

THE CULTURAL SPACES OF SIEGFRIED KRACAUER: THE MANY SURFACES OF BERLIN

1. Martin Jay,
*Permanent Exiles:
Essays on the
Intellectual Migration
From Germany to
America*, New York,
Columbia University
Press, 1986, p153.

2. Inka Mülder-
Bach, 'History as
Autobiography: The
Last Things Before
the Last' in *New
German Critique*, 54
(1991): 139-157;
and 'Introduction' to
Siegfried Kracauer,
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Masses* London,
Verso, 1998,
pp1-22; Miriam
Hansen, 'Decentric
Perspectives:
Kracauer's Early
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54 (1991): 47-76;
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*Theory of Film:
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S. Princeton NJ,
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Frisby, *Fragments of
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Modernity in the Work
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Anthony Vidler,
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Estrangement in
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in *New German
Critique*, 54 (1991):
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The jumble of Berlin street life and the glossed over spaces of the city are recurrent themes in the writings of Siegfried Kracauer. So much so that one could be forgiven for thinking that, from his journalistic essays onwards, much of his life's work represents a sort of iterative journey designed to redeem the details of everyday life through the lens of the urban. Martin Jay's acute observation that Kracauer's seemingly disparate projects all share the same goal of 'redeeming contingency from oblivion'¹ is certainly one that holds for his evocative descriptions of what many took to be the superficial spaces of Weimar Berlin in the 1920s and 1930s: the shopping arcades, the hotel lobbies, repair shops, bars, employment exchanges, underpasses, railway stations, and the like. Having been claimed for posterity as a film theorist, an historiographer and, more recently, as a pioneering critic of popular culture, it is equally plausible to claim Kracauer for urban studies, not merely for his ability to map the cultural contours of city life, but, more significantly, for his extraordinary urban sensibility.

In recognising something distinctive to Kracauer's approach to city landscapes, I follow the well-trodden path of those such as Inka Mülder-Bach, Miriam Hansen and other more explicit urban commentators like David Frisby and Anthony Vidler,² who have all pointed to the metropolitan topography that so preoccupied him. What, to my mind, has tended to be underplayed in this recognition, however, is what singles him out from the crowd of metropolitan observers; namely his peculiar phenomenological appreciation of the culture, texture and feel of life as it is lived out 'on the surface' of the city. In certain respects, his approach to life 'on the face' of reality prefigures contemporary efforts to capture the active presence of daily life as it is performed from one city space to the next. What he shares with such performative accounts is an understanding that all that there is to consider is right in front of you and even though we may not always fully grasp its significance, that is not because the 'truth' is somehow hidden from us or present some way below the 'surface'. Lived experience, for Kracauer, is a 'surface' phenomenon, and although much of it may be obvious and familiar to us that does not imply that its meaning is transparent or that it is readily understood.

This is what makes Kracauer's phenomenology exceptional, in so far as his efforts amounted to more than an attempt to describe the world of our experiences. He stood in the midst of the lives of the people that he described, urging his readers to recognise their common experience, yet he remained

apart from them - intent on deciphering the most cursory detail for the fullness of its meaning. His aim was to redeem city life for its inhabitants, to recover the obvious and the familiar, so that they may perhaps understand where, after all, historically their experiences are located. As such, it is the writings of Georg Simmel, an early influence on Kracauer, that I look to rather than the more accustomed sources of Walter Benjamin and Theodore Adorno to gain an insight into how Kracauer approached the legibility of urban spaces.³

In the first part of the paper, I explore Kracauer's treatment of the 'surface' character of Weimar Berlin, which he took to be expressive of the direction of cultural change at the time. This is done in part through a consideration of what others, mainly the authors cited above, made of Kracauer's shift in outlook towards the emerging mass cultural forms of the time and his embrace of a world of 'surfaces'. In doing so, I try to tease out an urban sensibility that bears the hallmark of Simmel's gift for working through meaningful associations and connections, as well as Kracauer's identified likeness between the superficial topographies of urban life and the montage of experiences revealed through the practices of photography and film.

Following that, I attempt to conjure such a sensibility to make sense of some of the more revealing aspects of Berlin today which, once again, finds itself intoxicated with the new, unsure of how to negotiate the past, and waiting to see what the future holds in store. In particular, I hope to recover an urban montage characterised by a new logic of superficiality and seduction by focussing upon the rational, yet indulgent, spaces of the reconstructed Potsdamer Platz at the heart of the new Berlin. At best, I hope to live up to Kracauer's respect for the radical superficiality of all that we are, as elusive as that may well be for the most of us.

