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## Anti-Fascist Aesthetics from Weimar to MoMA: Siegfried Kracauer & the Promise of Abstraction for Critical Theory

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Anti-Fascist Aesthetics from Weimar to MoMA: Siegfried Kracauer & the Promise of  
Abstraction for Critical Theory

by

Maxximilian Seijo

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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with a concentration in Film Studies  
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## Abstract

This thesis re-examines the life's work of German-American critical theorist, Siegfried Kracauer, to recover abstraction from tacit historical associations with modern fascism. Evoked in critical theory more generally, the abstraction-to-fascism-teleology imagines 20th century fascism as the dialectical fulfillment of modern alienation. Rooting such alienation in the flawed Liberal and Marxist conceptions of monetary relations, critical theorists conduct their aesthetic analyses via ambivalent condemnations of abstraction's assumed primordial alienation. In the thesis, I critique the abstraction-to-fascism-teleology through an affirmation of neochartalist political economy's conception of money's essential publicness and abundance. Drawing from this abstract legal mediation, I trace Kracauer's various condemnations of abstraction along the terms of his embodied contradiction among the WWII and Cold War fiscal mobilizations to illuminate repressed pleas for abstract mediation within his work and midcentury aesthetic realism broadly. Further, I move from the midcentury moment to the Weimar moment in order to locate potential in Kracauer's early affirmation of abstraction as a communal medium. I find such affirmations neglected in the Liberal and Marxist responses to the unemployment crises of the Great Depression in Germany. By looking to Kracauer's Weimar essays on architecture and photography, as well as a reading of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), I pinpoint historical and contemporary promise in their commitment to the inclusive potential of abstraction's (no)thingness, a commitment that was mirrored in the proposed monetary issuance of the WTB public

works plan of 1932, which was ultimately rejected by the Social Democratic Party of Germany in the lead up to their defeat in the parliamentary elections of 1933 and the Nazis' rise to power.

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Whatever knowledge one can therefore bring to these [Weimar] films, from cinema history or art history, from economics, from textual analysis, from film theory or audience research, it is unlikely that it will dislodge that now quasi-existential bond between a group of films and the subsequent fate of the society that produced and consumed them.<sup>1</sup>

**- Thomas Elsaesser**

*Introduction*

On November 26, 1966, critical theorist Siegfried Kracauer died in New York City of complications related to pneumonia, leaving his final book *History: The Last Things Before the Last* unfinished. Posthumously assembled and published, the book keeps with larger trends in his life-long project. It aims “to establish the intermediary area of history as an area in its own right—that of provisional insight into the last things before the last.”<sup>2</sup> Situating such work between the particular and universal, Kracauer affirms history as mediation and the historian as the mediator.

In this thesis, I treat Kracauer as an illuminating mediator for the problem of abstraction in modernity for critical theory. In doing so, I affirm Kracauer’s early and largely under-appreciated affection for abstraction, but question his later seemingly intractable designation of

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany’s Historical Imaginary*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 36.

<sup>2</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 16.

modern abstraction as proto-fascistic. On my argument, the supposedly teleological relation Kracauer's later writings imagine between abstraction and fascism constitutes a central impasse in the history of critical theory, while his early fascination with abstraction's complex social potentials offers a way to realize critical theory's professed aims. To these ends, I affirm Theodor W. Adorno's assertion: "With Kracauer, in place of theory it is always Kracauer himself who is already present in the gaze that grips the subject matter and takes it in."<sup>3</sup> As Adorno argues, Kracauer's signature mode of criticism is that of a mediating subject, in and amongst the cultural forms which make up the modern totality. To refract this totality afresh, I embrace Kracauer's fraught historical subjectivity to affirm the abstract relations he increasingly lamented in order to locate the political and aesthetic promise of abstraction in its primordial modern medium: money.

To many scholars, such an affirmation of money, under the guise of critical theory, might seem unseemly. To insist on organizing a left politics around the money relation would appear to be a contradiction in terms. Is money not the center of alienation? Against this established notion, I instead argue that a school of heterodox economics known as Modern Monetary Theory (MMT), or Neochartalism, open ups monetary relationality for an inclusive and inalienable leftist politics. In doing so, I claim that the abstract relationality of monetary governance, out of which emanates boundless publicness and inclusion (as MMT makes visible), exposes a key problem/question in modernity that my project aims to answer directly: how can we reckon with fascisms past and present, given that we are all dependent on the centralization of monetary governance? To answer such a question, I articulate money's inclusion and promise in the contours of abstract

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<sup>3</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Shierry Weber Nicholzen, "The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer," *New German Critique*, no. 54 (1991), 166.

mediation and monetary governance that enveloped one of fascisms most trenchant aesthetic critics.

In such thinking, I extend Scott Ferguson's recent book, *Declarations of Dependence: Money, Aesthetics and the Politics of Care* to questions of fascism he overlooks. Within, Ferguson argues for the importance of money as the socializing institution of politics. He writes that "money alone harbors the capacity to cultivate a full, diverse, and variable collective life."<sup>4</sup> Ferguson insists on the potential for a relation between collectivity and diversity within the money relation. Among his many claims, this is the one that points to my project's importance, as the collectivity and diversity are typically viewed as categorically opposed. He speaks to this directly when he doubles down on their concomitancy. "I affirm money's unrestricted capacity to socialize labor and accommodate myriad social differences," Ferguson writes.<sup>5</sup> These sorts of statements put a twist on the problem this work is addressing. It is not simply that we are dependent of the money relation, and therefore we have to reckon with what that dependence implies, but we are also, as individuals, constitutive inputs into that already-existent relation. As such, we shape its shaping of our collective life.

Kracauer subjectivity necessarily fits into this schema. He is thoroughly mediated and supported by monetary abstraction and reciprocally informs the totality with said subjectivity. In this way, I reject Kracauer's characterization of his status as extraterritorial, a term Martin Jay argues Kracauer used to define his lifelong critical perspective, especially as an emigre

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<sup>4</sup> Scott Ferguson, *Declarations of Dependence: Money, Aesthetics, and the Politics of Care*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



intellectual.<sup>6</sup> In this, I follow Johannes von Moltke, who provides a more nuanced understanding of Kracauer's American exile experience. "However complicated and idiosyncratic Kracauer may have been," von Moltke writes, "anecdotes about the isolation of this 'Einzelgänger' or 'lone wolf' misconstrue his work in the United States as cut off from all social interaction, film culture, and intellectual discourse."<sup>7</sup> In this thesis, I go further and extend von Moltke's critique to reject extraterritoriality through an even more emphatic affirmation of Kracauer's position as a subjective social actor throughout his life. Insisting upon what I call Kracauer's "intraterritoriality," I argue that his subjectivity is first and foremost a political economic one, which arises out of the abstract money relation as the mediator of political economic governance. Further, I stage my inquiry into Kracauer's monetary intraterritoriality on aesthetic terms. To do so, I look to the abstract media that preoccupied Kracauer's gaze: photography, film, and architecture. As well, I ground this aesthetic analysis in a neochartalist re-imagination of the abstract structures of political economy that surrounded his lived-experience. As a result, I unsettle critical theory's nefarious teleological relation between fascism and abstraction, whether aesthetic, political, or economic, through an affirmation of the unrealized caretaking capability of modern economies. In doing so, I locate specific moments in Weimar history when these capabilities were neglected to argue that such mismanagement contributed to the successful rise of fascism in Germany during the 1930s.

Therefore, I disentangle this teleological relation in order to articulate new paths to effective and *affective* anti-fascist social organizations. In unraveling this relation, I trace a

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Jay, "The Extraterritorial Life of Siegfried Kracauer," *Salmagundi*, no. 31/32 (1976), 50.

<sup>7</sup> Johannes von Moltke, *The Curious Humanist: Siegfried Kracauer in America*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 10.

reverse historical trajectory. I begin with Kracauer's late work in which he strongly repudiates abstraction as necessarily fascist, and work back through his tumultuous life to redeem Kracauer's early dialectically capacious yearnings for abstract mediation. Along this reversed trajectory, I labor in both theoretical and chronological opposition to Kracauer's developing insistence upon abstraction's alienating properties. While Kracauer increasingly defines modern political economy as a mirror of his literal alienation by the brutality of Nazi fascism in the early-1930s, I insist that abstraction's capacity for collective caretaking unsettles critical theory's calcified conception of the teleological relationship between far flung moneyed-economies and the contracted nationalisms of modern fascism.

Central to every moment in Kracauer's life outlined above is "abstraction," or "abstract mediation." For the purpose of clarity, I offer a preliminary definition at the outset. Abstraction, from the Latin *abstractio*, means "drawing away," and is used to describe the act of removing something from its context. This definition is useful for describing photographic abstraction, which has abstracted something "real" away from its context into a medium of display. However, this definition's fleeing spatial trajectory "away" from "reality" connotes an unnecessary alienation in abstract mediation. Therefore, I prefer a related definition: "action at a distance." Taken from *ab* "off, away from" and *tragh* "to draw, drag, move," abstraction defines action which is not bound by spatial or material constraints. The most obvious example of abstraction that we encounter in every moment of our lives is law, but this also applies to the aesthetics, which manifest such overarching categories of abstraction in particular sensory relations. For example, Kracauer integrates these logics directly into his analysis of the filmic medium when he condemns Weimar cinema in the 1940s. He writes that the films removed "things and events

from their own spheres into strange and unknown space” which enabled a substance devouring “total movement.”<sup>8</sup> In doing so, films are abstract because they enable action at a distance, action that actualizes the constitutive relations of the totality’s supposed alienating domination.

Whereas Kracauer laments this far flung action, I redeem it for critical theory throughout this study of his life’s work. I integrate my analysis of abstract political economic forms with my analysis of aesthetic forms. This is typical for critical theory. What separates my approach from other critical historicizations of Kracauer, including those conducted by Elsaesser, Koch, Jay, von Moltke and others, is that I do not reduce the abstraction of political economy to private commodity relations which obscure broader public and political possibilities. As mentioned above, I rethink abstraction and fascism with recourse to Ferguson’s work. In *Declarations of Dependence*, he argues that the reduction of monetary mediation to the commodity, or “Liberal money” as he calls it, causes theorists to identify money as the source of universal alienation, an alienation which the aesthetic realm is cultivated in opposition to. Ferguson writes, “[Liberal money] leads critical theorists to adopt an impoverished conception of the aesthetic, which constricts the curative capacities of money and aesthetics alike.”<sup>9</sup> I develop and complicate Ferguson’s intervention by locating a reliance on “Liberal money” in works on Weimar, and on Kracauer specifically. For example, Elsaesser writes that one of Kracauer’s “key contributions to our understanding of film as a socially significant phenomenon” is that an “analysis of commodity consumption is implicit in almost every line Kracauer writes.”<sup>10</sup> In some sense,

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<sup>8</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 302.

<sup>9</sup> Scott Ferguson, *Declarations of Dependence*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany’s Historical Imaginary* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 31.

Elsaesser is correct that Kracauer shared his reductive commodity view. However, in order to better understand the potential historical and contemporary alternatives to Nazi fascism, and where Kracauer's life of work variously fits into the context of these alternatives, we must reject the commodity view in favor of a conception of political economic relations that only neochartalism can offer.

Neochartalism is an approach to political economy with roots in the post-Keynesian and German Historical Schools. Its most important insight pertains to the historical nature of money. Whereas most Liberals or Marxists conceive of money as a private, finite and alienable commodity form which arises out of exchange or barter, neochartalism asserts that money is an abstract creature of law, or as Ferguson would put it, money is an instrument of the infinite capacity of centralized social governance. He writes that money is a "boundless public utility" which originates from a "boundless public center."<sup>11</sup> This redefinition of money entirely reframes political economic discourse. Instead of the orthodox view, which assumes that constraints on government spending are monetary, and thus assumes that a government can run out of a currency in which it has the sole legal authority to produce, neochartalism reveals that the only constraint on government spending is that of biophysical resources.<sup>12</sup> In other words, for neochartalism, the central question is whether or not the government's unlimited spending capacity is targeted toward production that is producible, given the availability of resources like labor and natural materials. What this all means is that the only consistent barrier to sustained

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<sup>11</sup> Scott Ferguson, *Declarations of Dependance*, 61; 184.

<sup>12</sup> L. Randall Wray, *Understanding Modern Money: The Key to Full Employment and Price Stability*, (Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, inc., 1998).

full employment is political opposition. We can afford to care for everyone through the abstract influence of government spending if the real resources exist.

