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Adorno, Benjamin, and Kracauer on the Politics of Sensory Perception

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Hansen, Miriam Bratu. 2012. *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 380 pp.

Miriam Hansen's thorough investigation and close reading of the writings on film and mass culture by Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno, makes her book a major contribution to contemporary Film and Media Studies, given that it defies commonly held assumptions and reveals novel theorizations by these three key thinkers from the Frankfurt School of critical theory. Hansen's critical exploration of Siegfried Kracauer's theories are particularly welcome, since—apart from his canonical book, *Theory of Film* (1960), which often appears in Cinema Studies programs—his writings are barely known outside of German-language critical debates, and may bring timely ideas to the discussion on the fate of film and photography in our current digital media world.

As Hansen explains in Part I and IV of the book, Kracauer's film theory has its motor in a particular relationship to the world of *things*, within a singular sort of materialism inspired by a combination of Jewish messianism, Gnosticism, and Marxist thought. Beyond revealing things in their habitual interdependence with human life, and capturing the traces of social, psychic, erotic relations, film is capable of rendering objects in their material *thingness*, "of giving the presumably dead world of things a form of speech" (16). Film and photography are therefore the most suitable media to express the Gnostic vision of creation and transformation: given the material connection of their images with the world represented, as well as the mortification, fragmentation, framing, and reconfiguration involved in cinematic editing and photographic exposure.

According to Hansen, the essay "Photography" that Kracauer wrote in 1927 is central to his Gnostic-materialist theory of film. Because photography amalgamates the dead and ghostly fragments of things with the incongruous assertion of a living presence, Kracauer attributes to photography "the decisive role in the historical confrontation between human consciousness and nature" (34). Although *nature* is often an allegorical designation for a given immutable reality, Kracauer insists that it is a category inseparable from history, that through the capitalist industrial mode of production it

has become an altered *physis* or *second nature*. Accordingly, photographs not merely replicate but are themselves part of nature; like the commodities they depict, they are material objects that configure new relations with the human (36). And if for Kracauer the fact that the world "devours" images of objects is a symptom of the fear and denial of death, he nevertheless discerns in both photography and film "the unprecedented possibility of confronting the subject with contingency and mortality" (32), and of reconfiguring the elements of nature in an emancipatory way (37/39).

In *Theory of Film*, Kracauer further grounds a material aesthetics of the cinema in the photographic basis of film. Additionally to the analysis of the published book, Hansen explores the sequence of writings that led to its final draft: from a preliminary statement (1948), through the Marseille Notebooks (1949), until the first full-length version (1954). Contesting the idea—put forward by critics early on, among them Pauline Kael—that the book focuses on cinematic realism, Hansen argues that Kracauer's work is a phenomenological project on cinema as a sensory-perceptual matrix of experience.

In Kracauer's terms, film's affinity with the material world does not rest in any narrow notion of representational verisimilitude, but instead in its ability to both resemble and decompose that world, making us experience both alienation and similitude (277); and *camera reality* designates the intertwining of the life world with the material reality of the viewer as embodied subject of perception, memory, and experience (278). Film involves the viewer as a corporeal being, shattering the integrity of individual identity through sensational immediacy and multiple viewpoints. Film has the power to render the flow of life, to present a material world that subjects inhabit and experience together, and therefore has ecological and collective implications, offering new modes of seeing, comprehending, and remembering. Hansen notes that Kracauer's concepts blend an historical approach with a phenomenological one, making his film theory resurface in contemporary film criticism by authors such as Deleuze, Guattari, Blanchot and Merleau-Ponty.

In Part II of the book, devoted to the writings on film and mass culture by Walter Benjamin, Hansen offers an unusual and groundbreaking reading of his theories. In effect, her analysis of the many different versions of Benjamin's seminal article, "The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility" (1936) not only defamiliarizes the essay by rethinking its claims, but also makes it available for alternative readings. For example, in relation to *aura*, Hansen explores the range of meanings/configurations that it acquires in several of Benjamin's writings, elucidating his ambivalence toward the concept. Thus, although in the artwork essay the concept appears restrictive (describing the mode of works of art as transmitted by tradition, or within a fetishistic cult of beautiful semblance),

in other writings it figures as a "genuine" medium of experience or as a form of perception that "endows a phenomenon with the ability to look back at us", to return our gaze (106).

According to Hansen, Benjamin's critique of the Western aesthetic tradition (which, among other things, perpetuated notions of beautiful semblance and creative genius) are linked to a wider notion of the aesthetic, closer to the original Greek meaning of *aisthēsis* as theory of perception. For Benjamin there is no beyond or outside of technology, since technology under capitalist commodity production has already altered the human body *sensorium*. Thus, in his later writings (e.g., *One-Way Street)* Benjamin was preoccupied with the alienation of the senses through hyperstimulation, and the possibility of undoing this alienation. Because he held that such undoing can only be accomplished on the terrain of technology itself, film has a key role in performing this task, for not only does it participate in the pathologies of industrial-capitalist technology, but it also provides a way of experience that enables a sensory recognition of self-alienation. At stake is how human beings will appropriate the new body and the new *physis*/nature that is being organized through technology, so as to bring them under control.