1920s BERLIN JUMBLE In David Frisby's 1990 article, 'Deciphering the hieroglyphics of Weimar Berlin: Siegfried Kracauer', one cannot but be impressed by the sheer range of locations and contexts Kracauer mused over and which, in 1920s and early 30s Berlin, represented a collection of spaces that have since been variously described as 'marginal', 'extreme', 'insignificant' or 'neglected' in terms of their social matter. That Kracauer was attracted, indeed absorbed by, so-called ordinary spaces, those inconspicuous settings that were largely glossed over by the academic and journalistic reportage of the day, is hardly in question. A glance at the cultural spaces of Weimar Berlin explored by him reveals their prosaic character, from his vivid street impressions and architectural images to the passing symbolism so carefully depicted in 'Farewell to the Linden Arcade'⁴ or the spaces of unrelatedness described in 'The Hotel Lobby' which leaves the occupants anonymous and distant from one another in what is clearly an allusion to Simmel's modern condition. But as matter-of-fact as such spaces may be, they do not, as Frisby is inclined to believe, mask a deeper reality; one hidden from view that lies submerged beneath the jumble of Berlin's daily life.

While it is certainly true that Kracauer's absorbed style of investigation

3. See John Allen, 'On Georg Simmel: Proximity, Distance and Movement' in Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift (eds), *Thinking Space*, London and New York, Routledge, 2000.

4. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, London, Verso, 1968 (1930).

5. Siegfried
Kracauer, *History:
The Last Things Before
the Last*, Oxford,
Oxford University
Press, 1969, p55.

is one that is intent on revealing, or deciphering as Frisby's title indicates, the spatial hieroglyphics of Weimar Berlin, his aim is to defamiliarise the familiar, not to trump it. In his final text, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, Kracauer drew explicit attention to the analogous procedures of historiography and the photographic media (a lifelong concern of his, as has been well documented), stressing the importance of the observer to immerse themselves in the frame of meaning, so that what lies before them is 'both left intact and made transparent'.⁵ This, it seems to me, is the redemptive moment in Kracauer, where the plain and ordinary business of people's lives - on the streets, at work, window-shopping, dancing, loitering, waiting, getting from here to there and back again - is something quite extra-ordinary, and thus easily missed. In fact, the significance of such daily routines and rhythms is easily overlooked precisely because they are self-evident: we miss the big picture because we are too close to it, because we are overly familiar with its trappings.

Another way of putting this is to point to the fluidity and connections that more or less make up what we take to be city life in all its unfathomable plenitude. Any attempt to grasp its multifarious detail, no matter how conspicuous, leaves us inevitably with a partial, provisional picture. Yet *through* that amorphous picture it is nonetheless possible to trace the different surface meanings, the connectedness of seemingly disparate phenomena, that render it more or less transparent, more or less legible. This is Martin Jay's 'contingent' realm, where the idle spaces of Kracauer's (1925) hotel lobby, for example, are compared to those of a church (and its congregation) to reveal something of the 'disinterested satisfaction', the 'invalidation of togetherness', the 'purposiveness without purpose' that sets a lobby space apart in its aimless design. Yet the very unrelatedness of those sitting or waiting in the lobby reveals itself through the attraction of the superficial encounter and the ability to disappear behind social masks. As a space of parenthesis, it holds itself apart from what goes on behind guest's doors and in the kitchen alleys, yet it remains connected through its very separateness. In short, it represents nothing more than the *play of surfaces*, which Kracauer asks us to attend to in his own enigmatic phenomenological style.

THE PLAY OF SURFACES

The trope of the 'surface' is not a particularly easy one to work with, given its obvious connotations of a smooth, flat, depthless plane. That is no less true today than it was nearly a century ago, where what lies on the surface is often still directly associated with an insubstantial world of appearances. The implicit vertical imagery which suggests that if you really want to know what is going on, we must somehow plumb the depths, is a hard one to shift. Depth, in this evocation, acts as a synonym for cultural truth, authenticity, or as the locus for a better interpretation of events, as in many psychoanalytical accounts of the everyday. Equally, the metaphor of society as a smooth, flat

surface is one that can give rise to a rather stultifying geography where space amounts to little more than a setting in which events take place, rather than as a source of animation and experience in and of itself. Gertrud Koch, however, in her assessment of Kracauer's thought, and especially his notion of the 'surface-level expressions' of an era, has tried to steer a path around such epistemological dilemmas.⁶

Her starting point, as in many cases, is the much cited introduction to Kracauer's best known essay, 'The Mass Ornament' (1927), the ambiguity of which has lent itself to a range of readings.