Adopting this redefinition of money's capacity for caretaking totally reorganizes critical historical inquiry. Developing this line of thought, Ferguson argues that neochartalism's insights demand a reorganization of critical theory's mode of inquiry. "Money is the center of care in modernity," Ferguson writes, "While historically critical theory came into existence in order to critique and eventually negate money's abstract value, critique after MMT must radically affirm money's boundless public center and politicize its boundless capacities for care."<sup>13</sup> Ferguson argues that neochartalism's intervention makes visible a radical politics that is centered around money's abstract capacity to care for all. Further, he offers a charge to those conducting critical theoretical inquiry after MMT, or neochartalism. Ferguson writes, "Critical theory must... invent new forms as well as recover ways of seeing and thinking from heterogeneous pasts."<sup>14</sup> Here, I take up Ferguson's conception of critical theory as a whole to trace its specific, complex, and contradictory history afresh. This includes a rethink of established categories of critical thought, including abstraction, fascism, and mediation, as well as the conception of new forms, like intraterritoriality, which I define as a persistent subjectivity to the monetary relation, a subjectivity which knows no outside.

Rather than negate intraterritoriality in the name of liberation from systems of governance, or melancholically color every abstract, mediated communicative system as fascist by nature, we ought to embrace our monetary immanence and redefine fascism according to the

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<sup>13</sup> Scott Ferguson, *Declarations of Dependence*, 93-94.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

vast embrace of our new topological frame. Throughout history, political theory, German studies, and critical theory, the definition of fascism has been a topic of constant attention. One of the major consistencies of the competing definitions is that fascism is based on the existence of a fascist inside group, which violently excludes outside groups from collective existence. For example, Stanley G. Payne, a historian of fascism, argues “fascism may be defined as a form of revolutionary ultranationalism for national rebirth that is based on a primarily vitalist philosophy.”<sup>15</sup> From the quasi-Aristotelian assertion of others as “non-living” in the face of the vitality of the “endowed group,” fascism seeks to purge the outsiders from their domain.

Any definition of fascism that considers intraterritoriality as a premise questions the foundational myth of fascist politics: that exclusion is possible in the first place. The myth of exclusion is one of the failures of scholarship on fascism to which authors variously succumb. In lieu of such thinking, I claim that fascists can exile, can subjugate, can kill, but what they cannot do is rid themselves of the burden of collective dependence. That is why, despite the incredible cruelty it can perpetrate, fascism is always a process of failure. The Nazis forced Kracauer from Europe, they killed many of his family members, but they were never able to rid Germany of his existence. Kracauer’s writings, in America, and from Weimar, are traces of such an inevitable failure.

Before I dive into the evidence for this argument, I will provide a brief narration of Kracauer’s life and work.<sup>16</sup> Born in 1889 in Frankfurt, Kracauer left his career as an architect in the early 1920s to become a film and literary editor at the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. His most

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<sup>15</sup> Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 14.

<sup>16</sup> Getrud Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer: An Introduction*, trans. Jeremy Gaines (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), ix-xii.

acclaimed essays hail from this era, and is where Kracauer—in some specific cases—critically affirms abstraction. Upon Nazism’s rise to power, his employment at the paper grew tenuous, until he was forced to flee to Paris in 1933. Though he was productive, he struggled to make a living in France.<sup>17</sup> Subsequently, when the war began, he fled to Marseille and onward to Portugal where he departed for New York on April 15, 1941.<sup>18</sup>

Upon arrival in New York, Kracauer worked for Iris Barry at the Film Library of Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). He spent this time writing in service of the war effort by publishing a study on Nazi propaganda films for institutions which made up the broader reaches of U.S. wartime governance. This study developed and culminated in his publication of *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947). In these writings, his central concern was that of the relationship between propaganda and the individual subject, a concern which situates him within American intellectual discourse at the time, and further enforces his intraterritoriality. In 1951, he moved to Columbia University to do empirical research. During this time, he wrote his expansive *Theory of Film* (1960), where he attempted to redeem film on realism’s terms. Finally, as I have already mentioned, he spent the last six years of his life on his *History*, attempting to reckon with his own place in the world.

I look specifically at three pivotal historical contexts that shape Kracauer’s intraterritorial life and work: Weimar, the United States during WWII, and the United States during the Cold War. Equally important, I ground my neochartalist analysis of these historical eras in works of art that evoke the limits and potentials of Kracauer’s work in various ways. To understand

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<sup>17</sup> Olivier Agard, “L’Exil Parisien de Siegfried Kracauer,” *ATALA*, no. 9, “Le France et l’Allemagne,” 2006, 60.

<sup>18</sup> Johannes von Moltke, *The Curious Humanist: Siegfried Kracauer in America*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 1.

Kracauer's redemption of the filmic medium on realism's terms during the height of the Cold War's "military Keynesian," I situate *Theory of Film* in relation to Cold War liberal humanism's contradictory rejection of aesthetic abstraction in Edward Steichen's infamous photography exhibit *The Family of Man* (1955). Throughout this section, I utilize Fred Turner's *Democratic Surround*, which traces the influence of anti-fascist aesthetics during and after WWII, and articulate the contours of the exhibit's Cold War conflicting impulses. Next, I consider Kracauer's declaration of Weimar culture's fascistic tendencies in *From Caligari to Hitler* given the revolutionary potential of monetary abundance during the WWII mobilization. Further, I embed this analysis in *From Caligari to Hitler*'s relationship to Erich Fromm's conception of fascism as Oedipal reversion. In the third section, I ponder the developing rejection of abstraction in Kracauer's Weimar essays given the political, economic, and social calamity of Weimar political economic austerity and unemployment. In the fourth section, I develop and extend Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), reading the film as an affirmation of a mediation that evokes specific anti-fascist organizations of aesthetics, politics, and economics. In my conclusion, I turn my findings toward the Frankfurt School more broadly, and insist on an affirmation of the "falsity" of critical theory's conception of the totality.

In the five sections of this study, I often put pressure on Kracauer's arguments and assumptions. Still, I find his work vital as a measure for what a critical aesthetic project can be. Importantly however, I do not locate Kracauer's relevance in his conclusions or metaphysical commitments, but in his methodology of negative illumination. Kracauer details this approach in his "Mass Ornament" essay. He argues that negative illumination provides access to the contradictory and directly inarticulable construction of the totality. He—and other critical



theorists—use negative illumination as a critique of enlightenment positivism. They aim to interpret structures of modernity that cannot be described through positive assertions, and instead insist on articulating the indescribable through the surface phenomena from which they manifest. Kracauer writes, “surface-level expressions... by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things.”<sup>19</sup> Later on in the essay, Kracauer claims that “knowledge” of the state of the totality “depends on the interpretation of these surface-level expressions.”<sup>20</sup> I find merit in such an appeal to the productive meaning of surface, and as a result, read Kracauer’s works as surface phenomena in this thesis. However, merely doing so would not necessarily be novel on its own terms, but in reading his work as surface—thanks to neochartalism’s intervention—I interpret its refraction of the unconscious “state of things” in a new way. I reveal that the Weimar “state of things” possessed the potential for an alternative construction of abstract political economic mediation, a construction that could have altered the brutal course of the first half of the 20th century, a construction that I suggest Kracauer was waiting for with a “hesitant openness.”<sup>21</sup>

### ***Contracting the Aesthetic Imaginary: Theory of Film as “Thisness”***

In her analysis of Siegfried Kracauer’s 1960 book, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Miriam Hansen underscores the importance of the book in Kracauer’s life by recounting a particular interaction between Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and Soma Morgenstern in

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<sup>19</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament” in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 75.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “Those Who Wait” in *The Mass Ornament*, 138.

a café in Marseille in 1941. Morgenstern, a novelist and former Vienna correspondent at the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, recalls:

she asked Kracauer, "What will become of us, Krac?" To which the latter replied, without thinking twice, "Soma, we will all have to kill ourselves here"—and quickly returned to his notes. As they reached the Préfecture, Benjamin turned to Morgenstern and remarked: "What will happen to us cannot be easily predicted. But of one thing I'm sure: if anyone will *not* kill himself, it's our friend Kracauer. After all, he has to finish writing his encyclopedia of film. And for that you need a long life."<sup>22</sup>

As can be seen in the above quote, Kracauer's relationship with the abstraction of the film medium had considerable consequences for not only his theoretical position, but also as Benjamin somberly quipped, for his capacity to endure the sufferings of an exiled European Jew in 1941. The importance of Kracauer's relationship with film, as a medium of representation, goes back to his renowned "Photography" essay from 1927, where he theorizes the abstract nature of the photographic medium as a "go-for broke game of the historical process."<sup>23</sup> Before the rise of Nazi fascism, Kracauer still believed that the abstraction of filmic representation possessed possibilities for an alternative organization of the totality. This was his go-for broke game. "The capacity to stir up the elements of nature is one of the possibilities of film," Kracauer wrote, "this possibility is realized whenever film combines parts and segments to create strange constructs."<sup>24</sup>

By 1960, and the publication of *Theory of Film*, this game was long over. The Nazis had dealt the deciding blow. *Theory of Film* contained no trace of his previous hope for any "liberated consciousness" which could result from the abstract mediation of things in modernity.

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<sup>22</sup> Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 257.

<sup>23</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, 62.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-63.

Instead, “*Theory of Film* appears, by contrast, to conceive abstraction in binary opposition to the concrete,” Johannes von Moltke writes.<sup>25</sup> Whereas in Weimar Kracauer redeemed the film medium by going *through* its abstract relations, von Moltke argues that *Theory of Film* “theorizes film as a medium that affords concrete experience *against* the abstraction of everyday life under capitalism.”<sup>26</sup>

Kracauer’s theorization accords with both his philosophical influences and his lived experience. Throughout much of his work, he connects the inadequacies of modern economic relationality with the abstraction of the commodity money form, a form that many—and Karl Marx, most notably—rejected as the source of modern alienation. Further, Kracauer lived through the brutally abstract industrialism of WWI, the Weimar hyperinflation of 1921-23, the unemployment of the depression, the rise of Nazism, and the calamitous events of WWII, which included his literal alienation from his German home, and the Holocaust. These events profoundly influenced his writings. It is understandable, given these experiences, that he yearned for a relationality that transcended the abstraction riddled crises of modernity. In spite of my rejection of his transcendent conclusions, I argue that the contours of his arguments can teach us more about the periods within which he lived than any simple measure of Kracauer’s assertion of the abstraction-to-fascism-teleology.

In his *Theory of Film*, Kracauer shifts from an approach which finds meaning by going through abstract relations toward one which seeks to find meaning in opposition to them. With this, the book reifies abstract mediation in form of an alienated thisness. Thisness is a concept

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<sup>25</sup> Johannes von Moltke, *The Curious Humanist*, 166.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

which can be described as a rejection of the reality of abstract relations in favor of an immediate decentralized relationship among particular beings or things. Throughout the book, Kracauer's insistence on the filmic concrete demonstrates his affinity for thisness. Scott Ferguson traces the term to the 13th century theologian Duns Scotus. From the Latin "haecceitas" or *haecceity*, thisness "is a metaphysical principle that denies causal dependencies between spatially separated beings. Instead, haecceity contracts the totality of being into the thisness of individuated particulars and, more specifically, into the thisness of the contiguous and, typically, material relations."<sup>27</sup> In other words, a metaphysics of thisness commits itself to an ontology of immediate relations while denying abstract relationships, ones which manifest between "spatially separated beings," any meaningful ontological priority. Under a metaphysics of thisness, abstraction is relegated unto immediate relations between things. As such, abstraction is rendered artificial by process of its supposed alienation of said thisness.

In *Theory of Film*, Kracauer elevated the physical over the abstract in order to redeem film from its presumed fascist nature. For Kracauer, just as commodity money supposedly alienates individuals from the fruits of their labor, film's aesthetic displacement of things from their spatial context perpetrates a propagandistic function which "[upsets] all sober considerations" among viewers.<sup>28</sup> The alienation of objects and labor from their "natural state" of relationality into the "artificial" and "unnatural" form of abstract relations begot the inhumanity of fascism, so the teleology goes. To critique the teleology means to critique Kracauer's insistence on thisness' priority as an ontological concept. In order to imagine a world in which

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<sup>27</sup> Scott Ferguson, *Declarations of Dependence*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 272.

the historical perpetuity of money's socialization of labor can manifest as an inclusive mechanism of governance means to imagine a world in which the spatial and temporal traversal of objects in film can engender empathy, and not just hate. This sort of traversal manifests in film as the distance between the moment and place of the object's photography and the moment and place of said object's reproduction on screen. In this, I affirm the distanced connections of abstraction as the relations which provision the contiguous relationships that Kracauer holds dear.

Instead, Kracauer attempts to redeem or "rescue" (*Errettung*) the film medium from its inherently abstract aesthetics in favor of "physical reality." In *Theory of Film*, he only affirms the film medium in so much as it "[incorporates] aspects of physical reality with a view to making us experience them."<sup>29</sup> By the privileging spectatorial experience of "physical reality" over and above any abstract cinematic spectatorial mediation, Kracauer demonstrates his propensity for filmic realism, which adopts an acute metaphysics of thisness, or haecceity.

