

Commentary

“*Ex Kino Lux*”:
Siegfried Kracauer as Film Critic

Johannes von Moltke

When the Schumann-Großkino opened in 1923 as Germany’s largest cinema, among the spectators was a young man eager to make his mark as a film critic. As the Weimar Republic entered its first and only decade, he was off to a slow start. In May 1921 the renowned *Frankfurter Zeitung* had run his first contribution on film, a report on the pedagogical uses of cinema. Over the following year and a half he filed a mere two dozen reviews in the paper. Yet here was someone clearly already attuned to the growing importance of the film medium and of cinema as a cultural institution. The grand opening of the Schumann-Großkino was a case in point, and the impressionable young critic’s report renders the sensations in staccato: “Cars pull up in long lines, hundreds have been unable to get tickets and head home in disappointment. Garlands inside, search for an empty seat, the house in festive excitement. How did the pusher Neumann put it so aptly in Kaiser’s *Nebeneinander*? *Ex Kino lux!*”¹

Light from the cinema—this line, which concludes the playwright Georg Kaiser’s 1923 drama—could stand as the motto for the career that Siegfried Kracauer went on to make as a film critic for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in the following decade. Kracauer’s reviews would probe the images created by the projector’s beam to shed light not only on individual films and the growth of the medium but on technological change, aesthetic and theoretical questions,

1. Kracauer, “Die erste Groß-Filmbühne.”

and the culture and society of the Weimar Republic at large. Alternating between routine and exceptional, often infused with the flair of a great modernist writer who penned two novels, the reviews offer a vivid cultural record of the interwar years, a seismograph of the era's many tremblings and explosions. Kracauer finds in the cinema an index of social injustice and of utopian longing; he exalts the arrival of Soviet cinema on Berlin screens and despairs at the ideological obfuscation perpetrated by Hollywood. At the same time, he champions American slapstick and film's ability to show an alienated world, intimating to the distracted metropolitan audiences made up of little shopgirls and other salaried masses that things could also be otherwise.

While selected reviews have been included in English-language sourcebooks on Weimar and German silent film, Kracauer's copious output as a film critic (three volumes of his collected works in the German edition) still awaits translation.² The following few examples can neither fill this gap nor claim to be representative of the full range and development of Kracauer's writings from 1921 to the end of the Weimar Republic and, to a reduced degree, in French and US exile. Leaving aside reviews that have been translated elsewhere,³ and focusing almost exclusively on the silent period, the present selection was guided by two considerations. First, it includes reviews of several films that have entered the canon of world cinema (*The Last Laugh*, *The Blue Angel*, *The Man with the Movie Camera*, *Girls in Uniform*). Second, it reflects Kracauer's attraction, particularly during the early 1920s, to American slapstick.

It is a consequential attraction. For Kracauer's tributes to the pratfalls and narrow misses, his delight in the sheer movement in the slapstick choreography of humans and objects, also inform his understanding of the cinema more generally. Indeed, slapstick is paradigmatic for Kracauer's evolving theory of film. Take only his fascination for the near-automatic quality of some of Buster Kea-

2. The translations below draw on Kracauer's collected writings (*Werke*, vol. 6), including the detailed critical apparatus. The translator gratefully acknowledges the editors' filmographic research and careful annotations, which form the basis for the notes in the translation as well.

3. For translations of other reviews and short writings on film, see Kracauer, "Calico World," "The Little Shop Girls Go to the Movies," "Film 1928," and "Cult of Distraction," in *The Mass Ornament*; Kracauer, "Task of the Film Critic"; and the larger subset of reviews included in *The Promise of Cinema*, edited by Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer, and Michael Cowan: "A Film (1924)," "Film Image and Prophetic Speech (1925)," "Mountains, Clouds, People (1926)," "Abstract Film (1928)," "Sound-Image Film (1928)," "All Quiet on the Western Front (1930)," "Chaplin in Old Films (1930)," "All about Film Stars (1931)," "Destitution and Distraction (1931)," "The Klieg Lights Stay On (1926)," "The Weekly Newsreel (1931)," "The Cinema on Münzstraße (1932)," "On the Border of Yesterday (1932)," and "Greta Garbo: A Study (1933)."

ton's movements, which for Kracauer raises the larger issue of objectification. In a film world in which objects lord it over hapless tramps, Kracauer insists, we glimpse an aesthetic (in)version of capitalist reification and of the objectifying tendencies of modernity more generally. As becomes apparent in various reviews selected below, the "automaton" is a key figure for this tendency of film to project an alienated image of our alienation—whether in *The Chess Player* (1927), which features automata as figures in the plot, or in *Seven Chances* (1925), where Keaton's gait evokes a windup toy. In the end, the automaton becomes a figure for the mechanism of cinema itself.