The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch's judgments about itself. Since these judgments are expressions of the tendencies of a particular era, they do not offer conclusive testimony about its overall constitution. The surface-level expressions, however, by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things. Conversely, knowledge of this state of things depends on the interpretation of these surface-level expressions. The fundamental substance of an epoch and its unheeded impulses illuminate each other reciprocally.⁷

It is perhaps worth recalling that this opening is sandwiched between a sombre Hölderlin quotation and a disquisition on a modern American dance company, the Tiller Girls, a highly drilled unit renowned for the patterned regularity of their movements - and regarded by Kracauer as a mass cultural ornament: empty and opaque, but no less legitimate in cultural terms because of that. Indeed, the essay itself is often considered to be emblematic of his progressively ambivalent stance towards modernity and its mass cultural forms. What is intriguing about the introduction, however, is that a 'surface-level expression' such as a mass chorus line is said to provide direct, uncomplicated access to the character of an epoch, or in this case to the cultural pulse of a modernising nation such as Weimar Germany. Rather than seen merely as a novel aspect of cultural life, a popular dance spectacle, inconspicuous by the standards of 'high' culture, is taken to be (ornamentally) symbolic of an emergent mass society. What depth of meaning there may be is paraded on the surface, so to speak, not handed down in a mediated fashion 'from above' by the judgements of those who claim prior knowledge of an era's countenance.

But there is a twist to this, as Koch recognised, in so far as the people who make up the surface flux of daily life through their diverse relationships and experiences are often the least conscious of their situation. According to Kracauer, they remain largely oblivious to the social clues that surround them; unaware, that is, of what historically their presence is helping to shape and thus broadly unable to read the signs of the times. For Koch, such signs are best understood through a *spatial* lens, as so many ornamental clues strewn

6. Gertrud Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer: An Introduction* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2000).

7. Siegfried Kracauer, 'The Mass Ornament' in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1995 [1963, 1927], p75.

8. See also, Steve Giles, 'Cracking The Cultural Code: Methodological Reflections on Kracauer's "The Mass Ornament"' in *Radical Philosophy*, 99 (1999): 31-39.

across the surface of society, rather than in psychoanalytical terms as the dream-like manifestations of a deeper unconscious.⁸ With the extravagant geometric dance patterns produced by the Tiller Girls, for instance, the composed ornament appears on stage, but the dancers themselves do not necessarily appreciate the mass figure in its entirety, in much the same way that the masses moving across one another in the metropolis may not fully grasp the significance of the changes going on all around them. In 1920s Berlin, for example, Kracauer insisted that the 'modernised' Linden Arcade no longer symbolised a world of detached fantasy with its motley collection of knick-knacks, kitsch and memorabilia on display. Whereas, previously, it had been distinct from the aimless trappings of commercial culture, now,

under a new glass roof and adorned in marble, the former arcade looks like the vestibule of a department store. The shops are still there, but its postcards are mass-produced commodities, its World Panorama has been superseded by a cinema, and its Anatomical Museum has long ceased to cause a sensation. All the objects have been struck dumb. They huddle timidly behind the empty architecture, which, for the time being, acts completely neutral but may later spawn who knows what - perhaps fascism, or perhaps nothing at all. What would be the point of an arcade [*passage*] in a society that is itself only a passageway?⁹

9. Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, op. cit., p342.

What has been lost and replaced in the spaces of the arcade for Kracauer thus held the clue to the nature of the transition from an enchanted era to a more shapeless modernity. Mapping the surface phenomenon of his time therefore was not something that he undertook to reveal the obviousness of the things around him - postcards as a visual reminder of the past versus their mass produced version, for instance - but an attempt to give an allegorical reading of such spaces and their ornamentation. As a materialist phenomenology of daily life, to use Thomas Levin's assessment of the *The Mass Ornament* essays,¹⁰ the play of surfaces described by Kracauer provides the ornamental clues which enable him to decipher the complex, and often contradictory, cultural mood of Weimer Berlin. It was, for him at least, a time when surface *was* depth.

10. Thomas Levin, 'Introduction' to Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, op. cit., pp1-30.

SURFACE DISTRACTIONS

This was not a view that he had always held, however. As Mülder-Bach and others have shown, Kracauer's initial evaluation of the direction of modern life was decidedly pessimistic,¹¹ with a clear disaffection for the superficial trappings of modernity and the empty isolation of the big cities. Berlin of the 1920s was a city of staggering growth and change, almost doubling in size over the decade and host to a scale of construction not unlike the present day, with new roads, factories, offices, hospitals, theatres, galleries, opera houses and the like, giving the city its modern 'vanguard' status. The air of progress

11. Mülder-Bach, 'History as Autobiography', op. cit..

and celebration of the new also witnessed the growth of a new class of worker, the white collar or salaried class, who were enthusiastic about the new styles of consumption, fashion, film and leisure taking root in the city. Kracauer was not slow in both describing and judging the new mood, bemoaning the cultural loss brought about by the trivialisation of culture and a metropolitan existence that was, in his eyes, essentially shallow and without meaning. Over the decade, however, he was to reassess the worth and significance of the new styles of cultural distraction, and with that his approach to life as it is lived 'on the surface'.