Importantly, Kracauer's film aesthetics were not always as persistently loyal to thisness, or haecceity. Kracauer becomes absolutely devoted to haecceity principally because he comes to conceive the teleological relationship between abstraction and fascism as immutable. Nodding to Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Kracauer makes clear that *Theory of Film* is the answer to this teleology's alleged intractability. In their book, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that the scientific advancement of the enlightenment was integral to fascism's rise. "Abstraction, the instrument of the enlightenment, stands in the same relationship

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<sup>29</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1960), 40.

to its objects as fate,” they claimed, “whose concept it eradicates: as liquidation.”<sup>30</sup> Or if short form is better, Adorno and Horkheimer also wrote: “Enlightenment is totalitarian.”<sup>31</sup> For Adorno and Horkheimer, there are differences between totalitarianism and fascism, however, their analysis turns on the question of control and domination such that it includes both types of regimes. From this context, Kracauer offers the concrete as the “remedy” for the abstraction and scientific calculation of fascism. He writes that “the remedy for the kind of abstractness which befalls minds under the impact of science is experience—the experience of things in their concreteness.”<sup>32</sup> To answer “the question of film after Auschwitz,” what Miriam Hansen describes as the central preoccupation of the book, Kracauer offers what Gertrud Koch argues are “somatic foundations [which] shield film against the barrenness of abstraction.”<sup>33</sup> Forming the basis of *Theory of Film*, Kracauer attempts to rescue film from the cold grip of Nazi abstraction by committing his realism to an endorsement of film’s capacity to mediate concrete reality, an affirmation which relegates the totality to the causal immediacy of haecceity.

When Benjamin remarked in that café that Kracauer’s “encyclopedia of film” would keep Kracauer alive throughout the suffering of exile and migration, he seemed to foretell a contradictory aspect of Kracauer’s life producing *Theory of Film* in “Amerika,” a remark Kracauer used to describe the experience of mediated life under capitalism in its alienating commodity ridden spectacle. Benjamin’s witty lament points to a central aspect of Kracauer’s

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<sup>30</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 9.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 296.

<sup>33</sup> Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 257; Gertrud Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 106.

exile: he owes his life to his American mediation.<sup>34</sup> Hansen makes this point while perpetuating the abstraction-to-fascism-teleology I wish to critique. As she puts it, “When National Socialists perfected this form of modernism into the millennial modernity of total domination and mass annihilation, ‘America’ had to become real, for better or for worse, for Kracauer and others to survive.”<sup>35</sup> The abstract mediation of America’s wholehearted affirmation of moneyed culture, which Frankfurt School figures dialectically critiqued as nearly universally alienating, became the source of Kracauer’s personal safety while he himself devoted his American work in opposition to such abstraction.

In order to further consider the relationship between the contradictory shape of Kracauer’s intraterritorial participation in this discourse with *Theory of Film*’s opposition to abstraction, and moreover, how this participation refracts the abstract political economic order which organized such a discourse, I consider Edward Steichen’s photography exhibit *The Family of Man* (1955) within the broader contexts of midcentury aesthetics and political economy. The contradictory prospects and limits of midcentury abstraction surrounded Kracauer in these contexts. Therefore, I read the *The Family of Man* to make these prospects and limits visible again in order to begin to unwind the abstraction-to-fascism-teleology.

Kracauer found himself at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York early during his American exile, and later, while writing *Theory of Film* at Columbia University. These various contexts colored his approach to abstraction. During this time, Kracauer was integrated into the larger institutional apparatus of American liberal humanism during the Cold War. This is

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<sup>34</sup> Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 40-41.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

made quite clear by the fact that the final section of *Theory of Film* is an ode to the infamous MoMA photography exhibit *The Family of Man*. Further, Steichen and Kracauer were friends who shared a similar commitment to realism and haecceity. Von Moltke nuances their intersecting realisms. He finds differentiation in Kracauer's propensity for things rather than individuated persons. However, even he establishes from the beginning that "as is evident from his endorsement of Steichen's exhibit, Kracauer indisputably participated in the Cold War humanist discourse that the MoMA show championed."<sup>36</sup>

A central contribution to the developing humanist discourse at MoMA, *The Family of Man* displayed photographs of men, women and children from various places around the world—in addition to accompanying poems by Carl Sandburg. Thanks to funding from the United States Information Agency (USIA), a "public diplomacy" agency which organized and broadcasted United States propaganda around the world, *The Family of Man* was exhibited in 37 countries reaching an estimate of 7.5 million exhibitors.<sup>37</sup> Given Steichen and Sandburg's earlier work on WWII propaganda at MoMA, Fred Turner argues that "we can see *The Family of Man* as part of a widespread effort to democratize American families and, through them, American society."<sup>38</sup> In an avowal of liberal humanism, Steichen described the ideological force behind the exhibit by defining the spectatorial experience of looking at the diversity of human existence. "When people come out of this show they'll feel that they've looked in a mirror," Steichen

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<sup>36</sup> Johannes von Moltke, *The Curious Humanist*, 175.

<sup>37</sup> Fred Turner, *The Democratic Surround: Multimedia & American Liberalism from World War II to the Psychedelic Sixties* (Chicago, IL: *The University of Chicago Press*, 2013), 181.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.



wrote, “that we’re all alike.”<sup>39</sup> This democratizing humanistic identification of the self in the other was not merely represented in a slide-show of various images, but in a specific aesthetic construction built to maximize the exhibit’s democratizing humanist effects.

In his book of the same name, Fred Turner dubs this formal construction “The Democratic Surround” (DS). Similar to how *Theory of Film* aims to address the question of film after Auschwitz, Steichen’s employs the DS in his exhibit by staging hundreds of photographs in a muralistic aesthetic construction, which averted the supposed relationship between the subjectivity of singular abstract media and the subjectivity of fascist experience. In other words, the DS was aimed to address the supposed tendency by which “mass communication could turn the individual personality and, with it, the structure of society as a whole in a totalitarian direction,” as Turner describes it.<sup>40</sup> To avoid this, the exhibit kept with earlier Steichen affirmations of the DS in his exhibits. In doing so, he utilized Herbert Bayer’s “extended field of vision,” a fundamental aspect of the DS, to favor a more democratic aesthetic relationality. The logic of the “extended field of vision,” as Steichen used it, was to place photographs in murals that eschewed any domineering singular relationality between exhibitor and artist. Turner describes this best, “With images literally all around them, visitors to *The Family of Man* had to make choices about where to look and how to integrate what they saw into their own worldviews. This process, in turn, exercised the psychological muscles on which democracy and perhaps even the future depended.”<sup>41</sup> Moreover, in a move which reveals a direct link to

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<sup>39</sup> Edward Steichen, “‘The Family of Man,’” *Vogue*, February, 1955, 168; quoted in Fred Turner, *The Democratic Surround*, 207.

<sup>40</sup> Fred Turner, *The Democratic Surround*, 38.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

Kracauer's midcentury approach to photography, Turner notes that Steichen was selective about the *content* of his images. "Steichen all but prohibited abstract images from the exhibition," Turner remarks.<sup>42</sup> Though, it should be noted, Kracauer's earlier work suggests that the prohibition of abstraction from photography is an impossible task, as photographs function to remove reality from its context. I agree, and find that Steichen's repression of the ever-present abstraction of photographic relations reveals a yearning for precisely what it negates.

In this way, the anti-fascist impulses in both *Theory of Film* and *The Family of Man* are betrayed by their relation to the abstract mobilization of the Cold War's political, aesthetic and economic order. These two works repress abstraction out of a fear of fascism, but their productions were both supported by an imperial Cold War apparatus of fiscal policy. Often called "military Keynesianism," the public spending was denominated in the abstract legal medium of governance known as the US dollar. Steichen's government support arrived more directly than that of Kracauer's, in the form of direct funding from USIA. However, Kracauer received multiple grants to study propaganda and the totalitarian effects of radio and film, as well as institutional support at Columbia University through Paul Lazarsfeld, whose connection to Hans Speier's broad social science defense network centered at the RAND Corporation engendered support for Lazarsfeld's institutional efforts.<sup>43</sup> These monetary connections to the broader military apparatus of the Cold War enabled the production of Steichen and Kracauer's works of art and criticism. One might read this as simply hypocritical, but I prefer to underscore it as evocative of more systemic unremarked dependencies. These dependencies took the form of

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>43</sup> Daniel Bessner, *Democracy in Exile: Hans Speier and the Rise of the Defense Intellectual*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 179.

monetary support which was ultimately made possible by a fiscal regime of relative abundance, especially when compared to the Great Depression that preceded it and neoliberal period which came after. In other words, the relative social abundance of the money relation conditioned an intraterritorial relationship for Kracauer and Steichen, a relationship which enabled them to take care of their families and produce these works.

To a skeptical eye, this understanding of monetary mediation might seem like far too broad of a mediating net, but that is precisely the point. Ferguson argues that all individual and social exchange is made possible by an initial relation to the center of sociopolitical existence, the locus whence money originates. He writes that money is “a political relationship between centralized governments and people... as an abstract relation, moreover, money operates ubiquitously, simultaneously, and at a distance.”<sup>44</sup> As a result, to adequately map what Kracauer in his “Mass Ornament” essay called the “state of things,” must consider the relative abundance or lack of monetary mediation as a product of the willful or un-willful political neglect of the “resolutely infinite instrument” of monetary mediation.<sup>45</sup> It is from this perspective that aesthetic analysis can inform our understanding of this newly opened up social contingency in order to articulate new forms of aesthetic mediation which can transvalue modernity’s austere history for the present.

Such a historiographical method makes visible the contours of the contradictory relationship between Steichen and Kracauer’s works of aesthetic production and what enabled them. Kracauer and Steichen condemn aesthetic abstraction while standing upon a floor of

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<sup>44</sup> Scott Ferguson, *Declarations of Dependence*, 184.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

midcentury abstraction. This abstract support, whether actualized through MoMA or Columbia University, was only realizable through the relative abundance of fiscal creation during the period. This of course does not mean that one has to affirm every aspect of midcentury liberalism, far from it. I find merit in Roland Barthes' critique of *The Family of Man's* humanism as a perpetuation of a fundamentally asocial, individuated and mythical universal.<sup>46</sup> I have no doubt that *The Family of Man* perpetuated its abstract influence as media, while repressing its own construction through a prohibition on abstract content, in a manner that was completely blind to the imperial atrocities of the United States' involvement in the Cold War.

However, where I depart from Barthes' critique is in his lamentation of *The Family of Man's* naturalization of work. "We know very well that work is 'natural' just as long as it is 'profitable'," Barthes writes, "and that in modifying the inevitability of the profit, we shall perhaps one day modify the inevitability of labour. It is this entirely historified work which we should be told about, instead of an eternal aesthetics of laborious gestures."<sup>47</sup> In his critique, Barthes misses the fact that *The Family of Man*, for all its imperial flaws, is not a product of profit, even though it depicts profit seeking work. Rather, when read through the looking glass of neochartalism, it is the public production of aesthetics which yearns for a universal on liberalism's terms.

With neochartalism as a guide, *The Family of Man* points to its own repressed universal. Not individual identification with the other, but the very medium which organized its aesthetic production, money as a public medium. The impulse behind *The Family of Man's* quest for a

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<sup>46</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Great Family of Man," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957), 100-102.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

universal is one important aspect of the exhibit which I affirm. Barthes does not see the essential publicness of this quest because his relative Marxism reifies the money relation in the form of the individuated exchange of the commodity relation, and not abstract and public governance. For example, in his essay on Jules Michelet's 1862 book *La Sorcière*, Barthes writes, "Something appears in history which changes men's relations with each other, transforms property into exploitation, drains all humanity from the link between serf and lord: gold. Itself an abstraction of material goods, gold abstracts the human relation; the lord no longer knows his peasants, but only the impersonal gold in which they must pay their tribute."<sup>48</sup> Instead of affirming the abundant capacities of the abstract public organization which money engenders, Barthes, like Kracauer, reifies money, and with it being, unto the "contiguous and, typically, material relations" of haecceity, or thisness.