Such insights both occur as sudden discoveries in a given film and develop over time, across the full breadth of Kracauer's reviewing practice and into his book-length analyses of film in his later works, *From Caligari to Hitler* and *Theory of Film*. While our selection cannot reflect that range, it is our hope that these few texts, arranged chronologically according to the dates of their publication,⁴ will provide a glimpse of the richness and variety of Kracauer's concerns as a film critic. Whether he is weighing in with his own take on groundbreaking films of the era, many of which have entered the pantheon of film history, or whether he is formulating trenchant insights into the medium in response to films of the day, these writings have largely been forgotten. We thus hope that this modest selection will provide the opportunity for new research and discovery.⁵

Johannes von Moltke is professor in the Departments of Germanic Languages and Literatures and Film, Television, and Media at the University of Michigan.

4. With one exception, all the translated reviews appeared in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*; the review of *The Blue Angel* appeared in the June 1930 issue of *Die neue Rundschau*.

5. For a consideration of the full scope of Kracauer's reviews from the 1920s, see von Moltke, "The Silent Film Criticism of Siegfried Kracauer."

Selected Film Criticism, 1923–1931, by Siegfried Kracauer

Weather and Rescues

This week the *Neue Lichtbühne* theater has arranged for an excellent program. They are showing *Die närrische Wette des Lord Aldini* [*The Foolish Bet of Lord Aldini*, dir. Luigi Romano, Germany, 1923]—a film that is reminiscent of the best of the (unfortunately terminated) *Stuart Webbs* series⁶ and that is as cinematic [*kinomäßig*] as one could wish. Why? Because nowhere does it create the illusion of reality (a reality it could not grasp in the first place); instead, it revolves around a pure nothing that becomes blown up into a gripping and highly improbable something. From this felicitous example one could readily develop the still unwritten metaphysics of film. For it shows that authentic cinema [*Kinospiel*] has the task of ironizing the pure semblance of our lives by exaggerating their unreality, thereby pointing us in the direction of true reality. Lord Aldini, a well-known sportsman, bets that he can drift about for three months as a vagabond without being recognized by anyone. Inevitably, this leads to irresistibly comical mistaken identities. An eccentric American billionaire, for example, bets in turn that she will find the vagabond lord and marry him, for he's "a real man." Of course, she ends up with the wrong man (what else would you expect?), while the true lord ties his fate to an exotic princess from Naomiland. Only toward the end does reality make a spectral appearance when the lord's alleged murderer is to be electrocuted. But right away the bubble bursts again, for the brisk gentleman frees the poor lad in a last-minute rescue entirely in keeping with his role. Cars, sailboats, ocean steamers, seaplanes, and skyscrapers are all essential to this affair. The deeper meaning of this amusing jest lies in the fact that it reveals the vacuousness of a world that can be set in motion for the sake of something vacuous, thereby conjuring laughter about its defanged seriousness. And, perhaps best of all: when the rigmarole finally subsides harmoniously, one does not even realize its import.—The American slapstick *Jimmy Aubrey als Beschützer der Unschuld* [*Jimmy Aubrey as Protector of Innocence*] is likewise a heightened caricature.⁷ It parodies human mobility with such exaggeration that all naturalness vanishes and

6. The serial's full title was *The Detective Adventures of Stuart Webbs*; it ran from 1913 to 1918.

7. Jimmy Aubrey (1887–1983) was a British-born American film comedian who appeared in countless films of the slapstick era. The exact film from Aubrey's own series of comedies to which Kracauer is here referring could not be determined.

everything seems based on magic. The comings and goings of the characters become unbelievable, and there is no norm that could account for the coherence of the parts. One laughs at the drastic appearance of the human automata, which is too improbable to induce terror. [December 16, 1923; *Werke* 6.1: 41–42]

Animals, Humans, Circus Gods

This week Max Linder reigns over the Schumann-Theater and the Neue Lichtbühne in his film *Der Zirkuskönig* (*The Circus God*, dir. Édouard-Émile Violet and Max Linder, Austria 1924). It is good to have him back, this forefather of the slapstick comedians, who possesses more charm than Chaplin while matching his drastic mobility. Perhaps the American is more consistent in his unsuccessful battle with malicious machine objects, but his skilled clumsiness easily becomes coarse when it wants to come out on top; Linder, by contrast, masters situations by more refined means, even though he is just as helpless among humans and things as Chaplin. The whole world and even his own body conspire against him—he is truly an inept fool, but a lucky one: he sets himself ridiculous goals, yet, as in a fairy tale, the miracle becomes event. Slapstick reigns. Whatever is purposeless or excessive becomes transfigured. All of this takes place in the *visible* world, unfolds with the changing situations; this means not only that everything can be mastered completely by film technique but that the latter also benefits from ever new possibilities and countless opportunities.