In his 1922 essay, 'Those who wait', Kracauer muses in a metaphysical vein on what it is 'to wait' when faced with different possible routes to a more fulfilled future. Hansen identifies this essay as a turning point for Kracauer, away from his earlier cultural pessimism towards a more open understanding that people find meaning and security in various ways, including that of short-circuited distraction from the routine, humdrum nature of much white collar work as it was at the time.¹² The rising world of mass consumption and entertainment, as a form of distraction, was something that Kracauer was soon to recognise for the possibilities that it held for transcending the modern condition.

12. Hansen, 'Decentric Perspectives' *op. cit.*

Rather than reject the consumerist 'follies' of modernism as a needless distraction, as one might have anticipated, he now subjected to scrutiny the phenomenon of 'distraction' itself. In some of his better known essays of the period, 'The Mass Ornament' (1927), 'Cult of Distraction' (1926), and 'The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies' (1927), he reworked the theme of cultural lack and the loss of meaning to present a more ambivalent attitude to the spectacle of modern mass culture. With pointed reference to the products of 'American distraction factories' (of which the Tiller Girls dance act was one, analogous in Kracauer's mind to the formless abstraction of Taylorist production), in particular, mass cinema, theatre and dance, he argued that these styles of distraction had now become a necessary reference point to understand the modern condition.

Berliners, on this view, sought refuge from the rationalisation of their working lives in the equally formless spheres of consumption because it allowed them a reprieve from the monotony of punching cards at the office, selling soft furnishings in the department store or making up accounts at the bank. The new forms of mass culture allowed them simply to be, without having to pretend otherwise. The role of popular film as a source of escape from routine, for example, also provided a means of seeing themselves as they would like to be: a celluloid fantasy that promised that it could all be very different, somehow, sometime, someplace. This release from daily routine was not, as Kracauer now understood, a part of life's epiphenomena, but rather part of its very constitution, where popular film and cinema articulated the dreams, desires and wishes of Berlin's new service class.

The welcome nature of such distractions, no matter how unrealistic or inauthentic they may be dubbed, were now seen by Kracauer to make up for

a different kind of lack other than a spiritual or intellectual one: the lack of meaning imposed by the mundane and monotonous routine of white collar work. Mass culture rather than elite culture he understood as part of the everyday, something that is simultaneously public, superficial and in keeping with the needs of the time. Commenting on the lofty ideals of certain high art forms which had lost touch with the needs of ordinary lives, Kracauer observed that:

In a profound sense, Berlin audiences act truthfully when they increasingly shun these art events (which, for good reason, remain caught in mere pretence), preferring instead the surface glamour of the stars, films, revues, and spectacular shows. Here, in pure externality, the audience encounters itself; its own reality is revealed in the fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions. Were this reality to remain hidden from the viewers, they could neither attack nor change it; its disclosure in distraction is therefore of *moral* significance.¹³

13. Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, op. cit. p326.

Life in Weimer Berlin, in this sense, for Kracauer, was lived on the surface, in all its fragmented, superficial and often seemingly ‘unreal’ qualities. It may have still held for him a sense of disenchantment, but there was equally a wonder at the directness and immediacy of daily life which opened a window on the Weimar era.

SUPERFICIAL TOPOGRAPHIES

Kracauer’s interest in the superficial, however, does not imply that his own analyses were superficial. On the contrary, his observations on the routine, often banal, experiences of the newly formed white collar workforce serialised in the daily newspaper, *Die Frankfurter Zeitung* (of which he was both journalist and bureau editor) and published in book form in 1930 under the title *Die Angestellten (The Salaried Masses)*¹⁴ provide a stark account of the tedious, gruelling nature of so much office work. A mix of reportage, anecdote, random observation, selective conversations, documentation and subjective judgement, the book wears its opinions unreflexively, as indeed does much of Kracauer’s ethnographic writing. With a subtitle ‘From the newest Germany’, the book attempts to convey what it means to be a member of the new service class, the experience of vulnerability and the general feeling of resignation felt in the face of sweeping economic change.

14. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, London, Verso, 1998 (1930).

The mind-numbing nature of much white collar work, its arbitrary and often petty conventions, as well as its precarious character, were captured by Kracauer and portrayed as a diagnosis of the times. Yet, as he pointed out, the thronging mass of salaried employees in 1920s Berlin, whose lives unfolded on the public stage, were among those who least grasped their predicament or recognised the changed circumstances that now surrounded them. The very ordinary nature of people’s lives, the fact that such performances took

place quite openly, is precisely why things were taken for granted. Nothing is hidden from view, no crucial meanings are concealed, yet the economic mood of an era is overlooked simply because it is experienced as ordinary and mundane.

What is also striking about Kracauer's observational style, however, is that, in attempting to convey the fullness of employment change, he deliberately chose richly textured cases to make his point, 'exemplary instances of reality', as he referred to them in the Preface to the book.

In much the same way that he believed that the ornamental signs strewn across the surface of society provided the clue to the modern cultural condition, so the absorbing cases revealed by Kracauer are used to illuminate what had hitherto been overlooked; namely, the modernisation of the metropolitan service economy. The working lives of individual figures - sales employees, accountants, cashiers, shorthand typists, junior managers, trainees, punch card operators - are carved in relief against a background of mechanisation and rationalisation. Yet the chequered experiences which make up this new arrangement are not collected together to provide a general picture of the modern world of work. Rather they retain their case-like status - as revealing snapshots, single observations, framed close-ups - of what, for instance, it is to be on the edge of employment, subject to the whims of paternalistic management, or subject to the commercialisation of their feelings.

Hansen, Koch, and Mülder-Bach, among others, have all drawn attention to the focussed quality of Kracauer's reportage, where the import of superficial instances is drawn out to reveal the surface as depth.¹⁵ Nor has it escaped such observers that Kracauer's interest in the superficial topography of Berlin life reflected a sustained interest in another of his preoccupations: namely, that of film camerawork and photography. A first inkling of this is to be found in his 'Photography' essay,¹⁶ but it is in his *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*¹⁷ and, as noted, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*,¹⁸ that the close 'affinities' between film's representational practices and the topographical flow of everyday life are highlighted.

In much the same way that the empathetic 'reporter' may work with conversations, interviews and documentary evidence to reveal something of the rich texture of city life in 'close-up', so the photographer may work with film to bring to life aspects of the everyday that we habitually overlook or fail to see because of their 'obviousness'. Both journalistic investigation and the photography, in this line of thought, attempt a similar job of redemption by foregrounding the surface connections, the chance configurations, the unposed and unscripted nature of daily life. If perhaps Kracauer placed a little too much faith in the ability of photographers to realise this quest, photography nonetheless holds a certain potential for capturing the fullness of the world in indeterminate flow. In common with the attentive reporter, the task of the mindful photographer, according to Kracauer, is precisely to decipher the play of surfaces: in this case, to capture the jumble of people's lives, its happenstances and contingent reckonings, on film.

15. Hansen 'Decentric Perspectives', op. cit; Koch *Siegfried Kracauer*, op. cit; Mülder-Bach, 'History as Autobiography', op. cit., and 'Introduction' to *The Salaried Masses*, op. cit.

16. 'Photography' in *The Mass Ornament*, op. cit.

17. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1960.

18. Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969.

Although much depends on the associations triggered by photographic images, the densely textured instances that reporters and photographers alike strive to create also recall a similar film technique: that of *montage*. Indeed, much has been made of the resemblance in style between the montage of journalistic materials gathered by Kracauer and the composite images of the montage-minded film maker.¹⁹ It is important to stress, however, that whatever common ground there is between these practices, Kracauer held very definite views on montage. Basically, he had little time for what he saw as montages constructed from contrived sequences of film, where an image is pieced together less for its content and rather more for the novelty realised through juxtaposition and overlay.

The point is easily missed, whereas, in fact, a concern and worry about misplaced images and forced associations is one that recurs throughout Kracauer's work, from his journalistic writings through to his studies of film and history. At root, it is a concern to avoid artifice and, as Heide Schlüpmann in particular has emphasised, to recognise that even a single frame or 'close-up' is in many respects *already* a montage: for what it reveals as much as for what it suggests, for what is present as much as for what is absent.²⁰ In that sense, anything that 'photographs life', to borrow Kracauer's own assessment of his journalistic writings,²¹ by deciphering the familiar picture-writing of the city, may claim to be an *urban* montage.