From this perspective, Steichen's exhibit must be considered in the larger context of midcentury aesthetic abstraction. Ferguson offers much in this regard, and as a result of his critique of haecceity, analyzes anew the relationship between midcentury aesthetic abstraction and the relative abundance of the Cold War money relation. Integral to this analysis is his propensity to prioritize the "reality" of the abstract relations of aesthetic and monetary mediation. I share this commitment. Despite important caveats which surround the racist and sexist inequities of the midcentury moment, Ferguson links the fiscal abundance of this period with the flourishing of the abstract aesthetics of midcentury modernism. "Coming after aesthetic

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<sup>48</sup> Roland Barthes, "*La Sorcière*," in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 104.

experiments in modernist abstraction,” Ferguson writes, “midcentury cultural production embraced formal and technological abstraction as *the* semiology of white middle-class uplift.”<sup>49</sup>

Situated in this context, the images which make up *The Family of Man* complicate this semiological exclusion. Steichen’s realist photography, which represses its own abstraction as a medium, shines a light on the inequities of its moment. There is one particularly striking photograph which demonstrates this phenomenon. It is a portrait shot of a stoic African-American man in a white shirt who seems to be operating some sort of heavy machinery. His forearms are flexed, and he is intently looking forward, slightly passed the lens of the camera. There is a caption below the photography which reads: “...Who is on my side? Who? - II Kings 9:32.” Turner implicitly references these moments when he writes that despite its flaws, the exhibit “modeled a more diverse and tolerant society.”<sup>50</sup> Notwithstanding *The Family of Man*’s repression of its own abstract medium, and these forays into more inclusive politics, one can redeem midcentury abstraction, and even in some sense, *The Family of Man*, as negatively reflecting a new aesthetic semiology of uplift. Ferguson makes a similar point, even though he only identifies such semiological uplift in avowedly abstract art. He argues that the “hubris, dynamism, and ease” which defined the postwar economy was translated into a more universal and social experience of aesthetic abstraction. “Abstraction was not, in other words, merely white middle-class uplift,” Ferguson writes, “It was a phenomenal leap into a kind of collective floating.”<sup>51</sup> What I contend is that *The Family of Man* must be considered as such abstract art, even as it represses its own uplifting possibility. In other words, *The Family of Man*, in its

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<sup>49</sup> Scott Ferguson, *Declarations of Dependance*, 163.

<sup>50</sup> Fred Turner, *The Democratic Surround*, 212.

<sup>51</sup> Scott Ferguson, *Declarations of Dependance*, 165.

context of “military Keynesianism” and the abstraction laden aesthetics of its moment, makes visible greater access to the fruits of abstract relationality, whether aesthetic or monetary, which the exhibit itself represses in its photographic images.

What this points to is that the Nazis’ use of abstraction was only one side of the coin. In midcentury, ten or fifteen years after the end of the war, the effects of the monetary abundance of the mobilization lingered. Public spending, institutional coordination, and aesthetic governance enabled the defeat of fascism, and ultimately, conditioned the structure of American governance deep into the Cold War. Steichen’s exhibit, and with it Kracauer’s affirmation of it, must be understood as a product of the wake of the American experience of defeating Nazism, which inverted into the imperial relations of the Cold War. Most importantly though, the contexts of Kracauer and Steichen’s work destabilizes the abstraction-to-fascism-teleology. If abstraction led to fascism, and was used by fascism to commit mass atrocities, it was also responsible for the mass mobilization of American jobs in all sectors of the economy, from infantry units, to day care centers, to propagandistic art exhibits and films, to analyses of Nazi film propaganda, jobs which were specifically tasked with defeating fascism wherever it stood. These jobs, which supported Kracauer as well, made the new found democratic inclusivity of the civil rights movement imaginable.

I frame the moment in this way to respond to the critiques of midcentury aesthetic culture and abstraction, critiques which Kracauer perpetuates in much of his work. These criticisms, which are named in Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, dismiss the “culture industry” aesthetics of the midcentury moment as a perpetuation of the racial hierarchies and domination found in both American midcentury culture and its preceding European fascisms. In

response, I extend Ferguson's claim to midcentury "collective floating" through Steichen's exhibit in order to make visible the inclusion of oppressed groups in the phenomenal experience of midcentury abstraction which he asserts. In fact, there are hints of this collective floating in the hovering images of the DS itself.

Through this inclusion, even if sometimes only through a relative lack of mediating support, marginalized groups were able to imagine new organizations and possibilities for their communities. Media studies scholar Lynn Spigel eludes to this point in her work on Georg Olden, a black modernist who produced commercial art at CBS in the early 1950s. Spigel argues that "like many other African Americans of the era, Olden saw television as an opportunity for gainful employment, and his stature in the almost exclusively white worlds of modern design and television production defied racist stereotypes in both industries."<sup>52</sup> Given these new opportunities, I point to the abstraction of the midcentury moment as an integral precursor to the Civil Rights Movement, which is ramping up as Kracauer's life is coming to its end.

The "Double Victory" of the war, a term coined by the African American newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier*, represented the desegregating promise of the war.<sup>53</sup> Reminiscent of this "collective floating," Walter Francis White, head of the NAACP from 1931-1955, published a book in 1945 titled *A Rising Wind*. Fitting into a distinctly modern trend of describing abstraction through the a metaphorical appeal to weightlessness and uplift, the last two sentences of the book evoke its central hovering motif: "A wind is rising a wind of determination by the havenots of the world to share the benefits of freedom and prosperity which the haves of the earth have tried

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<sup>52</sup> Lynn Spigel, "Back to the Drawing Board: Graphic Design and the Visual Environment of Television at Midcentury," in *Cinema Journal*, vol. 55, no. 4, Summer 2016, 48.

<sup>53</sup> Rawn James Jr., *The Double V: How Wars, Protest, and Harry Truman Desegregated America's Military*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 141-142.



to keep exclusively for themselves. That wind blows all over the world. Whether that wind develops into a hurricane is a decision which we must make now and in the days when we form the peace.”<sup>54</sup> A hurricane formed, and as Dean Baker, Sarah Rawlins, and David Stein chronicle in their report on the legacy of the economic goals of the civil rights movement, “The call for full employment—an economy where every person who seeks employment can secure a job—arose as part of broader transnational stirrings in the wake of the Depression and the winding down of World War II.”<sup>55</sup> It arose out of the promise of collective and inclusive phenomenology of abstract mediation, which the fight against fascism made visible.

As inclusive phenomenology, one of the dominant notions that popularized the use of the DS was the idea that an individual psychological subject, in isolation, needed to train their liberal humanist and democratic muscles at the level of aesthetic experience. To understand the relationship between this abstract phenomenology as a midcentury experience and Kracauer’s preoccupation with the aesthetic forms that mirrored it in the WWII mobilization, I consider the relationship between such midcentury governance and the psychological subjectivity living among them engendered. In doing so, I interrogate the very notion of psychological isolation and find, again, unarticulated dependence and monetary support therein.

### ***Kracauer during WWII: Care’s Immaterial Embrace***

In the previous section, I claimed that by the time *Theory of Film* was published in 1960, Kracauer’s “go-for broke game of the historical process” was long over. Nearly twenty years earlier, however, his gambit still flickered with a dim, but nevertheless visible light. Still, it did

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<sup>54</sup> Walter Francis White, *A Rising Wind*, (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1945), 155.

<sup>55</sup> Dean Baker, Sarah Rawlins, and David Stein, “The Full Employment Mandate of the Federal Reserve: Its Origins and Importance,” *Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR)*, (July 2017), 6.

not persist in the same shape as it once had. Rather than actualizing in the form of a theoretical argument in favor of photography, and thus film's abstract potential, Kracauer repressed those Weimar impulses in favor of a historical project, which rejected the abstraction that supported him upon arrival in New York.

On the eve of disembarking from Lisbon to New York, March 28, 1941, Kracauer penned a letter to Theodor W. Adorno that demonstrates the contradictory nature of his evolving trajectory. "It is awful to arrive as we will," he wrote, "after eight years of an existence that does not deserve a name. I have grown older, also within myself. [...] I will arrive a poor man, poorer than I have ever been. [...] Now comes the last station, the last chance, which I must not gamble away, lest everything be lost."<sup>56</sup> Kracauer's game seemed to live on in the "gamble" of what he called his "last chance" for redemption. In this section, I trace the contours of his repression of abstraction to claim that the structure of Kracauer's intraterritoriality was shared among those subject to the monetary governance of the American WWII mobilization.

Through his enlistment into the structures of the WWII mobilization upon arrival in New York, Kracauer produced wartime analysis that culminated in his publication of *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947). As a work, the book was more historically driven than his ontological arguments in *Theory of Film*. However, the two books shared a general motivation: to "[understand] Hitler's ascent and ascendancy."<sup>57</sup> In locating Hitler's rise in both the "visible hieroglyphs" and the narrative figures of German film during the Weimar era, *From Caligari to Hitler* argued that the abstract aesthetic of Weimar cinema enabled fascism's rise. He argued that Weimar cinema, in a

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<sup>56</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, Letter to Theodor W. Adorno, March 28, 1941, in Johannes von Moltke, *The Curious Humanist: Siegfried Kracauer in America*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 2.

<sup>57</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 11.

way similar to the Nazi cinema that came after it, conditioned its viewing subjects to the whims of epic narratives and artificially constructed set pieces.<sup>58</sup> The abstraction of the films' aesthetics allegedly demolished the rationality of individual subjects, casting the German people into a submissive state ripe for authoritarian dominance. My central criticism of the book is that its argument perpetuates the flawed teleological relationship between the abstraction of the film spectacle and the historical rise of fascism. As Gertrud Koch writes, the "vanishing point of [*From Caligari to Hitler*] is the Nazi present and not the many possible other histories or courses history could have taken."<sup>59</sup> Kracauer's narrative in *From Caligari to Hitler* forecloses the possibility for historical contingency. As a result, the book represents the antithesis of my insistence on the inclusive potential of abstraction, both historically, and in the present.

Rather than re-articulate the criticisms of this mode of thinking, I want to point again to Kracauer's intraterritorial perspective during this period in order to further disentangle the teleology's grip on critical theory. I also wish to shine a light on the under-theorized monetary relationality of the WWII mobilization. In doing so, I survey the political, economic, and aesthetic discourses about and around *From Caligari to Hitler* in order to illuminate alternative modes of understanding its intractable historical narrative.

As Johannes von Moltke has argued about *From Caligari to Hitler*, Kracauer's psychological approach to the question of German cinema accords with work being done by his contemporaries in New York. These contemporaries include the likes of Hannah Arendt, Edward Steichen, Maya Deren, Erich Fromm, and many others. For the purposes of this project, I rethink

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Gertrud Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 90.

Kracauer's (Frommian) symptomology and flawed ontogenetic narrative. The narrative goes like this: when an individual subject can be isolated from care in adulthood, they will either revert to oedipal structures of dominance or be cast off into the void of otherness. I reject this binary and argue that critiquing its influence is a necessary part of unwinding the abstraction-to-fascism-teleology as any narrative of individual isolation succumbs to the pervasiveness of fascism's myth of exclusion.

In 1941, the German-born psychoanalyst Erich Fromm published *Escape from Freedom* in exile in New York. In the book, Fromm narrates such a fallen trajectory of social development within which the shock of developmental freedom initiates an oedipal reversion unto fascist governance. Fromm describes this process as an ontogenetic paradox. He claims that the "more independent, self-reliant, and critical" one becomes, the "more isolated, alone, and afraid" they become.<sup>60</sup> From this isolation and fear, the supposedly free individual subject subordinates themselves into the arms of the fascist demagogue.

Fromm's reasoning is problematic in a number of ways. First, it appeals to a haecceity-based notion of freedom as divorced from the mediation of abstract governance. As such, it claims individuation as an unmooring from the social supports of dependency which we know are always present in the construction of legal mediation. This tendency can be seen in some of his Freudian influence. For example, Fromm argues that "neurosis is always to be understood as an attempt, and essentially an unsuccessful one, to solve the conflict between that basic dependency and the quest for freedom."<sup>61</sup> Secondly, in understanding the "quest for freedom" in

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<sup>60</sup> Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 1941), 104.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

this manner, Fromm undervalues the necessity of provisioning the caretaking for our macro dependence by such monetary and legal mediation. As a result, he undervalues such social care in the name of analyzing the brute binary of power relations where either one is subordinated to an individuated haecceity dependence or an untethered freedom.

In contrast to Fromm's account, I argue that such subjectivity, in the form of intraterritoriality, necessitates an ontogenetic narrative which factors in the perpetual legal mediation of the individuation process, and thus its qualitative malleability or contingency. In other words, the relativity of social freedom needs to be a constructed goal, which itself is subordinated within the social sphere of macro dependence in which there is no outside, or extraterritorial perspective.