If the audience could hardly stop laughing during Linder's productions, it remained quiet and serious during the film *Tiere sind Menschen* (*Animals Are Humans*, dir. R. Féquant, France 1924), even though this film, too, was aiming for lightheartedness. Ostensibly a burlesque, it intended to show that animals will behave like humans when dressed in clothes, but its plot remained too threadbare to engender mirth, revealing all too clearly the effort that went into the preparations. Animals, after all, are precisely *not* humans and are far more likely to elicit human interest if left to their animalistic nature than when they are costumed as ladies and gentlemen. [October 25, 1924; *Werke* 6.1: 98]

The Last Laugh

This film [*Der letzte Mann* / *The Last Laugh*, dir. F. W. Murnau, Germany, 1924] at the Ufa-Lichtspiele is the work of the screen poet, the director, and the actors, combined here into rare unity. Carl Mayer, the poet, has devised a plot that requires no translation into the realm of the optical but derives from it

instead. One can recount this plot, but language is a poor substitute where the sequence of images alone speaks and narrates, where the eye hears and the word would only be a distracting illustration.

Still, the story does rest on a fable that can stand alone without images. It is one of those stories that the young Dostoevsky could have written, who knew about the fate of “poor folk”—a story made up of sadness, smiles, and pity.⁸ This is how it goes: the old porter of the Hotel Atlantic has a wonderful, braided uniform; he receives the distinguished guests at the entrance to the palace that he represents; and though he shoulders the suitcases himself—for this is what duty demands—he is nonetheless a king, a master of his realm. And it could be thus for all eternity, if age spared the kings and the manager did not one day notice that the heavy suitcases call for stronger shoulders. And so the terrible, the unthinkable happens: the king is forced to abdicate and is relegated to the—*washroom*. He who used to bestow favors must now hand the towel to foul-tempered gentlemen; he who used to reign over the revolving door is now the “last man,” a debased potentate. In the end, his obscure new station is discovered at home, the tenement neighbors ridicule the bathroom attendant when he returns from work, and the family casts out the outcast. Late at night, he totters back to the hotel and to his chair in the washroom, where he falls asleep.

Here the story would end if the author believed that real life already signifies reality and that the arbitrary ending could dare to stand as the last word. But he does not believe this, and so he takes liberties with his story that we can only admire (contrary to other opinions): he adds a postscript that restores justice, a fairy tale–like postscript so unbelievable that we can do nothing but believe it. It rests on a *coincidence* that contains more providence than the coincidental chains of events in reality. Thanks to the providential intervention by the ironic author, the last man advances to become the first man by virtue of an inheritance. A newly crowned King Croesus, he sups extravagantly in the make-believe world of the Atlantic with his only companion, the night porter; he spoils his successor in the washroom with earthly delights, generously distributes tips among the bellboys, who bow deeply as he is whisked away in a horse-drawn carriage.

A poem in *images*, then: the fable issues forth from the visuals rather than determining them in the first instance. Their sequence and their mise-en-scène is the work of the director Wilhelm Murnau—the ultimate achievement, one cannot separate the events from the images, since the former inhere in the latter; text-free optical unfolding has become the only appropriate artistic

8. Kracauer’s reference is to Dostoevsky’s novel *Poor Folk* (1846).

form. The direct representation of the contrast between hotel lobby and tenement housing speaks its own language, the architecture signifies without the need for commentary, the concatenation of situations contributes to the overall effect; aesthetic devices proper to the film medium are of constitutive significance. The old man reads his termination notice: one sees the letters dissolve and their flicker expresses his feelings; the old man gets drunk at a wedding one last time in the borrowed glory of his uniform: in a dream sequence, one sees him wield an enormous suitcase as if it were a feather and then walk off like an acrobat, a smile on his face. One sees the gaudy wedding guests, whose faces are reminiscent of young boys' photographs, and one measures the distance between the indisputable reality and the touching make-believe monarchical existence of the old man, one sees all this and asks for nothing else, for what one sees contains the entire substance. If one thing were to be changed, it could be this: the postscript would have to be crafted in an even more unrealistic and playful manner if it were really to appear as the fairy tale premonition of a different world. Emil Jannings is the center of this poem; his porter cuts a figure that will remain unforgettable. How he strokes his beard and strides away with majestic grandeur; how he teeters pitifully in the uniform that is no longer his, as if he were now dressed in someone else's clothes; how haltingly he goes after his shameful tasks once he has been exiled to the washroom; and how later he treats his companion in his helpless redemption and kindly showers the undeserving with gifts—all this is crafted without surplus: it is art that enchants because it fills the moment completely and draws even the tiniest gesture into its orbit through the wealth of expressive possibilities. Under the director's guidance, the other actors are dignified in their supporting roles. To name only a few: Hans Unterkircher's manager displays the disdainful manner appropriate to his profession, Hermann Vallentin portrays one of the guests with the usual brusque demeanor; and Georg John is the mute, tired, kind night porter who, even after having risen to the status of a hotel guest, stands at attention when the manager approaches. [November 2, 1925; *Werke* 6.1: 120–22]

Buster Keaton

Buster Keaton, this slim, small man with the parted hair and the slightly morose profile—only the eyes betray a conscious gaze—has certainly lost touch with life.⁹ It is said that in his youth his head struck a hard object. He is a stricken man. Endless objects, apparatuses, tree trunks, tram car walls, and human bodies make a plaything of him; he no longer knows what is up or down; the