With that in mind, I want to turn now to some of the more ornamental spaces that, for some, have captured a sense of what Berlin is becoming today. Not, I should add, to provide a series of juxtaposed images which supposedly capture the depth of recent change, but rather, in the spirit of Kracauer, to offer a close-up of a surface, the obviousness of which belies its radical superficiality.

FROM THE NEWEST BERLIN ...

In present-day Berlin, much has been made of the fact that the city is once again at the sharp end of modernity, in a manner not unlike the 1920s and 1930s where it found itself successively renegotiating its recent past.²² Kracauer, I am sure, would have been among the first to recognise the ornamental clues strewn across the contemporary re-surfacing of Berlin at the beginning of the twenty first century. Indeed, in one sense, it could be argued that the new national capital is overdressed with symbolic meaning, from Norman Foster's glass-domed gesture to democracy, the Reichstag, and Daniel Libeskind's void at the heart of the Jewish Museum to the distracting glass and brick-clad structures at Potsdamer Platz erected by Helmut Jahn and Renzo Piano.²³ It is not this kind of overstated symbolism, however, which acts as a pointer to a preferred future that, to my mind, would have caught Kracauer's spatial imagination. Rather, it is the inconspicuous surface expressions inscribed in such spaces that, I think, Kracauer would have sought to decipher. Of these spaces, it is the superficial topography of the

19. Hansen, 'Introduction' to *Theory of Film*, op. cit.; Levin, 'Introduction' to *The Mass Ornament*, op. cit.; Mülder-Bach, 'Introduction' to *The Salaried Masses*, op. cit.

20. Heide Schlüpmann, 'The Subject of Survival: On Kracauer's "Theory of Film" in *New German Critique*, 54 (1991): 111-125.

21. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, op. cit.

22. See Alexandra Richie, *Faust's Metropolis: A History of Berlin*, London, Harper Collins, 1999.

23. See N. Howe, 'Berlin Mitte' in *Dissent* (Winter, 1998): 71-81.

developments at Potsdamer Platz that I wish to map in a montage-minded manner; that is, as a 'close-up' which hopefully reveals something new and unsuspecting about the contemporary urban experience.²⁴

SURFACE AS DEPTH

Potsdamer Platz today is dominated, visually and in a corporate sense, by two developments, the Debis quarter which houses the headquarters of the Daimler Chrysler Corporation, and the Sony Centre. Of the two complexes, Sony's range of consumer offerings - bars, restaurants, a style store, an urban entertainment centre complete with IMAX 3D cinema and an eight-screen cinema bloc - leaves the casual bystander in no doubt as to the purpose of the space. It is effectively a setting for the commercial display and purchase of Sony's archive of films, music and entertainment software - from Sony Play Stations and online movies to all manner of electronic wizardry. It is a space given over to pure indulgence, a modern-day distraction outlet for those who wish to browse, walk through, touch and move on - a space that is itself the experience and has no other purpose than to seduce. Everything is pure externality, where the excess is intended not hidden or apologised for, and the surface meaning reveals itself for the commercial spectacle that it is.

In one respect, the social relations, design and layout of the space reflect the decidedly rational organisation of the cultural experience that is on offer: a commercial operation run along corporate lines and self-styled as a space of 'edutainment'. It is without doubt a 'branded' space, branded by Sony as an arena of cultural consumption. There is no attempt, nor indeed any need, to conceal this fact. It is what it says it is. Yet, at one and the same time, for all those who go there to browse, the space opens up a window on a less obvious economy: the commercialisation of the insubstantial.²⁵

In this self-styled space of entertainment, its register is not so much the wholesale re-creation of entertainment values as one of pleasure, relaxation and indulgence. Those moving around the complex find themselves pulled by spontaneity and impulsiveness, rather than by any direct or covert steer. In truth, this has less to do with a modern day sense of distraction and rather more to do with an attempt to construct new commercial subjects through exposure to a range of sensory pleasures drawn from advertising, design and display. In this emergent economy of affect, it is the *experience* of the space itself that provides the commercial offering. The connectedness of commodities to feelings which register through the design of the space, the association between cultural images and emotions on display, and the marketing of Sony as a sensual event, all speak to the commercialisation of affect. At minimum, the experience generates an interest in Sony's merchandise, perhaps reinforcing a preference for its brand of goods over its competitors which may or may not be reflected in future sales and profits, but not for want of trying to seed such a possibility.

It comes back to the point that whilst much of this new experiential

24. This paper is based on research undertaken with Allan Cochrane, Adrian Passmore and Michael Pryke, with the help of an ESRC award, R000222431, *Berlin Models: Reconstructing European Futures in The Contemporary City*.