In *From Caligari to Hitler*, Kracauer reiterates Fromm's problematic narrative, and locates such proto-fascist self-subordination in trends throughout Weimar cinema. Von Moltke suggests as much. "*From Caligari to Hitler* relies heavily on Fromm's analysis of authoritarian rule as an ontogenetic development gone awry," von Moltke writes, "In other words, Kracauer finds enacted in the cinema the same drama of failed individuation that Fromm diagnoses as the root of fascism."<sup>62</sup> Such a tendency in Kracauer's analysis of Weimar culture can be found throughout his *Caligari* book. However, one of the more striking examples can be found in his analysis of the ending of Bruno Rahn's *Tragedy of the Street* (1927). Known as *Dirnentragödie* in German, the literal translation would be "Tragedy of the Prostitutes." The film depicts the life of an aging prostitute named Auguste, played by Asta Nielsen, who ditches her pimp, believing she has fallen in love with a drunk street-going bourgeois young man. After she spends her life

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<sup>62</sup> Johannes von Moltke, *The Curious Humanist*, 110.

savings to “become worthy of him,” he leaves her for a younger prostitute named Clarissa. As a result, Auguste, in despair, has Clarissa killed. When the police track her down for the murder, Auguste kills herself. Kracauer narrates these series of events, culminating in the final scene, when the young man at the center of it all looks for safety back *home*. Kracauer writes that “the boy performs the well-known gesture: he sobs, head sheltered in his mother’s lap.”<sup>63</sup> Von Moltke brings together this scene with Fromm’s cautionary ontogenetic tale. “For Kracauer, this image encodes the failure of the Oedipal process, the inability of the Weimar middle-class man to leave boyhood behind, to liberate himself from a masochistic ‘longing for submission’ and dependency of the mother figure,” von Moltke argues.<sup>64</sup>

This argument is crucial for understanding how Kracauer’s relationship to the moment of the mobilization allows for a prescient re-reading of *From Caligari to Hitler*’s place in the constellation of anti-fascism. Kracauer’s framing brings together two important aspects of Fromm’s symptomology, one’s alleged isolation and subordination, and maps them onto both the narrative and abstract formal construction of Weimar cinema. Strikingly, my critique of this Frommian framework, which insists that “isolation” is ontological impossible and that the alienations of freedom are a policy variable, applies equally to Kracauer’s own lived experience. It applies to his exile in France and subsequent subordination unto the abstraction of the institutional war effort of the United States. As such, we do not have to negate the dependency of this Oedipus complex, which Fromm does with reference to Freud. Instead, I insist that we must

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<sup>63</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 157-158.

<sup>64</sup> Johannes von Moltke, *The Curious Humanist*, 128-129.

completely re-articulate and affirm the sort of macro level dependence that Kracauer's subordination to a cog in the proverbial war machine implies.

To rethink this subordination, I use Scott Ferguson's recommendation for a "politics of care" in order to locate Kracauer's macro caretaker in the abstract supports of the money relation. Throughout this thesis, I maintain that the historiographical reparation of Kracauer's monetary immanence "demands a method of critical reading that is attentive not only to symptoms of power but also the symptomology of care," as Ferguson articulates it.<sup>65</sup> It is important to note, that for Ferguson care is not altruism and "cannot be reduced to the familialism that orients the object-relations tradition," rather, "in modernity, care is a problem of money in the first and last instance."<sup>66</sup> From this perspective, what does Kracauer's analysis of *Dirnentragödie* make visible? The central theme of both Kracauer and Fromm's articulation is fear. Afraid of isolation and independence, the boy returns to the mother figure just as the working class German reverts to Nazism in 1933. Before I dive too deeply into the important relation between fear and money for Kracauer and his moment, I want to take a slight digression to consider Kracauer's feminization of this Oedipal schema.

What we see in Kracauer's allegorization of the boy returning to the mother figure is the continued effects of haecceity's dominance on modern thought. Instead of care being an abstract macro structure of provisioning centered around the monetary relation, it becomes dispersed to the immediate and contingent relation of mother and child. Conceived on such proximate haecceity terms, the politicization of care becomes eminently dissolvable by distance. Ferguson

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<sup>65</sup> Scott Ferguson, *Declarations of Dependence*, 102.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

notes this reduction, and argues that despite it, “care remains tasked with holding everything together while lacking a proper designation or place to call her own.”<sup>67</sup> The implicit reference to Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, who famously noted that “five hundred pounds a year will keep one alive in the sunshine,” is telling.<sup>68</sup> With it, Ferguson imagines an inclusive politics of care which becomes visible as a symptomology of the inadequacies of Liberal money’s repression of abstract and centralized mediation. “Money’s symptoms emerge *from* the center’s failed social support systems. They return *to* the center as unconscious pleas for social security,” Ferguson writes.<sup>69</sup> Kracauer’s analysis of *Dirnentragödie* takes the form of such an unconscious plea. Situated as a historical remembrance of his suffering and exile from his *Heimat*, this plea reflects Kracauer’s abandonment by Weimar. Importantly too, this plea takes the form of his intraterritorial immersion into United States, his “last station” or *Heimat* of his own.

While Kracauer narrated his own existence in America in terms of a rootless “extraterritoriality,” read through the lens of care it becomes clear that Kracauer feared such an outsider status. As the letter to Adorno demonstrates, this fear of the outside took the form of anxiety about his own monetary isolation. In this context, we can see that process of writing about the horrors and terrors of Weimar film in *From Caligari to Hitler* was his way of earning a living, ensuring his intraterritoriality. As I have already mentioned, this work was supported by the wider institutional war effort. *From Caligari to Hitler* was funded by MoMA in addition to the two fellowships Kracauer received from the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.<sup>70</sup> This is not

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>68</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1929), 38.

<sup>69</sup> Scott Ferguson, *Declarations of Dependence*, 103.

<sup>70</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, v.



to suggest that Kracauer's life in New York during WWII was easy, but rather, that his life was enabled by the mediating net of abstract monetary relationality that provisioned his work and created his new *Heimat*.

Helping to create such a mediating net was Iris Barry, the head of MoMA's Film Library, and Kracauer's patron in exile. It is sobering to consider what might have happened to Siegfried and his wife Lili Kracauer if it were not for her support of his work. And yet, her institutional support arose in spite of her feelings about him personally. In the early days of Kracauer's time at MoMA, Barry wrote of her impressions of him by describing him in what von Moltke has called "barely veiled racist terms."<sup>71</sup> With a reference to the "Circumcised?...Pawnbrokers?" and Rothschilds, Barry noted that Kracauer "worked hard, did his job well, [and] was praised for it," but nevertheless concluded that "he was a nightmare."<sup>72</sup>

By refusing to reduce care to the feminized "familialism" of its haecceity conception, we can begin to see how Barry's anti-semitic revulsion of Kracauer can manifest beside her institutional support of him. In other words, care is not interpersonal altruism, but the material actualization of our monetarily mediated dependence. As I will argue in the next section of this study, what Kracauer encountered in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s was not merely hate, or simply the presence of anti-semitic Nazis. Rather, it was an austerity of monetarily actualized care through a lack of fiscal and monetary support for full employment. Just like in Weimar, Kracauer encountered plenty of Nazis in the theaters of the Upper East Side where he often went

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<sup>71</sup> Johannes von Moltke, *The Curious Humanist*, 224.

<sup>72</sup> Iris Barry, Museum of Modern Art, Film Study Center, Department of Film and Media Records, Box 5, file 5.14. See also Johannes von Moltke, *The Curious Humanist: Siegfried Kracauer in America*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 224; Robert Sitton, *Lady in the Dark: Iris Barry and the Art of Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

to watch movies.<sup>73</sup> However, in contrast to his Weimar experience, when he arrived to the United States, publicly provisioned employment opportunities were generally more abundant. Further, in New York, he was not simply relegated into the basement to do some “make-work,” but was mobilized in support of the institutional war effort. Through his connection to the German sociologist turned defense intellectual Hans Speier and the Austrian psychoanalyst Ernst Kris, “Kracauer’s work at MoMA formed part of a larger effort, spearheaded by the ‘Communications Group’ at the Rockefeller Foundation, to study wartime mass communications, both by Nazis and by Americans and the Allies.”<sup>74</sup> His inclusive employment in the war mobilization was even more potent than the similar Cold War support he benefitted from in his later years.

The contradictions of this era’s simultaneous monetary abundance and persistent discriminations were not limited to Kracauer, and really defined a whole generation of wartime workers. Such a wide ranging claim manifests in Fanny Christina Hill’s account. Christina Hill was an African American woman newly working in an American aircraft factory during WWII. As a domestic servant before the war, she described her and her sister’s experience of wartime work as emancipatory. “Hitler was the one that got us out of the white folks’ kitchen,” she said.<sup>75</sup> Perversely, her anecdote applied to Kracauer too, albeit in a much darker form. The Nazis forced Kracauer out of Europe, killed many in his extended family, and yet, their existence as a Schmittean enemy precipitated his work at MoMA, where he was mobilized by the abstraction of

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<sup>73</sup> Johannes von Moltke, *The Curious Humanist*, 21.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>75</sup> Sherna Berger Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, the War and Social Change* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 42.

centralized governance to put his talents toward defeating fascism in Europe, much like Rosie the Riveter.

Given this framing of Kracauer's place in the war mobilization, his preoccupation with the topic fear in cinema during this era connects the symptomatic expressions of midcentury culture with Kracauer's yearning for monetary inclusion. Just before the publication of *From Caligari to Hitler*, Kracauer wrote an essay titled "Hollywood Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind?" Published in 1946 for the newly formed *Commentary* magazine, Kracauer's essay remarked on the increasing popularity of a genre of film which would later famously be called "film noir." Kracauer found that these films represented a sort of dialectical progression of anti-Nazi films of the war, which internalized the terror of life under Nazism. Kracauer wrote that in these films "apprehension is accumulated; threatening allusions and dreadful possibilities evoke a world in which everybody is afraid of everybody else, and no one knows when or where the ultimate and inevitable horror will arrive."<sup>76</sup> Moreover, he concluded that the "panic which in the anti-Nazi films was characterized as peculiar to the atmosphere of life under Hitler now saturates the whole world."<sup>77</sup> Kracauer saw his experience in Europe, on the run from the Nazis, mirrored in "film noir."

Kracauer, in locating "terror" as the central feature of these films, drew upon the broader context of the "freedom from fear" tenant of President Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" speech. In doing so, perhaps he also hungered for the "freedom from want" tenant? Either way, von Moltke makes the connection to the speech as well, and in doing so, argues that there was an undeniable

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<sup>76</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, "Hollywood Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind?" in *New German Critique*, No. 89, Film and Exile, (Spring - Summer, 2003), 106.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

alignment between how members of the Frankfurt School theorized the effect of fear on a populace. In line with what Leo Löwenthal, Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and others believed, von Moltke suggests that Kracauer's analysis in the essay internalized the idea that "under the conditions of terror, humans lose their sense of responsibility towards others and revert to a state of nature, to raw material, or to 'surplus' to be annihilated."<sup>78</sup> Intrinsic to von Moltke's idea is the Lockean and Hobbesian notion of the state of nature, which precedes any formation of legal mediation.<sup>79</sup> Ferguson, as well as work done by the legal historian Christine Desan in her book *Making Money* have debunked this Liberal assertion.<sup>80</sup> So, too, have mountains of neochartalist scholarship devoted to this question.<sup>81</sup> As a result, they established legal monetary mediation as a preceding factor to any social market formation of exchange upon which Locke and Hobbes base their Liberal social ontology. This matters because near the end of Kracauer's essay he links his analysis of fear and terror in film noir to a false economic dilemma which is premised on the Liberal assumption von Moltke articulates above. What this does is construct a spatial binary for modernity by which total freedom is only definable by its antithetical domination, from which abstract mediation is supposed to arise. Thus, economic planning is colored as fascistic as it shares the same face as totalitarian mediation. Kracauer suggests as much:

Caught in the snarls of the free-enterprise system, we nevertheless view with apprehension the totalitarian potentialities inherent in any sort of planned economy. Democracy, with its individual freedom, seems economically out of joint, so that it must resort to makeshifts and breed nightmarish dreams of fascist pseudo-solutions, worse

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<sup>78</sup> Johannes von Moltke, *The Curious Humanist*, 89.

<sup>79</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatise of Government*, (London: McMaster University Archive, 1823), 106.

<sup>80</sup> Christine Desan, *Making Money: Coin, Currency, and the Coming of Capitalism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>81</sup> L. Randall Wray, ed., *Credit and State Theories of Money: The Contributions of A. Mitchell Innes*, (Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2004).

than the ills they are intended to cure. Shall we be able to preserve individual freedom under collectivism?<sup>82</sup>

In his analysis of political economy, Kracauer sees an unavoidable contradiction between the “freedom” of democracy and the totalitarian potentiality of being “caught in the snarls” of a “free-enterprise” monetary system. However, the “free-enterprise system” does not exist. The lubricating necessity of legal monetary mediation, or even property rights, precedes its commodity exchange. His subjectivity to such a system is merely his shared intraterritorial position within its embrace. This reframes the binary Kracauer establishes in this passage, and with it his central conclusion about film noir. To conceive of the extremes of the “planned economy” and the “free-enterprise system” is to view political economy along the terms of its haecceity actualizations, within the narrow scope of either individuated exchange or immediate government decree. In contrast, what I contend is that the “free-enterprise system,” just like democracy, is provisioned and mediated through the nested apparatus of governing mediation. Rather than being “out of joint,” coming out of the war mobilization, both midcentury democracy and midcentury political economy were becoming far too austere, which explains the rise of film noir as a symptom of this new-found anxiety about future democratic inclusivity, both political and economic.