9. Review of *Seven Chances*, dir. Buster Keaton, 1925.

senseless pressure of coincidental objects has rendered him apathetic. No smile appears on his mouth, his features are set, his gait is that of an automaton. Give him a poke and he marches off; confront him with an obstacle and he stands still as if glued to the spot. He cannot cope with events that transpire above the level of pressure and strike. Women, friends, human experience to him are so many occasions for failure. Others shake hands, fall in love, or get into fights—of all this he knows nothing, the terrible objects demand his undivided attention; mute and solitary, he spends his life trying to avoid them. Or perhaps he does know something about love, about shaking hands, about the kinds of action that occur beyond the mechanical. But he cannot quite get it out, it is stuck in him like a lump, his head having encountered the objects too decisively. If it was up to him alone, he would never reach a human goal. Yet, precisely because he is buffeted like a fool by the lifeless universe, he receives last-minute help that he does not seek: it seeks him out instead. Coincidence wrests him from a thousand perils, an invisible hand lifts him right into the heart of the amorous American idyll. In the end, he is the happy fool. [July 24, 1926; *Werke* 6.1: 250–51]

The Gold Rush

Charlie Chaplin, who composed *The Gold Rush* [United States, 1925], moves through his poem as a representation of the human, drawn from sources that had almost been buried. This is how fairy tales intend humanity, in stupid Hans and other fairy tale heroes who are no heroes; and this is perhaps what is meant by Lao Tzu's saying that it is the powerless who move the world.

The gold prospectors in whose midst Chaplin appears have a will; they fight over gold and women—rude, bumbling giants as we know them from adventure stories. He has no will; where others have a drive toward self-preservation or a greed for power, he harbors nothing but an emptiness as blank as the snowfields of Alaska. Other people have a consciousness of themselves and live in human relations; his self has gone astray, and for this reason, he cannot participate in so-called life. He is a hole into which everything falls; all that is normally conjoined shatters into its constitutive parts when it hits in his depths.

This human being must necessarily appear cowardly, weak, and comical as soon as he is pushed among people. He is even less of a match for the imposing gold diggers than for bodies of lesser size. Since he has no self, how could he defend it against those great ego bundles? He quivers at the opening of a door behind him, for the door, too, has an ego; anything that asserts itself, in-

animate and living things, everything has power over him. Before such power one had best doff one's hat, and thus he always doffs his hat. People eat, after all you have to eat, but only those who are self-assured eat real food; for him, a boot will suffice, his own boot, and he has not even noticed that he will miss it afterward, for he does not look after himself who does not exist. At one point, he dances with the girl; she, too, feels like dancing. His prowess as a dancer is realized only when he lets his forks dance in front of the girl in his dream.

A human without surface, without a possibility of contact with the world. Pathology would call this a splitting of the ego, schizophrenia. A hole. But from this hole, the purely human shines forth unbound—it is always scattered into the organism unbound, in fragments only—the human that otherwise suffocates beneath the surface, that cannot radiate through the layers of ego consciousness. Fidelity bursts out of him, the constant readiness to help casts a glow around this selfless appearance. The girl whom Chaplin loves—can one call it love?—is attacked, and he who is always the attacked, who is so weak and cowardly, wants to protect her like a cavalier from the assaults. One laughs, one cries, one knows that the surface has been breached.

But since the film represents the human in this way, it makes sense that his fate is fairy tale-like. The force of the elements retreats before Chaplin, this little worm that crawls helplessly and all alone through the snowstorm and the gold diggers' town. Over and over again, chance comes running in the nick of time to save him from dangers he does not fathom. Even the bear himself is friendly toward him like a bear from the fairy tales. His powerlessness is dynamite, his comedy overwhelms those who laugh and is more than touching, for it touches the very existence of our world. [November 6, 1926; *Werke* 6.1: 269–70]

The Chess Player

The French spectacular *The Chess Player* [*Le joueur d'échecs*, dir. Raymond Bernard, France, 1927], which is showing at the Théâtre Marivaux [Paris], will leave a legacy. It is based on a novel by Henry Dupuy-Mazuel that takes place at the end of the eighteenth century in Poland and Russia and that garnishes an episode of the fight for Polish independence with many a courtly intrigue. Neither the historical fable nor the grandeur of the sets distinguishes this film from German fare of the same genre, though it should be admitted that the scenes in the castles of Warsaw and Petersburg have been arranged with unmatched skill and that the choice of views and the sequencing of the images render the mass approach of riders on horseback with unusual effectiveness. But we have seen

similar things before. By contrast, what seems to appear for the first time here on-screen is the terror spread by automata.

No better theme could be devised for film. The automata are visible objects, and when one opens them, one can peer at their insides, which remain sealed off in humans. One can perceive not only the movements that they execute but the reasons for those movements as well, for where humans have hearts, the automata have sprockets and spindles. Human decisions may break into the sphere of film, but the automaton permeates it all the way down.

