Müller, p. 240.} The relationship to Panza has little place in this reading, and hence, there is no resistance to the hero’s idealist imaginings.
Jünger’s use of Quixote to validate a heroic model of the interpreting individual should cause some alarm, and Jünger’s contemporaries were alert to the problems that could arise from his conception. Jünger allows the simple assertion of the will to compensate for error; moreover, he incorporates the will in a fashion that renders it difficult to imagine any means of distinguishing between the relative merits or flaws of different interpretations. In this situation, Jünger readily gives emphasis to instinct over intellect. We are in a Schmittian universe where what matters most is the principle of decision or will in itself, for governance is based on this decision. By including Panza in his model of the quixotic, Kracauer sought to defuse precisely this danger; Panza represented a check on the quixotic imagination. Whether this check was successful or not, however, is another matter. As the above mentioned Kafka parable suggests, Panza also preserves a utopian ingredient, a potentially unfettered drive to elicit hidden meanings from prosaic reality. Kafka was not alone in this attempt to complicate the relationship of Quixote and Panza; contemporaries such as Miguel de Unamuno, Ernst Weiß and, later, Erich Auerbach all saw in the figure of Panza a torch bearer of the quixotic legacy, a figure who was deeply entwined in the quixotic adventure. In 1926, an excerpt of Unamuno’s *The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho* appeared in the feuilleton of the *FZ*. The excerpt was drawn from the final chapter concerning the death of the knight. Death, however, is a misnomer as Unamuno declares that Sancho is actually the “inheritor” of the quixotic spirit, and that Sancho will venture out into the world again and continue the legacy of his master: “Preserve, O my God, Sancho in his dreams and faith.” Unamuno even mentions the possible resurrection of Quixote. To be sure, Kracauer never went this far in his references to Panza. Indeed, in the aftermath of World War Two, Kracauer questioned the consuming rage for interpretation that he believed distinguished Weimar culture. In a surprisingly deprecating and unpublished essay, he even went as far as to attribute this trait to Jewish intellectuals; but a post-1945 reckoning of this sort probably should be understood, in part, as a response to the trauma of the war. After 1945 hindsight led others to explore their misgivings concerning the meaning of the Quixote figure. In 1947, Wilhelm Hausenstein, a translator and art historian, and a close friend to

182 Ibid., 249.
183 Miguel de Unamuno, “Don Quixotes Tod,” *FZ*, May 19, 1926 (M1).
184 Miriam Hansen suggests that this essay was probably written before Kracauer had fully understood the scope of the Holocaust; see Hansen, “Decentric Perspectives,” p. 52, n. 11.
both Reifenberg and Picard, published a short dialogue to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the birth of Cervantes. The celebration was not unclouded, however, and Hausenstein’s text mingled admiration with ambivalence. In the course of the work, the positive estimates of Quixote are interrogated by two friends named Cardenio and Lucinde. True, argues Cardenio, there was none “bolder” than Quixote in terms of connecting thought and action; nonetheless, he does so in ways that confound the imaginative with the practical, and he compromises both as a result. For Quixote suffers in his dealings with the world. Moreover, he suffers in a way that offends “human dignity” and reminds us that “out of the humanity of the renaissance there emerged an unsettling inhumanity.”

Prodding further in this direction, Cardenio then asks, has not Cervantes shown that “amid human relations, the truth, more or less always and in general is placed amidst the obfuscating and overshadowing danger of error.” In other words, does Quixote not risk a fall into the mistaken and the inhumane? Given the year the dialogue appeared, this statement crosses into murky territory, a full discussion of which cannot be undertaken here. The potential to conflate truth and error, however, does not lead Hausenstein to pursue an apologetics grounded in the limits of reason, but rather towards its opposite – a warning that “one must become a reasonable Don Quixote.” Here, I would argue, he had in mind a reflective reason close to what Kracauer meant when he spoke of “genial cleverness.”