Evidence for this can be found most clearly in Roosevelt’s “Freedom from Want” tenant in his speech, but on a more technocratic level, there was also progressive economics discourse about postwar economic anxiety. In a long forgotten book, *The Road We Are Traveling* (1942), the economist Stuart Chase outlined what was his central concern about maintaining a postwar economy: “Full Employment. All men and women seeking work which cannot be found in

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<sup>82</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “Hollywood Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind?,” 111.

private industry should be employed by the state,” Chase wrote.<sup>83</sup> In a chartalist articulation of precisely how his “Postwar Platform” for America was to be achieved, Chase asked, “Where’s the money coming from? Out of that one hundred million man-years of work wasted; out of that two hundred billion dollars of production which never was produced. It will come from the same place that the bombers, tanks and battleships are now coming from – out of the full employment of people.”<sup>84</sup> Money is boundless, but people are not, and they cannot be left behind by financial constraints, he essentially argued.

What is film noir if not the confluence of Kracauer’s manifold articulations of these anxieties in film, from the Oedipal complex of *From Caligari to Hitler’s* analysis of *Dirnentragödie*, to the disjunct between democracy and capitalism in his “Hollywood Terror Films.” One might even call Kracauer’s construction of the fear in this moment a *Double Indemnity*, a symptomatic insurance mechanism which hedges against the barbarism of the postwar monetary tapering with the shadow of Nazi presence. Further, film noir becomes preoccupied with the abstraction of money’s fleeting WWII abundance *and* the new found postwar project of disemploying American women. As American society was enacting this reactionary disemployment project, film noir demonstrates that its premises were tenuous, and its perpetrators were riddled with anxiety about its very plausibility. Pandora’s box had already been opened and the money relation’s capacity for care had been exposed. How can money be put back in the box? How can women be made to make up for such monetary foreclosure? Can they be trusted again? Rather than *femme fatale* figures representing an Oedipal reversion, as

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<sup>83</sup> Stuart Chase, *The Road We Are Traveling 1914-1942*, (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, 1942), 92.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

Kracauer might suggest, they represent the long scream of Care's repression in postwar employment governance, governance which sought to return women to their assumed place in the home.<sup>85</sup>

Read in this context, *From Caligari to Hitler* is best understood as the mechanism by which Kracauer transposes his Weimar sufferings onto an exceedingly different political, economic and aesthetic environment. It is a book which is decidedly of a piece with anti-fascist discourse at the time, a discourse which is out of joint with its moment of abundance, victory, fear and suffering. It cannot see the potentials of its abstractly mediated political economic moment. Into this blindspot, we must go deeper into the past in order to see the abstractions Kracauer could not.

### ***From Nothing: Abstraction as Inclusive Mediation***

More than any other era, the Weimar period plays out the problem of abstraction for critical theory in its ambivalent failure and promise. The crises of Weimar's social democratic experiment are intrinsic to Kracauer's writing during the period. In such work, Kracauer goes directly toward the aesthetics of modernity, to the specific details which many often overlook, in order to transvalue their mere thisness into a broader metaphysical field. As a result, Kracauer's work potently reflects its socio-historical condition. Thomas Y. Levin, who translated many of Kracauer's essays into English for the first time, argues as much when he writes that Kracauer's utilization of surface objects focused on "their diagnostic value as social facts, reading photography and film (prior to any specific content) as material expressions of a particular

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<sup>85</sup> David M. Kennedy, *The American People in World War II: Freedom from Fear, Part Two*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 355-356.

historical condition.”<sup>86</sup> Through this surface methodology, Kracauer brings German aesthetic philosophy to bear on popular culture and sees lingering attachments to fine art as politically reactionary and historically retrograde. As well, he reads surface expressions as indicative of the dialectical historical process that bourgeois intellectuals do not see. His metaphysics served that imperceptible historical process and took the form of the performance of the negative at the level of affect and method. Levin writes that this commitment “insists on the possibility of a utopian—or even messianic—moment in what he calls the ‘revelation of the negative.’”<sup>87</sup> In this section, I expose Kracauer’s negativity to the abstract forces of political economy which fill its utopian void, and find anti-fascist promise in its construction as abstraction itself.

On August 24, 1930, Siegfried Kracauer wrote a solemn letter from Berlin to Theodor W. Adorno, who was already living in the United States at that time. Within, Kracauer analyzed the perilous economic situation in Germany and noted that he was not optimistic about the future. It reads:

The situation in Germany is more than serious... We will have three to four million people unemployed and I can see no way out. A disaster is hanging over this country and I am certain that it’s not just capitalism. That capitalism may be bestial is not due to economic causes alone.<sup>88</sup>

The fear and confusion of Kracauer’s words is unmistakable. Rather than simply being afraid that his personal existence as a Jew in Germany was under threat (which he of course was), or confused and angry about the people of Germany, who were suffering terribly from the exacerbation of Weimar unemployment induced by the Great Depression, Kracauer’s words

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<sup>86</sup> Thomas Y. Levin, “Introduction,” in *The Mass Ornament*, 20.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, Quoted in Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 304;



demonstrate a more existential fear: the fear that fascism was closing in on his *Heimat* and there was nothing that could be done to stop it.

Miriam Hansen, writing specifically about this letter, has shown the stakes of Kracauer's prescient negativity. "Kracauer recognized that Berlin represented the inescapable horizon within which the contradictions of modernity demanded to be engaged," she argued.<sup>89</sup> Her apt description of the supposedly inescapable contradictions of modernity in this moment demonstrates the historiographical power that the abstraction-to-fascism-teleology has maintained into the 21st century. Since the 1930s, it has become a fundamental construct of how late modernity reckons with itself.

Having been spawned in precisely the moment which Kracauer writes, the abstraction-to-fascism-teleology's central characteristic is the belief that capitalism's innate contradictions produce violences from which unemployment is inevitable and suffering is unstoppable. Further, it points to Friedrich Engels' notion, which was repeated most famously by Rosa Luxemburg, who said: "Bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism."<sup>90</sup> In other words, we can either have the abstract value form, with its progressively more regressive imperial barbarisms, or liberation under various socialist schemas which overturn and distribute a supposedly scarce pie of material resources unto the public. I claim that Kracauer, in a way which did not rebuff the spirit of Luxemburg's words, nevertheless rejected her binary typology through his intraterritorial subjectivity among aesthetic forms. To these ends, his gaze unearthed the inadequacies of Marxism's analysis of money's legal structure,

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>90</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, *Socialism or Barbarism: The Selected Writings of Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Paul Le Blanc and Helen C. Scott (New York: Pluto Press, 2010), 204.

and yet, Kracauer could not reckon with what his gaze uncovered. He could not see the imaginative possibility of the immaterial and abstract relations which forever engender our material sphere, as the negative which manifests everywhere, all-at-once in legal mediation.

In the same year that he wrote the above letter to Adorno, Kracauer published an essay in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* that demonstrates how he at once makes visible and forecloses the potential for abstract mediation as negativity in his later Weimar essays. Titled “Farewell to the Linden Arcade,” Kracauer’s essay reads the violence of the transition to modernity as a “reconfiguration of metropolitan topography,” as Levin noted.<sup>91</sup> In centering the question of the topographical shape of modernity, Kracauer analyzes a popular subject of pre-war critical theory: the urban passageway (*Passage*), otherwise known as an arcade. His conclusions, at first glance, maintain the dominance of the abstraction-to-fascism-teleology.

The essay begins in Kracauer’s typical contradictory style. “The *Lindenpassage* (Linden Arcade) has ceased to exist,” Kracauer writes.<sup>92</sup> According to Kracauer, the freight train of modern abstraction has infiltrated every pocket of life to strike it mute, and the arcades are no different. He claims that abstract formal structures of *Neue Sachlichkeit* architecture encase the commodity laden shops beneath smooth lines. He argues that these empty forms partially paper over the “horribly beautiful” Wilhelmine architecture of “our fathers and grandfathers.”<sup>93</sup> As a result, Kracauer’s cloistered childhood *Passage* is “now sinking into a mass grave of cool marble.”<sup>94</sup> The relations of “cool marble,” for Kracauer, allegorize the inhuman and alienating

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<sup>91</sup> Thomas Y. Levin, “Introduction,” in *The Mass Ornament*, 30.

<sup>92</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “Farewell to the Linden Arcade” in *The Mass Ornament*, 337.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

function of abstraction. As such, the arcade—just as he would shortly be—was an exile in its own land and also lost to time. Kracauer’s thinking here perpetuates the abstraction-to-fascism-teleology by pointing to the aesthetic abstraction of the *Passage*, linking it with the monetary abstraction of so-called commodity exchange, and asserting the foundational void of all such forms, which might soon be filled with a positive articulation of abstraction’s supposed annihilation of difference.

In its affirmation of the abstraction-to-fascism-teleology, his reasoning in the essay largely accords with his other work in this era. However, near the end of the essay, Kracauer draws together a binary which points backward toward his earlier writings. In the form of negativity, he introduces a contingency into the abstraction-to-fascism-teleology. He argues that within the *Passage* “all 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.”<sup>95</sup> His words here, especially the idea that “nothing” is the only alternative to fascism, I find particularly important. As a concept, nothing offers an almost inarticulable alternative to fascism. Though he could not see it through to its conclusion, I contend that his alternative springs forth from the abstract monetary relations Kracauer condemned.

To this point, nothing, or (no)thing-ness, on my reading represents the rejection of thisness in the name social organizations that utilize money’s abstract abundance. More important than whether or not Kracauer was thinking specifically of this when he wrote those words is the fact that his gaze revealed such a path. As surface itself, Kracauer’s words reflect the

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 342.

contingent historical trajectories among which he lived in Weimar. There are particular aspects of this history which draw together these disparate points, including proposed policy solutions to the problem of Weimar unemployment. For now, however, I will leave those for a little later in order to survey the relationships between the manifold meanings of “nothing” as the alternative to fascism.

To understand this “nothing,” or non-existence, one needs to return to a concept which has preoccupied critical theory: utopia. When Thomas More wrote *Utopia* in 1516, he derived its title from *topos*, the Latin word for “place,” and the Greek prefix *ou-*, meaning “not.” The no-place of *Utopia* evokes Kracauer’s topographical “nothing-at-all” in no uncertain terms, but utopianism has not been looked at kindly by critical theory in the 20th century.

While critical theory’s relationship to utopia is complicated, there exists a general disdain for its idealism. This trend goes back to Marx’s repeated indictment of “utopian” thinkers throughout his writings, perhaps most famously in his rejection of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.<sup>96</sup> As well, Marx even integrated his anti-utopianism into the inner-workings of his dialectical thought, as Chris Matthew Sciabarra has claimed.<sup>97</sup> Marx argues in *Capital Vol. 1* that dialectical inquiry has to “appropriate the material in detail, to analyze its different forms of development and to track down their inner connection.”<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, in Vol. 1 Marx repeats his criticism of Hegel’s “mystifying” idealism. He argues, “With me the reverse is true: the ideal is nothing but

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<sup>96</sup> Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, trans. Harry Quelch (Chicago: Charles H. Herr & Company, 1910), 73.

<sup>97</sup> Chris Matthew Sciabarra, *Marx, Hayek, and Utopia*, SUNY Series in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 2-3.

<sup>98</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 102.

the material world reflected in the mind of man, and translated into forms of thought.”<sup>99</sup> In prioritizing material existence over the “non-existence” of utopian idealism, Marx favors the material thisness over the immaterial abstractions which have *always* organized such material fields, as neochartalism has shown. Rather than attempting to recuperate the idealisms Marx critiqued, we need to reckon with the fact that the topography of modernity does not revolve around the immediate coming together of capital and labor, but instead the nothingness that organized these flawed and unjust relations.