One of the protagonists in *The Chess Player* is a baron, whom Charles Dullin, director of the Montmartre theater L'Atelier, portrays as a sly oddball with thin lips and the skeptical smile characteristic of the Enlightenment. This seems appropriate, since the baron, a worthy successor to Lamettrie, has peopled the halls of his mansion with self-made automatic figures. In the middle of the circular great room, he has positioned his own likeness. When he deigns to press the various levers, there appear a young woman playing the mandolin; a man who bobbles his head; a touching family still life; and several other pseudohumans. They bobble, play, and stride according to the baron's designs, and in these scenes the film is so perfect that it seems as if the human actors who portray this mechanical menagerie were in fact automata who had become human in turn.

The film's greatest achievements, however, come in the final act. A Russian major forces his way into the deserted mansion to take possession of some valuable document whose exact location is unknown to him. He finds himself in the great hall and feels for the various levers on the switchboard. Things happen that confuse him. The white drapes covering the automata begin to crease and move. The major tears at the cloth and finds himself face-to-face with the artificial baron, a friendly smile on his face. His creator and doppelgänger anticipated burglaries and knew to protect himself against them by means that are more effective, if more cumbersome, than alarm bells. As the major guillotines the bobblehead with his sabre, he inadvertently steps on a switch in the floor that is connected to some hidden clockwork. Doors open around the perimeter of the room. Soldiers step forth from all these doors, their épées drawn. Step by step, they advance toward the center of the hall, encircling the major. The artificial baron at his side continues to smile steadfastly, and the mandolin player strums. The major tries in vain to escape the brandished swords. The carefully devised fencing skills of the *hommes machines* are superior to those of a living officer. He breaks down. With a smile, the decomposing baron finally collapses onto the major's corpse.

In this scene the film encounters a reality that is fully its own. The automaton, which film can grasp because it resembles it, here conquers the human, and nothing any longer escapes its mechanical externality. The invisible is negated by colorful visibility; no world seems to exist besides what is divulged to the camera lens. The power of objects over objectified humans, which is one of the great themes of American slapstick, is here demoniacally personified in the monstrous figure of the automata. [January 24, 1921; *Werke* 6.1: 285–87]

I Kiss Your Hand, Madame

A popular hit song and Harry Liedtke—what more could audiences ask for? The hit song is played as an introduction [to *Ich küsse Ihre Hand, Madame*, dir. Robert Land, Germany, 1928], in the middle it seduces, and in the end it comes true. Harry Liedtke emerges from the music like Venus from the sea. With inimitable elegance, he first kisses the hand, later the mouth—a gentleman of the kind we only find in hit songs these days. And Madame is worthy of him: a small little mouth that is easy to kiss, fashionable clothes, and a chic Parisian apartment (Marlene Dietrich certainly has her charms). There is little to be said about the plot, particularly since we seem to have seen it before in the Menjou film *Wie Madame befehlen* [*Service for Ladies*, dir. Harry d'Abbadie d'Arrast, USA, 1927]. The original has been adopted including the defense of the waiters' guild—except for the fact that in the German film, one has reserved a little escape hatch and has turned Harry into a Russian count who earns his living as a waiter. It is as a count, however, that he may kiss Madame's mouth. Apart from the broad parallels in the plot, the Liedtke film cannot measure up to the Menjou film, which is far superior. Where the latter offers analyses, the former falls back on mere routine. To animate the audience (which included a noticeable number of young ladies who appeared to have come for heavenly Harry), the Viennese singer Hans Ritter croons several popular hits that lead directly to the kissing in the main feature. The musical illustration by the conductor Pflugmacher includes several good ideas but translates the images all too literally. [February 24, 1929; *Werke* 6.2: 212–13]

Man with a Movie Camera

Recently, we have seen several Russian films that signaled a certain slowing down—especially Pudovkin's *Storm over Asia*. Each one of these films, to be sure, is still superior to the entire range of German productions, but neither in substance nor in their montage have they contributed anything fundamentally new when compared to *Potemkin* or *The End of St. Petersburg*. In terms of its

overall stance, *Storm over Asia* was something of a revolutionary pageant, an inverted Bayreuth (maybe that is precisely why it elicited such aesthetic rapture here [in Germany]).

Now a new Russian film has reached Berlin, and it proves that the Russians have not rested on their laurels. I had the opportunity to watch it at the Russian trade mission. It is titled *Man with a Movie Camera* [dir. Dziga Vertov, USSR, 1929] and is to be premiered publicly at the Stuttgart exhibition *Film and Photo*. Dziga Vertov, the director, began his career as a mechanic. Today he is the main representative of the group Kino-Eye (Kinoki) and works hand in hand with his wife Esfir Schub, the leader of the constructivists. Both of these avant-garde groups have foresworn the feature film and disdain studios, actors, and sets. As is to be expected, they choose social themes; reality is their material. Since this reality does not come artistically preformed, they put the emphasis on montage.