25. Nigel Thrift, 'Elsewhere' in N. Cummings, and M. Lewandowska (eds), *Capital*, London, Tate Publishing, 2001.

economy may not be self-evident, it is nonetheless there for all to see, hear and touch in spaces like the Sony complex. The nature of the indulgence may appear superficial, seeking to take advantage of attitudes and tastes already present among consumers, but the experience does not mask anything deeper or more profound. The realm of the insubstantial is not clamped on to a more 'real' world of durable electronic goods and commodities; it is simply part of the play of surfaces and no less meaningful because of that. As such, familiarity belies its economic significance, whether we come to recognise it or not.

OPEN WALLS

There is another sense, too, in which Sony's elliptical central plaza, a generous space open to the public and laid out under a dramatic tent-like roof structure does not reveal itself. Again, nothing is hidden from view, and yet a new kind of public space - accessible but closed, inclusive yet controlled - has emerged whose openness makes it that much harder to pin down.

Open public spaces are usually equated with accessibility and whether the aim is to mix shopping with browsing or relaxation with entertainment, the choice to walk away, to opt out, is always available. In Sony's commercialised public space, which opens directly onto the street from a number of broad entrances, the invitation to mingle, circulate and loiter is built into the design and layout. People can walk through the hospitable complex, cut across it, indulge themselves, and imagine that they are at the heart of Berlin's reconstructed metropolis. Yet the peculiar feature of this plaza is that, as an open space, it is regularised, predictable and far from chaotic.

Whilst the movements of the browsing public are unscripted, in a manner that Kracauer would have understood, people appear to move around the plaza in more or less scripted ways, enticed by the experiences and the settings laid out for temptation. Visitors seem to move this rather than that way, tend to walk in one direction rather than another, as if they were responding to the invitations and suggestions inscribed in the layout. Closure in this kind of accessible space is all about seduction, in the sense that our desires and wants are indulged in selective ways and also in the sense that we remain largely oblivious to the scripted nature of such open spaces. Power, oddly enough, in this new type of public space, works through *inclusion* rather than exclusion.²⁶

It is perhaps hard to shrug off the idea that power in an urban context is all about spatial exclusion, the social rules or physical barriers that restrict entry or movement. In truth, Sony's complex is a privatised space, closed off for spectacles such as film premieres, yet one designed as an open, accessible space where people are free to enter without the constraint of barriers or discriminating rules of entry. No doubt surveillance techniques are in place, but it is not that type of watchful power which controls the space. In precisely the same way that the experience of the space itself provides the commercial

26. See John Allen, *J. Lost Geographies of Power*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2003.

offering, so too does that experience operate as a practice of inclusion. The suggestive pull of the layout, design and practices do not talk to a rule-bound logic imposed from above, but rather to a logic of superficiality. The logic works through people being encouraged to feel free to mill around, hang out, watch others, take a coffee, pass the time of day, shop, consume and leave. Because everything is on the surface, because nothing is hidden or covert, it makes the workings of this kind of power all the more elusive.

At issue is the legibility of such spaces, where closed-circuit television cameras and uniformed staff do not tell us all that there is to know about the nature of power in such places. As noted, there is little that is chaotic or unpredictable about Sony's composed open space. Despite the abundance of seating, there are no street scenes which made Potsdamer Platz the magnet for passers-by in Kracauer's day (or in Simmel's too for that matter). In many respects, Sony's central plaza is an impersonal, sanitised space where meaningful exchange is possible without people having to know about the ins and outs of each other's personal lives. But that, after all, is what it is intended to be. Its visible qualities of openness, accessibility and inclusiveness are clues that can be read as symptomatic of this new style of space in the public realm, where power no longer needs to be signposted to be effective.

MORE OR LESS PRESENT

The idea that there are things close to us which make them difficult to see extends to the *absences* that make up social spaces. The 'empathic absorption'²⁷ that Kracauer spoke about when observers try to capture the fullness of the experience in front of them includes what is beyond the 'frame' too: how a space refers beyond itself, points to past as well as distant associations, which are all nonetheless part of its surface meaning. One of the more striking observations about Potsdamer Platz as a designed space is the extent to which Berlin's past is resolutely absent from it, whereas elements of elsewhere appear solidly in the frame. Both history and geography surround the development, which, when looked at close-up, constitute a 'fringe of indistinct multiple meanings'.²⁸

27. Kracauer, *History*, op. cit., p56.

28. *Ibid.*, p59.