For better or for worse, Marx’s critique of utopianism influenced the development of the critical theory tradition. Its thread was picked up later by Georg Lukács, who in his influential book *The Theory of the Novel*, also insisted on the substantiality of positive spatial existence. “If ever this world should come into being as something natural and simply experienced, as the only true reality,” Lukács writes, “a new complete totality could be built out of all its substances and relationships.”<sup>100</sup> Against the abstraction of utopian aesthetics, Lukács claims art can never enact the transformation to his preferred substantiality, or thisness: “But art can never be the agent of such a transformation: the great epic is a form bound to the historical moment, and any attempt to depict the utopian as existent can only end in destroying the form, not in creating reality.”<sup>101</sup> Lukács argues that utopia, the negative, abstraction itself, can never be the agent for building his and Marx’s material socialism, as abstraction is defined as forever in dialectical opposition to such material, rather than a constitutive *a priori* aspect of its existence.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1977), 152.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

Moreover, the futility of Lukács' designation of depicting "utopian as existent" should remind us of Kracauer's "no way out" line from his letter to Adorno. In this manner, Kracauer picks up on Lukács' notion throughout his Weimar essays. For example, in his essay "The Group as Bearer of Ideas," Kracauer comments on the idea of a "utopian community" to argue that "Such things can be beautifully imagined and also serve an indispensable role as a regulative principle. Yet reality does not comply so readily with the demands of reason, and it is the task of ontology to disclose the terrible in-itself of this reality."<sup>102</sup> Like with Marx and Lukács, Kracauer's notion of "reality" is opposed to the abstraction of his own nothing-ness alternative to fascism. As a result, such a devotion to thisness is what has cemented the abstraction-to-fascism-teleology and shaped the path by which Kracauer instinctually stumbled into "nothing" as the solution to teleology's "terrible-in-itself" reality.

To bring this back to the historical circumstance, I explore the ways in which this "nothing" solution was actionable in Weimar political history as a specific call for abstract monetary issuance. This call was made to the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (known as the SPD or Social Democrats) in the name of addressing the pervasiveness of unemployment. Though eventually thwarted, it was a proposed policy which could have altered the course of history to create a world in which fascism was less appealing to struggling unemployed Germans.

As the historian Robert A. Gates has recounted, the Weimar political response to the Great Depression was calamitous. "Rather than sponsor imaginative antidepression measures," and out of inflation phobia, the Weimar Social Democrats encouraged the centrist German

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<sup>102</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, "The Group as Bearer of Ideas" in *The Mass Ornament*, 157-158.

Chancellor Heinrich Brüning's "disastrous commitment to deflation which left the field open to the Nazis."<sup>103</sup> Brüning and the SPD's policy was to pull money out of the economy in an effort to reduce wages, and induce foreign investment. Not only did this not work, but it increased the level of unemployment and suffering among the Germany populace, as it revoked purchasing power from the already struggling working class. As any neochartalist would surely tell you, this was a predictable outcome. And as it turns out, there was a chartalist economist inside the trade-union institutions who was alarmed by the policy, and sought to remedy it with "a Program to End Depression." Named Wladimir Woytinsky, he was an exiled Bolshevik economist working for the German confederation of trade unions known as the ADGB. In his memoir, he claims that he was preoccupied with the suffering of the German people and sought to remedy it through the implementation of wide scale public works programs. He wrote, "Active economic policy, with large-scale public works as its cornerstone, remained my obsession. It seemed to me that I saw — physically, with my eyes — how Brüning was leading Germany to a tragic end."<sup>104</sup>

In response to the catastrophe he saw unfolding around him, Woytinsky, Fritz Tarnow, president of the German Woodworkers Union, and Fritz Baade, the SPD's expert on agriculture, authored a public works plan known as the WTB Plan. Gates argues that "the plan which they drafted emphasized that the automatic mechanisms by which capitalist crises were supposed to prepare the way for recovery were not working. Public works would have to be undertaken to provide jobs and stimulate private business activity."<sup>105</sup> Further, as Woytinsky describes in his

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<sup>103</sup> Robert A. Gates, "German Socialism and the Crisis of 1929-33," *Central European History*. vol. 7, no. 4 (Dec., 1974), 342-343.

<sup>104</sup> W.S. Woytinsky, *Stormy Passage. A Personal History Through Two Russian Revolutions to Democracy and Freedom: 1905-1960*, (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc. 1961), 466.

<sup>105</sup> Robert A. Gates, "German Socialism and the Crisis of 1929-33," 350.

memoir, he undertook to sell the plan to SPD leaders through an explanation about the impossibility of inflationary pressure for creating money out of *nothing*. He brought in an unnamed expert,<sup>106</sup> who “explained the mechanism of bank credits for financing a project and tried to show that advancing money cannot produce runaway inflation.”<sup>107</sup> Gates elaborates on this, and argues that “there was no immediate danger of inflation because of the immense unused productive capacity of the German economy. This capacity could be put in motion without exerting significant upward pressure on Germany's greatly deflated price level.”<sup>108</sup> In other words, the WTB plan aimed to mobilized what chartalism had unearthed to employ the German population through the creation of money from “nothing-at-all.”

What might be obvious now is that such embrace of the caretaking potential of abstract mediation in Weimar was not actualized. SPD leaders rejected the plan. After the plan started gaining support among members of the party, Rudolf Hilferding, Marxist intellectual and SPD finance expert, “opposed the WTB Plan unremittingly.”<sup>109</sup> Hilferding, Otto Wels (the chairman of the SPD) and others rejected the plan because they did not believe it represented Marxist analysis and values. When Woytinsky and Gerald Colm, a scholar who supported the plan, came before the SPD leaders to present the proposal, Hilferding attacked its foundation with an appeal to Marxism. As Woytinsky recalls, Hilferding argued:

Colm and Woytinsky... are questioning the very foundations of our program, Marx's theory of labor value. Our program rests on the conviction that labor, and labor alone,

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<sup>106</sup> Perhaps left unnamed by Woytinsky due to later collaboration with the Nazis' expansionary fiscal program.

<sup>107</sup> W.S. Woytinsky, *Stormy Passage*, 469.

<sup>108</sup> Robert A. Gates, “German Socialism and the Crisis of 1929-33,” 350.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.



creates value. Prices deviate from labor values under the impact of the interplay of supply and demand. Depressions result from the anarchy of the capitalist system. Either they come to an end or they must lead to the collapse of this system. If Colm and Woytinsky think they can mitigate a depression by public works, they are merely showing that they are not Marxists.<sup>110</sup>

By deploying the labor theory of value as a rhetorical weapon against abstract monetary creation, Hilferding showed the problem with Weimar Marxism: the reification of money to haecceity. Woytinsky, in his rebuttal, implored Hilferding and Wels to change their minds: “The flood of unemployment is rising, the people are at the end of their patience. The workers, holding us responsible for their misery, are deserting the party to join the Communists and Nazis. We are losing ground. There is no time to waste. Something must be done before it is too late... The only question is whether we take the initiative or leave it to our enemies.”<sup>111</sup> As we know, they left the abstract governance to their enemies, which only further solidified the association between abstraction and oppression. However, as the history shows, the solution to the problem of Nazism’s rise was more abstraction, not less.

In the very moment when Kracauer wrote the letter to Adorno exclaiming that he saw “no way out” of the suffering of Weimar unemployment, an intrepid heterodox economist was laying the ground work for a public policy solution that could have provided such a path. Rather than affirm the abstract money relation as the center of collective existence, an ill-advised appeal to Marxism’s commitment to the concrete, the real, or the substantial blocked the way. It was similar commitment to those made throughout critical theory, one which forms the basis of the flawed assertions of the abstraction-to-fascism-teleology. This commitment does not just repress

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<sup>110</sup> W.S. Woytinsky, *Stormy Passage*, 471.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

the path to utopia-through-nothingness, but in its symptomology, it perversely reveals itself to be a plea for such a path, a “way out” of our concrete sufferings toward an embrace of the organizing care of money’s abstract actualization of our collective dependence.

A few years earlier, in the early-days of the Weimar experiment, Kracauer saw such collectivity in abstract relationality. Through a critical cultural moment in the development of Weimar cinema, in its varying modernisms, I tease out Kracauer’s yearning for abstraction in the following section.

### ***Metropolis: A Case Study in Mediation***

In this case study, I consider the defining film of the late-Weimar era, Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* alongside Kracauer’s essays to illuminate how its figuration of abstract mediation informs the assertion of an alternative to the abstraction-to-fascism-teleology. In doing so, I redeem Kracauer’s early affinities for medieval community in his essays. Furthermore, I affirm the mediation of *Metropolis* alongside these affinities in order to consider Weimar cinema’s aesthetic history anew.

Released in 1927, *Metropolis* is a blockbuster sci fi dystopia with a familiar Marxist class conflict narrative. It depicts a city-scape that evokes a topographical binary. In the world above, there is the urban and affluent metropolis powered by a titan of industry and his capital. Below, the workers toil away like zombies in the factory that powers the city. The separation of the two groups of people, labor and capital, is the motor for the narrative of the film.

As the mediator of the two sides of the binary, the film positions Freder, the son of the leader of the city, as its main character. Near the beginning of the film, Freder finds himself

underneath the city after he follows Maria, a poor young woman who caught Freder's eye in the gardens above, where she was not supposed to be. Maria is depicted in the film as the "virgin-mother-lover figure," as Andreas Huyssen has described her.<sup>112</sup> Every version of her character (she has a robotic evil twin) evokes the Oedipal desire that I characterized as a symptomatic rendering of care's repression in a previous section. Without belaboring the point, Maria exemplifies the feminization of macro caretaking into an immediate haecceity persona. After following Maria below, Freder sees the death and suffering of the workers underneath and becomes sympathetic to their plight. The rest of the film takes many twists and turns, but is essentially concerned with resolving the calamity that is Lang's depiction of a capitalist dystopia through the figure of Freder as an idealist and naive class traitor.

There are many avenues one could go down when considering *Metropolis*. There have been many books written about the Weimar proto-blockbuster. For the purposes of this project, I consider two aspects of the film which Siegfried Kracauer remarks upon in Weimar, and in *From Caligari to Hitler* later on. The through-line of both aspects is the question of abstract mediation, and its alleged linkage to fascism. First is the film's aesthetics, which brings together two styles of the period, and second is the film's often lamented ending, which Kracauer, later in *From Caligari to Hitler*, argues "results in the establishment of totalitarian authority."<sup>113</sup>

According to Kracauer, *Metropolis* attains this alleged totalitarianism through its utilization of ornamental forms of abstraction. "In his exclusive concern with ornamentation," Kracauer writes, "Lang goes as far to compose decorative patterns from the masses who are

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<sup>112</sup> Andreas Huyssen, "The Vamp and the Machine," in *Fritz Lang's Metropolis: Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*, ed. Michael Minden and Holger Bachmann, (Rochester: Camden House, 2000), 208.

<sup>113</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 164.

desperately trying to escape the inundation of the lower city.”<sup>114</sup> Kracauer dialectically affirms these ornamental forms and patterns in his famous Weimar essay “The Mass Ornament.”<sup>115</sup> However, by 1947 Kracauer found them reminiscent of mass Nazi rallies. The ornamental forms represent, in their collective subjectivity to capital, the films expressionist tenancies. Eugene Lunn echoes Kracauer’s reading when he connects the film to the broader stylistic trend. “Many expressionist poems, plays, films, and paintings show revulsion for the impersonal, mechanical, routinized, and authoritarian aspects of modern factory and urban life (Kaiser’s *Gas* and Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* are two well-known examples),” Lunn contends.<sup>116</sup> As a violent protest against the inadequacies of modernity, the film negates the abstract authoritarianisms of capitalism through such a violent collective subject. This story should sound familiar, as it is reminiscent of leftist films throughout the 20th century.

Layered on top of the film’s expressionist aesthetics is another commitment that is exhibited in *Metropolis*’ staging of set pieces. Rather than create expressionist architectural set pieces, much like what one finds in the set design of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Lang instead opted for the smoother and more symmetrical architecture of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (new objectivity) tradition, a tradition which should remind us of the “cool marble” Kracauer lamented in his “Linden Arcade” essay. New Objectivity, which Lunn describes as more “disengaged”

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 149-150.

<sup>115</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament” in *The Mass Ornament*.

<sup>116</sup> Eugene Lunn, *Marxism & Modernism; an historical study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 62.

from political struggle than expressionism, situates the set pieces of the film in the context of exceedingly bourgeois spaces, like an office building or a shop window.<sup>117</sup>

The bringing together of these two styles seems a bit like a contradiction in terms. Just like in the “Linden Arcade” essay, when Kracauer lamented the papering over of Wilhelmine aesthetics with the smooth lines of new objectivity, we see in *Metropolis* a struggle between two aesthetic forms. Given Lunn’s reading of Weimar aesthetics, the question becomes: how can revolutionary mass struggle of expressionism be coupled with commercial consumption and the coldness of the new objectivity’s institutional abstraction? What I want to suggest here is that the mediation of the seemingly opposed is *Metropolis*’ central ideological commitment. The aesthetics of *Metropolis* resolve the aesthetic struggle and synthesize their opposition into an aesthetic dialectic, one which mediates moneyed economies with the interests of the working class. Most importantly, *Metropolis*’ commitment yearns for the sort of mediation through abstraction which the WTB plan offered.