Man with a Movie Camera wants to represent nothing less than life itself. The *collective life of a metropolis*. In the predawn hours, this man roams the city and listens in on people's sleep and on the fragmentary existence that silently begins to stir. The city awakens, stretches. Teeth are brushed, blinds raised. Trams and carriages announce the new day. It is movement, a single, powerful movement that seizes what until now has been piecemeal, combining and melding all the elements—connecting rods, street people, a woman's labor pains—so that they merge into the rhythm of the whole. Even after the work-day ends, the stream does not subside, it just changes direction. The workers bathe and try out the whole range of sports. This is followed by evening with its shooting galleries, Chinese magicians, beer halls, and cinemas. Day draws to a close. Tomorrow it will resume, and so it goes, year after year.

This is the life that the operator, the "man with a movie camera," records. But he also records himself, since without him as subject, life would not be an object for us—subject and object belong together. One witnesses him in desperate situations: how he digs himself and his crank case into a hole to photograph a train from below; how he clings impossibly to the outside of a tram; how he operates the apparatus while standing in a car. Even the cinema makes an appearance, and the life he chased reappears before the eyes of the audience as a strip of images.

There are, then, *two* principal actors in the film: the collective of a city's objects and people, and the "man with a movie camera" who takes hold of this collective. On the one side the object, on the other the "cinema eye." The relations between these two determine the film's substance. They are of a most wondrous nature; in any event, it is not as if the operator simply took a picture of the object.

Leaving aside for a moment the operator and his manipulations, let us consider only the filmed world of objects. This leaves a film that consists of lots of associations. Ruttmann must have had something similar in mind for his city symphony, *Berlin [Symphony of a Great City]*, dir. Walter Ruttmann, Germany, 1927]. But whereas the latter's associations were purely formal (even in his sound-image films, he appears to settle for entirely external connections that he fails to penetrate), Vertov draws meaning from the connections between fragments of reality through montage. Ruttmann was concerned with an array that he did not analyze; Vertov interprets it through representation.

Just consider how he documents the predawn hours! Fragments follow one another without evident connections: an empty garden, the chest of a sleeper, shop window mannequins, faces on a poster. Never before has a film crafted with such assurance the secret of this strange hour that inverts the relationship between life and death. It reveals itself to the surrealist artist who gleans the dialogue between mute, decayed life and alert objects. A dream relation that later reverts to a dark dream, when the poster transforms back into an ordinary image by daylight.

The significance of other hours of the day is captured as well, apart from the early morning, especially the tremendous wrap-up before night settles. The day itself does not seem to suit Vertov as much as the borders between day and night. Some scenes amount to rather banal combinations prompted by literary ideas and theoretical knowledge. One could shorten not only the sports episodes that were likely inspired by an excess of pedagogical verve. Here and elsewhere the expressions of the collective evince a primitive pleasure in being that makes for a strange contrast with the late surrealist gaze at the spheres beyond daytime. East and West meet in the film.

They come even closer through the involvement of the operator. Again and again he enters the fray of the unselfconscious collective and rattles its naivete. He switches to slow motion, shows aspects in magnification that distort to the point of unrecognizability, and generally treats his objects in a willful manner, constantly interrupting the normal course of events.

Does this follow from the technician's eagerness to display his artistic prowess? Such an explanation is unsatisfactory for being too obvious. One should assume, rather, that these demonstrations of technique amount to a new form of *romantic irony*. Like the romantic who ironically draws into question his own creations, Vertov over and over again penetrates the seemingly self-enclosed reality of the collective. In his film the kino-eye takes on a meta-physical function, as it were. He reaches below the surface, dethrones self-

assuredness, and grazes the sinister edges of organized daily life. He achieves a special estrangement in those few images in which life's habitual motion suddenly comes to a standstill. The crowd was just flowing across the plaza, and one second later, defying all probability, it is poised on the screen as if glued to the spot. A simple trick conjures up the vision of death that inheres in life. The shock that the cinematic apparatus produces here is not the same as what the earlier revolutionary films aimed for.

If Vertov's film is more than an isolated case, then it must be understood as a symptom of the *eruption of universal human categories* into Russia's politically fixated thinking. Perhaps Vertov really wanted nothing more than to visualize the official *existence of today's Russian collective*, but in that case, he achieved something else along the way and against his own intentions. With a peculiar shyness, even half ashamed, the age-old questions about the meaning of collective existence as well as of the individual human being reassert themselves. They have barely been asked in Russian films to date. It is a testament to an indestructible substance that we can grasp anew the universal human dimensions implicit in these questions despite the constriction of consciousness by party doctrine. [May 19, 1929; *Werke* 6.2: 247–51]

The Blue Angel

Every once in a while the German public is presented with a marvelously executed work whose only flaw is that it does not amount to a work. To be sure, it could have been arranged with greater artistry, but its decor is merely decorative. Such empty spectacles are typical of today's public. There is a hidden reason why nothing lies hidden behind them.