Other concepts by Benjamin that are discussed in Hansen's book include *innervation*, *mimetic faculty*, *optical unconscious* and *Spiel* (play/performance). The concept of innervation—referring to "a neurophysiological process that mediates between internal and external, psychic and motoric, human and machinic registers" (133)—plays a crucial role in Benjamin's efforts to imagine a progressive reception of technology (film), in perceptual, social, and political terms. In Benjamin's techno-utopian views, by imbricating body-space and image-space, film enables a *collective innervation* that can reverse "the spiral of shock-anesthetics-aestheticization" which the same media has helped proliferate (153/162). The possibility to engage the senses differently, and to effect a regeneration of affect by means of mechanically produced images, lies in the emergence of new modes of configuring body-space and image-space, so as to articulate a new relation with the material world (153). This implies an emancipatory aesthetics of film that utilizes the camera's exploratory, cognitive, and liberating possibilities (164).

Through the process of innervation, film can be a tool of totalitarian mass mobilization but also, alternatively, hold a consciousness-raising therapeutic role. Benjamin develops such therapeutic arguments in reference to Walt Disney's early Mickey Mouse cartoons, that shake up the audience with bodily experienced collective laughter through the parodistic incorporation of technology by the animation figures. As a result, they help diffuse and neutralize the mass psychoses engendered by the industrialist-capitalist misadaptation of technology, and perform a preemptive release of destructive unconscious energies (163-82).

Hansen considers that Benjamin's actuality lies in his very structure of thinking: in the way he works through extreme antithetical positions, and thereby highlights contradictions in media culture itself. Such "radical ambivalence" or "ontology of extremes" is manifest when on the one hand he welcomes the new media of his time because they put an end to the cultural heritage of bourgeois-humanist notions of art, and on the other laments the decline of auratic experience and historical memory due to the excessive stimuli brought about by technology (80-2). Such an ability to imagine both vast possibilities and deadly risks in technological media practices makes Benjamin's thinking in many ways more pertinent to the emergent media of our times, offering us chances to think about their potentials and effects in less binary ways.

In contrast to Benjamin's reflections on film/technological reproduction as an emancipatory force alongside the masses/proletariat, and to Kracauer's perception of cinema (including commercial cinema) as a blueprint for an alternative public sphere, Adorno's critique of the culture industry, and of film as its most characteristic medium, has generally discouraged interest from within the discipline of Film Studies towards his ideas. Part III of Hansen's book, however, traces alternative impulses in Adorno's thinking on film, through writings other than his "media-pessimistic" *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944).

Adorno's most important contributions to film aesthetics consist of "Transparencies on Film", an essay he wrote in 1966; and of *Composing for the Films*, a book-length critical analysis of film music practices in Hollywood that he co-authored with Hanns Eisler in 1944. Remarkably, he was also involved in filmmaking from 1943 to 1946, having authored several treatment versions of *Below the Surface*, an experimental film project on anti-Semitism. Adding to these sources, Hansen, similarly infers significant aesthetic comments on film in Adorno's writings on art in general.

Like Benjamin and Kracauer, Adorno observed the transformation of human sensory perception and subjectivity accomplished through technology; however, where the former stress and acclaim the collective nature of such transformation, Adorno insists on the mediation of collective experience by the individual (214). According to Adorno, "emancipated film" should wrest the collectivity from an unconscious and irrational influence, and instead engage it in self-reflexive reason.

Valuing the importance of "autonomous" art, Adorno insists that art's affinity with "medieval" artisanal praxis, and its continued individual mode of production, puts it into conflict with the industrial-capitalist deployment of technology (212). Hence, rather than envisioning artistic technique being liberated by technological possibilities, he argues that the primacy of reproduction technology

curbs the autonomous development of technique in the aesthetic sense (215). Artworks' adaptation of industrial standards eliminates their difference from the world of commodities (213):

> Technology opens up unlimited opportunities for art in the future, and even in the poorest motion pictures there are moments when such opportunities are strikingly apparent . . . [but] the same principle that has opened up these opportunities also ties them to big business. (Adorno, cited 216)

Nonetheless, Adorno proposes an emancipated film aesthetics that "retemporalizes time", against the neutralization and abstraction of time produced by the mass culture industry. Accordingly, he suggests that film (like music) is capable of negating empirical time or chronometric duration, resembling an associative stream of consciousness or a subjective mode of experience. Instead of inciting the viewer "to move along as if in a procession", film may express *inner duration* and enable "the duration of the transient" through multiple mobilities—such as *mise-en-scène*, focal length and focus, slow and fast motion, lighting and color, camera movement, and the rhythm of editing—that move and set off images against each other within a layered dynamics (236-50).

As Hansen notes, the key question for the three critical theorists was "which role technological media were playing in the historic restructuration of subjectivity: whether they were giving rise to new forms of imagination, expression, and collectivity, or whether they were merely perfecting techniques of subjection and domination" (163-4). Ultimately, that may be why Hansen's book makes such a significant contribution to Film and Media Studies: because in our age of global and digital proliferation of images and sounds, the issue of the organization and politics of sensory perception is still, and perhaps even more, of paramount importance.

Note:

Miriam Hansen (1949-2011)

Author of several books on early European and North-American cinema as a "vernacular modernist" medium, and on the emergence of film spectatorship in its relation to the historical transformation of the public sphere, Miriam Hansen established the University of Chicago's Cinema and Media Studies Program in 1990, a department which she subsequently led for two decades. A native of Germany, she received her Ph.D. from the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität in Frankfurt in 1975, studying with Jürgen Habermas and Theodor Adorno, among others. Her last book, *Cinema and Experience*, published posthumously in 2012, is proof of her expertise on the film theorists and Marxist philosophers associated with the Frankfurt School of social theory, as well as of her belief that New Media follows Cinema's project of innervating human perception in novel ways.