At first glance, the development is not about Berlin at all, with its high-rise, brick-clad buildings and extroverted use of glass, stainless steel and aluminium. There is no indulgence in a style of architecture reminiscent of Berlin's Prussian past, where local stone and low-line development were favoured, or any real attempt to tap into the symbolic significance of the site as an historic interchange at the heart of Berlin's city life before the Second World War. Neither do selected moments from Berlin's recent past - from Bismark's imperial Prussian past, to its Weimar and Nazi moments, to its legacy as a divided city between the GDR and the West - make an appearance on site, so to speak. And yet, such absences are hard to miss. The conscious decision not to celebrate the past is such a strong statement that the past becomes present through its obvious absence. The material and social connections with

29. See Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2003.

30. Michael Pryke, 'The White Noise of Capitalism' in *Cultural Geography*, 9, 3 (2002).

31. See Allan Cochrane and Andrew Jonas, 'Reimagining Berlin: World City, National Capital or Ordinary Place', in *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 6, 2 (1999): 145-164.

the past are brought to bear on the present in such a stark fashion - through their omission - that they themselves are rendered transparent.²⁹

Interestingly, what unites the spaces of Potsdamer Platz is their relentless aim to display the present. Yet in treating the past as one monolithic bloc, the site's diverse histories interrupt the present in both a mocking and a surreal way. The only fully intact building in the whole development that can lay claim to the past, for instance, is the Hans Huth, an impressive five storey building with its grey stone facade largely unscathed. However, because it stands apart from the modern architecture that surrounds it, it wears its history in an obvious, theatrical way. The idea that it *is* history is lost in the play of difference between it and the rest of the modern buildings, revealing it as part of the commercial spectacle - part of the experience to be consumed.

The irony of much of this is that while the past is present through its absence, much of the rest of the world is only too present. The Sony complex, in particular, is a space that refers beyond itself to draw in the worlds of finance, commerce, information and media.³⁰ Films, music and entertainment software, along with interiors, layouts, materials and architecture, are pulled in from elsewhere to give the site a global presence. The obviousness of this set of connections, however, belies the fact that such symbolism is not so much about the present, as about the future. The symbolism can perhaps best be read as anticipatory, as a sign of something yet to come, which at present is absent: Berlin as a European, global consumer city. As such, it reveals more about how certain groups in Berlin want to see themselves than it does about the contradictions and ambivalences of present-day Berlin.³¹

This, I think, is precisely the kind of indeterminate issue that, in Kracauer's mode of analysis, would fall just outside the frame. But, and perhaps this is the main point, in likening his analytical approach to the practice of montage, all such absences form part of a connected whole, where the associations are neither forced, nor contrived. A 'close-up' of a particular space such as Potsdamer Platz, in this line of thought, plays across the presence/absence dichotomy in both a suggestive and a revealing manner. It forms part of an urban topography intended, in this case, to recover something of the mood of the newest Berlin: its uncertainty about its future role and identity as a German city.

In taking the surface expressions of Potsdamer Platz as in some way revealing of trends in present-day Berlin and, more generally, of the commercialisation of public space, I know that I am in danger of extrapolating a little too far. I leave it to others to judge, but I do wish to press the point that it is possible to redeem the fullness of city life through the most cursory detail, where the superficial topography of an urban setting becomes the object to be deciphered and its meaning laid bare. The montage of experiences that makes up Sony's central plaza, for instance, has in a *single frame* the potential

to reveal the insubstantial, surface relationships which characterise such a rational space and, at the same time, what precisely those relationships add up to historically. It seems to me that this is Kracauer's legacy (or one of them at least), where the legibility of urban spaces revealed through the play of its surfaces opens up a window on the contemporary era.

It suggests that if we shift attention to the inconspicuous spaces of contemporary urban life rather than dwell on their iconic counterparts, we may learn more about the nature of the changes going on around us from their surface distractions and superficial characteristics than from any number of conspicuous architectural symbols. It also suggests that any such analysis would be far from superficial, with the familiarity of the experiences which comprise such spaces making it all too easy to miss their broader significance. Whether it is Kracauer's 'contingent', often aimless, spaces of Weimar Berlin which occupy the frame of inquiry or the increasingly commercialised spaces of today's urban culture, it is their very familiarity which has the potential to render them all the more elusive.

It is this urban sensibility which distinguishes Kracauer's approach to Berlin life. Although perhaps everything that one needs to know about an urban culture may be right in front of us, on the surface, its meaning is neither obvious nor straightforward. Sometimes one may be too close to take in what is happening around us, too much a part of the superficial to make out emergent forms and imperfections. This, to my mind, is the strength of Kracauer's phenomenological approach, in that it enables us to describe the many familiar spaces that we inhabit, whilst simultaneously setting them in a context that challenges and unsettles such certainties.