How one should arrive at this position in a flood of interpretations and opinions was another matter, and Kracauer’s efforts, throughout his career, were addressed to this problem of grounding one’s interpretations in a world of relative judgments and infinite perspectives. This multiplicity made interpretation a risky and potentially dangerous endeavour. As Thomas Mann wrote, while reading Cervantes on his first voyage to the United States in 1934:

> History is the common reality for which humanity is born, for which one must be capable, and in which Don Quixote’s maladjusted gallantry fails. That is endearing and laughable. However, what if it was a matter of an anti-idealistic, a dark and pessimistic Don Quixote who believed in violence, a Don Quixote of brutality, who nonetheless remained a Don Quixote? The humour and melancholy of Cervantes has not brought us so far.

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186 Ibid., pp. 45-46.
These questions concerning the nature of the quixotic legacy, questions raised by Mann, Kracauer, and Hausenstein, do not lend themselves to easy answers. To be sure, the more malignant Don Quixotes of these years were recognizable and Kracauer was quite willing to abandon the means of “indirect communication” where it was a clear question of a politics of barbarism and violence. Thus, he chastised the FZ for taking far too tolerant a line against the rise of National Socialism.\(^{188}\) However, he did not address his work towards those who readily embraced Nazism, but rather to those who he saw as wavering in a confused state, beset by competing ideologies and by religious sentiments and scepticism. One ought to recognize the darker side of Quixote when it wears the uniform of the SA or SS, but Kracauer was concerned with more than this. He also feared what he saw as a collapse of the minute and often unspoken values and codes of behaviour that constituted the fabric of everyday life; here the task of interpretation was more difficult but just as important. It was in this domain that the changes threatening Germany frightened him just as much as the conduct of politics. In a letter to Adorno in 1930, he discussed the minor transformations that he thought were part of a deeper rupture in German society:

> A devastation rules over this land, and I know for a fact that it is not just a matter of capitalism. That this country can become so bestial has in no way only an economic reason. How should I formulate this? I always notice when in France ... what has been destroyed at home: a simple decency, the whole of good nature and with it every trust that men and women have in one another. Since for us, no revolution will enliven an exhausted folk – as perhaps in Russia – I do not believe in the healing powers of the revolutionary urge. I recognize only a general mess and it would be best to me if we could continue to muddle forward in this fashion.\(^{189}\)

Here, Kracauer describes a pervasive cynicism and indifference that Hausenstein would later identify with the age of Cervantes. The Quixote too arose out of a period very close to our “modern indifferentism,” a period given over to the “frivolity of artistic and theological

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\(^{188}\) Kracauer to Reifenberg, February 12, 1933, KN, DLA.

improvisations.”¹⁹⁰ The problem of the Quixote was a modern problem, and one could revere him on account of his challenge to indifference and the status quo, but there was a danger present whenever Quixote appeared without the necessary corrective of Panza.

In one of the famous episodes of Cervantes’ novel, the knight interrupts his squire as he is telling a story that recounts the shepherding of many goats across a river.¹⁹¹ Quixote objects to Sancho’s insistence that the crossing of every goat must find its place in the narrative. Quixote remonstrates with Sancho that this is no way to tell a story, that if they all went across he should just say so and not recount the details concerning the crossing of each and every goat. As has been pointed out, Quixote here insists on the need to shape experience; he gives precedence to the claims of aesthetic unity over and above that of the chronicle. The claims of a generalizing and rational narrative triumph over an unseemly chaos of particulars.¹⁹² Sancho, of course, states that he knows of no other way to tell the story and, on account of his lord’s interruption, he is no longer able to finish. Kracauer’s criticism attempts to mediate this dispute. He argues, with Panza, that the concrete details of experience do matter, that each goat does have its legitimate claim, and that these claims represent an existential imperative that should be set against the claims of ratio or any totalizing system of philosophy, art, or politics. In this regard, the triumphant narrative of secularization and the counter-narrative of religious revival both served the fragmented modern subject poorly. An act of mediation between them was needed, the cultivation of a “secular hermeneutics” that would afford the individual a foothold in a bewildering modern landscape where redemption, if it was possible at all, was to be intimated only negatively. Kracauer’s call to “use your intellect” was, in this context, a demanding one that found limited resonance. The desire to do justice to reality, to represent it in all of its complexity, was drowned out by the totalizing ideological discourses that poisoned political life in the first part of the century. The story of Sancho Panza was abruptly broken off, though as Panza stated, there were a good many interesting things still to tell.

¹⁹⁰ Hausenstein, Zwiegesprach, p. 49.
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