Received with hymnal praise by the press, the film *Der blaue Engel* [*The Blue Angel*, dir. Josef von Sternberg, Germany, 1930] is a prime example of such lack of substance, and as such it deserves our analytic attention. The film contains details that could not be better; it has undeniably been put together and edited with great skill. Admittedly, this outstanding accomplishment includes particularly powerful shifts between talking and silent scenes that have hardly been achieved in this fashion before; some performances—such as that of the principal in the classroom or the wedding feast—are extraordinarily impressive; Jannings effectively milks every promising effect with comedic self-assurance; and there is a pleasant correspondence between Marlene Dietrich's vocal organs and her pretty legs. Yet, having admitted all this—what is the purpose of the legs, the effects, the technique, all the spectacle?

Their purpose is a private tragedy that, in this version, is of no real concern to anyone, let alone these days. The decisive problem is not that the film abuses Heinrich Mann's novel but that one chose this prewar book as the basis for a screenplay in the first place. What interests steered the producers toward the dark soul of Professor Unrat and his relations with the singer Lola when they could just as well have picked Mann's *Der Untertan* (*Man of Straw*)? Their interest lay precisely in the fact that the chosen material is bereft of contemporary interest and that it consequently fails to provide a substantive material basis in the first place. No matter whether the choice of materials and the forms in which they are presented to the public resulted from conscious or unconscious processes, *The Blue Angel* testifies in an exemplary way to the fact that any such choice aims to distract from and conceal reality. Unrat's personal destiny is no end in itself; rather, it is just a means for the flight from reality, and in this respect, it resembles the paintings on a theater curtain that are designed to simulate the play itself. Unfortunately, the audience fails to notice that the curtain is never lifted.

But aren't there still individual destinies, and isn't there psychology even after the war, just as there was before? Naturally, and there is nothing to prohibit their rightful representation. Our film, however, has no interest in an adequate exploration of its theme. Had it really grappled with the latter, it would have had to situate its characters in social space; indeed, it would have inevitably foregrounded the social relations that bring the schoolteacher and the singer together. For if there is one thing that we have learned once and for all from our most recent past, it is this: that individual processes are determined, or at least codetermined, by the relevant economic and social situation. By contrast, with labored studiousness, the film avoids any hint that might refer us to our contemporary social environment. It represses the environment that would impose itself on the naive observer of Unrat's catastrophe; it tears the players out of all social relations that might have imbued them with relevance and instead places them in a vacuum. Neither Unrat nor Lola has sufficient air to breathe. Which again goes to show that the film is less concerned with showing the reality of their existence than with obfuscating the existence of reality.

There can be no question, then, about what the film seems to be asking. On top of all this, however, the film inflates all this vain shadowboxing into something colossal. Here, too, *The Blue Angel* confirms the rule governing most public events. Through monumental architecture, one attempts to create the illusion of content; one places decorative textures before things that are nothing but pretexts and claims that they are the thing itself. With the same

din with which primitives exorcise evil spirits, one tries here to suffocate evil knowledge—which is to say: knowledge that would bring to our consciousness the reality from which we are seeking to escape.

Whereas the true Professor Unrat must crumble silently, he succumbs noisily. More than ever before, psychological processes today are located in an interior that must be penetrated; here they are drawn out and declared to be the main surface events with the help of optical and acoustical close-ups. This is only logical; if the external conditions of our existence are to be banished from consciousness, then interiority must of course flood the exterior world with noise and grow into a splendid facade behind which the true exterior can disappear unobserved. A glove turned inside out: the interior becomes the exterior so that the latter becomes invisible, and Jannings may crow as loudly as he possibly can. The semblance of lost interiority that could no longer serve any other purpose is just good enough to replace external reality.

Thankfully, this inverted order exacts its revenge. Compared to the drawn-out scenes at the school, for example, Unrat plummets far too suddenly and jerkily. That is what happens when you try to use psychological events decoratively—their continuity does not allow them to be dragged about willy-nilly. The film similarly betrays itself in the staging of the harbor street, which tries too hard to be expressive long after expressionism. Instead, it submits willingly to psychological invasion, demotes itself to mere decoration. And then there is, finally, all that screaming and rattling, the sadism and the whole war tumult at the end: what a hopeless equation the film proposes here between racket and meaning! But of course, all this built-up racket is necessary to cover up the lack of meaning.

The Blue Angel makes good on the intention to race across our situation and thereby to escape it—and in this, it is characteristic of our situation itself. Those who determine the face of the German public sphere today hardly have any choice but to cast a fog on reality. They have no vital knowledge with which to oppose the attacks from the opposing camp; as I have shown in my book *The Salaried Masses*, they are ideologically on the defensive. For that very reason, it is in their own interest to avoid an open exchange about the status quo. *The Blue Angel* provides a case study for how to conjure the dangers of such an exchange. It also shows that in the long run all escape attempts are in vain, for they lead into a yawning void. [June 1930; *Werke* 6.2: 375–77]

Revolt in the Girls' Boarding School

Finally, a few good German films are beginning to appear amid the glut of military films and all those productions that the film industry delivers to consumers whether they demand them or against their will, and that are designed en-

tirely for distraction. The Pabst-Film *Kameradschaft* [*Comradeship*, dir. G. W. Pabst, Germany, 1931], which had all too brief a run, is now followed by *Mädchen in Uniform* (*Girls in Uniform*, dir. Leontine Sagan, Germany 1931) at the Capitol Theater. This is a welcome achievement in two respects. On the one hand, it testifies to a level of taste and dignity that has become rare in our parts; on the other, it is the result of a collaboration. With its first collective effort, the Deutsche Film-Gemeinschaft under the artistic direction of Carl Froelich proves that there are other possible methods of producing films than those practiced by the ruling film industry. Undoubtedly, the applause that arose spontaneously and repeatedly during the premiere expressed among other things the audience's satisfaction with this breakthrough.

The film is based on the play *Gestern und heute* [*Yesterday and Today*] by Christa Winsloe, who also contributed to its adaptation. Its theme: the pedagogical methods in a boarding school for girls from the nobility, who are "soldiers' children" and shall become "soldiers' mothers" in turn. The conflict between an outdated and a new spirit arises from the depictions of circumstances that provide insight into the terrible cruelty of the boarding school's pedagogical practices. The principal and her entourage represent the old spirit, which derives from conservative maxims and readily promotes an unacknowledged sadism. The new spirit, by contrast, is embodied by one of the teachers who believes that she can achieve more with understanding and love than with military discipline. The girls are all instinctively drawn to this teacher, especially one who develops a romantic affection toward her. Fueled by the passions of puberty, the relationship is contained with silent resignation, but when the principal finds out, her draconian measures lead to a break with the teacher and to the girl's suicide. At the last minute, a second catastrophe is prevented only by the intervention of the children, who have finally turned rebellious.

Frau Leontine Sagan has neatly staged this neat story. I could pay no higher compliment to her assured directing than to say that she brings to the task a detailed knowledge of expressive forms and a fine sense of style. Whereas a run-of-the-mill director surely would have roughly caricatured such a subject, Frau Sagan never oversteps the boundaries that reality draws. The school principal remains a plausible figure, and the regimen to which the pupils are subjected is believable even in its excesses. Avoiding the farcical cannot have been an easy task, for many of the episodes—such as the prayer intermezzo and the visit of a royal highness—virtually beg for it. Yet the directing hews to a clear line; thanks to the fully formed characters, it manages what no two-dimensional satire could achieve: a critique of such girls' boarding schools

that also identifies their essence. All this unfurls in a succession of loosely connected scenes full of lovely cinematic ideas. The daily routines in the boarding school and the Potsdam architecture interpret one another; the great staircase at the school develops a life of its own just as it should; the theater episode is staged in exemplary fashion; and the mixture between comedic, serious, and tragic performances is delicately balanced. Leaving aside some occasionally lengthy parts and those few scenes (such as the teachers' conference) that do not quite live up to the overall framing, one still is left with a marvelously fine-tuned arrangement that also evinces a thoughtful approach to sound film. Thanks to its precision, the film is particularly powerful in small moments. The principal's slow departure at the end, for example, is deeply moving and effective; when she disappears into the hallway after having been dethroned by the preceding events, it is as if a ghost had vanished.

The all-female ensemble is made up of actresses and lay girls. What a delight for once to look again at unknown faces instead of the same old actors and audience darlings who remain the same no matter what role they play. And the film yields another kind of satisfaction: its pupils are not standardized *girls* but real young women. Perhaps now the time of the *girl* is over on-screen, too, the fashion having long passed in real life. Hertha Thiele in the lead role stands out from the group that gathers wonderfully and effortlessly. She can laugh and cry without artifice, and she has two eyes that know how to convey something—in other words, this young woman can expect to be tainted by a glorious future. Next to her, Ellen Schwannecke already displays greater variety in her acting: a charming mix of awkwardness, warmth, and impertinence. Dorothea Wieck imbues the beloved teacher with both beauty and sadness, and Emilia Unda brilliantly creates the figure of the principal. How she musters the troop of girls, leaning on her cane just like Old Fritz, how she strides through the hallways full of menace, and incites dread with just one look: all these are masterly studies in character. The film's overall presentation is supported through skillful photography that captures every nuance without undue emphasis. [December 1, 1931; *Werke* 6.2: 562–64]

Translated by Johannes von Moltke

References

- Kaes, Anton, Nicholas Baer, and Michael Cowan, eds. *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory, 1907–1933*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016.
- Kracauer, Siegfried. "Die erste Groß-Filmbühne." In Kracauer, *Werke* 6.1: 41.

- Kracauer, Siegfried. *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, edited and translated by Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Kracauer, Siegfried. "The Task of the Film Critic." In *Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg, 634–35. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Kracauer, Siegfried. *Werke*, edited by Inka Mülder-Bach and Ingrid Belke. 9 vols. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004–12.
- von Moltke, Johannes. "The Silent Film Criticism of Siegfried Kracauer." In *Oxford Handbook of Silent Cinema*, edited by Charlie Keil and Rob King. Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.