A few film scholars come to this conclusion about *Metropolis*’ commitment to mediation, including Anton Kaes, and to a certain extent, Thomas Elsaesser and Andreas Huyssen as well.<sup>118</sup> However, nobody affirms such mediation. Of those that condemn it, R.L. Rutsky is the most brash. His excessive denunciation of *Metropolis* reflects, in its opposite, how one should think about the relationship of the film to the WTB plan’s solution for Weimar political economy.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 66; Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 92-100.

<sup>118</sup> Anton Kaes, “Metropolis (1927): City, Cinema, Modernity,” in *An Essential Guide to Classic Films of the Era: Weimar Cinema*, ed. by Noah Isenberg, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 173-191; Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany’s Historical Imaginary*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 146; Andreas Huyssen, “The Vamp and the Machine,” in *Fritz Lang’s Metropolis: Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*, ed. Michael Minden and Holger Bachmann, (Rochester: Camden House, 2000).

Despite the fact that his argument exhibits all the symptoms of the abstraction-to-fascism-teleology, Rutsky makes a similar claim about the mediation of architectural styles as I do, and links them the cathedral which shows up in the film from time to time, but most importantly in the final scene. However, unlike me, he denounces such mediation as fervently fascist. “The architecture of this cathedral combines the forms of both the *Neue Sachlichkeit* and expressionism; it represents itself as modern and technological on the one hand,” Rutsky writes, “and, on the other hand, as the heir to a mythical Aryan tradition, of which the Gothic cathedrals are a part.”<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, he goes on to argue, “It is only on the basis of this aesthetic mediation (of technology, of difference) that the tyranny and the horror of Nazism are made possible.”<sup>120</sup> I fundamentally reject these claims, as such reasoning necessitates not just the negation of abstraction, but also the very category of modernism, as Rutsky does.<sup>121</sup> As I hope I have shown, this sort of aversion to abstract mediation and obsession with the immediacy of haecceity in modernity induces the social abandonment which makes Nazism possible. It is important to note that Rutsky’s view echos many of Kracauer’s later claims about Lang, and *Metropolis*. Though, that does not mean that Kracauer was always as averse to such abstractly mediated aesthetics.

In order to disclose how Kracauer’s open-ness to abstract mediation in Weimar manifested, I need to consider in detail the final scene of *Metropolis*. In the beginning of the scene, the camera faces the aforementioned cathedral. Into the relatively empty frame march the

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<sup>119</sup> R.L. Rutsky, “The Mediation of Technology and Gender: *Metropolis*, Nazism, Modernism,” in *Fritz Lang’s Metropolis: Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*, ed. Michael Minden and Holger Bachmann, (Rochester: Camden House, 2000), 242.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 236-238.

workers in an ornamentally positioned wedge formation. They move toward the front step of the cathedral in order to confront the owner of the city, Fredersen, Freder's father. Grot, the leader of the workers, goes up the steps, and in an attempted reconciliation with Fredersen, reaches out his hand, but soon recoils in anger. Seeking to end the staged standoff, Maria goes to Freder and implores him to intervene. She says: "Head and Hands want to join together, but they don't have the heart to do it... Oh mediator, show them the way to each other." Freder responds to Maria's request, and takes his father's hand. As the ornamental score climaxes, Freder reaches for Grot's hand, and now holding both his father and Grot's hands, slowly brings them together, resolving the dispute between capital and labor on the steps of the cathedral. As their hands touch, the shot dissolves to an intertitle that reads: "The Mediator Between Head and Hands must be the Heart!" *Metropolis* ends the conflict that motored its narrative in a seemingly reformist resolution of the material problems that defined its social binary.

The film received lots of criticism for its ending. Among those who have criticized this moment is Kracauer himself. He wrote of the moment in terms of a "policy of appeasement," which evoke the failures of Neville Chamberlain's pre-war diplomatic policy. "On the surface, it seems that Freder has converted his father; in reality, the industrialist has outwitted his son," Kracauer wrote, "The concession amounts to a policy of appeasement that not only prevents the workers from winning their cause, but enables him to tighten his grip on them."<sup>122</sup> He goes on to compare the structure of the final scene of *Metropolis* to that of Goebbels and the German people, and concludes that "Freder's rebellion results in the establishment of totalitarian, and he

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<sup>122</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 163.

considers this result a victory.”<sup>123</sup> For the Kracauer of 1947, the film performs the self-subjugation which would manifest in the Nazis takeover of power in 1933. I disagree, and hold up the film’s modernist insistence on mediation in both its aesthetics and narrative as a fumbling plea for monetary and legal mediation of the insecure and austere employment relations that defined Weimar political economy and the workers in *Metropolis*. Springing forth as monetary credit from “nothing-at-all,” such a resolution was possible in the form of the WTB plan.

There was a time when Kracauer yearned for such metaphysical mediation as well. In his essay, “The Hotel Lobby,” written between 1922-1923, Kracauer immanently redeems the seemingly asocial anonymity of the hotel lobby as a reflection of the abstract community of the Christian Middle Ages. Kracauer writes, “In the hotel lobby, equality is based not on a relation to God but on a relation to the nothing.”<sup>124</sup> The “nothing” is of course the abstraction of modernity, of which monetary mediation is the prime engine, just like in the commerce of the hotel lobby. By lamenting the alleged hallowing out of abstract connection in modernity by the abstract forces of political economy and secularization, by lamenting modern alienation, Kracauer offers the hotel lobby as a distorted reflection of “the *equality* of those who pray.”<sup>125</sup> Levin summarizes Kracauer’s commitment to medieval Christianity in a revealing and succinct manner.

“Kracauer’s highly romanticized vision of a utopian Middle Ages, which he describes as a ‘unified culture’ that was ‘saturated with meaning,’” Levin writes, “forms a striking contrast to his reading of modernity, which he considers above all in terms of its spiritual lack.”<sup>126</sup> Content

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>124</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “The Hotel Lobby” in *The Mass Ornament*, 179.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>126</sup> Thomas Y. Levin, “Introduction,” in *The Mass Ornament*, 13.



aside, we should notice first the usage of words like “utopian” by Levin as a perpetuation of the schema of indicting abstraction as lacking material content, just as Kracauer does over and over. What I suggest is that Kracauer’s lionization of the Middle Ages represents an affirmative historical reading of abstraction’s past, while he nevertheless can only immanently apply the same lens to the “nothing” of his present, despite a fervent desire for such abstraction.

In his affirmation of abstraction's past, Kracauer argues that social subjectivity before God is repeated before the “nothing” of the hotel lobby. He writes: "It is true that only those who stand before God are sufficiently estranged from one another to discover they are brother; only they are exposed to such an extent that they can love one another without knowing one another and without using names."<sup>127</sup> Just like the workers sitting before the cathedral in the final scene of *Metropolis*, Kracauer argues that communal unity is only possible in the universal “estrangement” of abstract modern commercial spaces like the hotel lobby. In the essay, he repeatedly develops this theme to identify the particular contradictions of communal commercial interrelation. This reasoning extends to the silence of a hotel lobby, a feature that Kracauer connects to the house of God. “It is a silence that abstracts from the differentiating word and compels one downward into the equality of the encounter with the nothing,” Kracauer writes, “an equality that a voice resounding through space would disturb.”<sup>128</sup> The silence of modern abstraction, the lack of spatial representation of its formal qualities, brings people together in the form of their communal relationships to such a lack. Though Kracauer cannot consciously

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<sup>127</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “The Hotel Lobby” in *The Mass Ornament*, 182.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 181

articulate it, that lack is the legal mediation of money's infinity, and nobody is outside of its embrace.

As I have mentioned already, the arguments in "The Hotel Lobby" cast the final scene of *Metropolis* in a new light. The workers, sitting before the "house of God," once alienated by the rigidity of immediate haecceity subjugation by capital, have embraced the mediation of anonymous subjectivity to abstraction, which can reshape their inclusion in a society that ostracized them to the depths of the city. This is precisely how the mediation of the WTB plan was supposed to work, to enable Germans to participate in productive society by providing them meaningful jobs. It was to include everyone. Moreover, just as in "The Hotel Lobby" essay, where Kracauer suggests that "the house of God retains only a decorative significance" in modernity, so too does the aesthetic construction of *Metropolis*' final moments, with all its maligned "ornamentation" and "decorative patterns."<sup>129</sup> Such decoration is crucial for understanding the meaning of the film to Weimar culture.

Sitting before the Gothic cathedral, the workers look up at its vaulted decorative arrangement, and intuit a subjectivity to its political construction. Relatedly, Scott Ferguson argues that the Gothic cathedral challenges our ability to perceive the totality in its material manifestations. "Emblematized by the periods ornate and towering cathedrals," Ferguson writes, "Gothic form twists up, against, and beyond the threshold of the perceptible, suspending beholders in God's bewildering infinitude."<sup>130</sup> It is precisely such an infinity sign that is at the center of the modern money relation. In other words, it is precisely the imperceptibility of the

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 175; Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 149-150.

<sup>130</sup> Scott Ferguson, *Declarations of Dependence*, 111.

aesthetics and narrative of *Metropolis* that evoke the abstract plane upon which the *nothing* of monetary mediation organizes our positive interactions, or exchanges.

Therefore, in order to fight fascisms wherever they spring, we need to assert our democratic power of the political form of the *nothing* in order to shape its infinity toward inclusive and democratic ends, rather than leave its power to the domain of reactionaries. To do this, we need an affirmation of both the aesthetics and politics of modernism as distanced mediation. We need to affirm the always-already togetherness of the materially disparate. And finally, we need to demand inclusion in these political modernisms at the level of aesthetic and monetary experience.

In reaching for these demands, we can no longer conceive of Kracauer's work through the lens of his "terrible-in-itself" pessimism. Adorno had it right when he dialectically criticized Kracauer's realism as unnecessarily dystopian. "Even when Kracauer agitates against utopia like a defeatist, he is actually attacking something that animated him, as though out of fear," Adorno writes, "The utopian trait, afraid of its own name and concept, sneaks into the figure of the man who does not quite fit in."<sup>131</sup> My goal in this project was to write a history that spoke to the spirit of these words. In doing so, I establish utopianism as the nothing of abstraction to reveal that Kracauer's agitations were in favor of a monetary care that beckoned his moment.

In his Weimar essay "Those Who Wait," Kracauer—like Benjamin—argues for waiting as central to any potential salvation. Kracauer writes that those who wait do not devolve into cynical "skepticism-as-a-matter-of-principle, since from the outset his entire being has been

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<sup>131</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Shierry Weber Nicholzen, "The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer," *New German Critique*, no. 54 (1991), 176.

geared toward establishing a relationship with the absolute.”<sup>132</sup> As a comportment to find hope in the hopeless, such a perspective is courageous. However, we know that our relationship to the absolute was always-already constitutive of our shared social existence. In the abstraction of memory, the ever presence of historical existence, Kracauer is still waiting. Let us finally answer his pleas.

### ***Conclusion***

The story of Kracauer’s life opens up onto a broader history of critical theory. To not confine it to a particular era, I consider critical theory a project of reckoning with our mutual belonging to modernity, a method of reckoning with the promise, suffering, happiness, and despair which coexist all-at-once on the pages of journals, newspapers, magazines, aesthetic artifacts, and the interior lives of men and women alike. Furthermore, as the title of this work contends, the defining characteristic of this critical all-at-onceness is the *problem* of abstraction in our shared modernities. As I hope this project has demonstrated, there are paths to overcoming this critical problem. By affirming our intraterritoriality and the promise of monetary care inherent to the abstract mediation of our lives, we can look to aesthetics and history to embrace the contours of the shape of our common topological embeddedness.

Critical theory’s specific historical inauguration was committed, in a certain sense, to this project. Forming as a response to the rigid scientism of the Second International, critical theory opposed a scientific Marxism that imagined the processes of economy as mechanistic, as operating near-autonomously according to the laws of the capital. Instead, critical theory sought to embed human consciousness and dialectical contradiction into social analysis. Martin Jay

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<sup>132</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “Those Who Wait” in *The Mass Ornament*, 139.

frames the intellectual transition in these terms. “Hegel’s stress on consciousness as constitutive of the world challenged the passive materialism of the Second International’s theorists,” Jay wrote.<sup>133</sup> To charitably read Hegel’s intervention upon which critical theorists drew, one can argue that critical theory’s dialectical tradition functions as a critique of a particular form of scientific haecceity, which imagines the locus of social transformation as *solely* a function of concrete particulars and immediate interactions. As such a rebuke, critical theory emphasized the abstract processes of modern mediation as encompassing more than the monetary form itself. Instead, it showed the constitutive nature of other forms of abstract mediation, including aesthetics, as well as large scale institutional mediation, all of which I contend are provisioned and maintained by monetary governance. In refracting the totality, *critical theory leans toward the universal*, even if this leaning concludes in an ambivalent affirmation of our shared falsity. When Adorno wrote, playing with Hegel’s famous phrase, “The whole is the false,” he wrote of our shared totality.<sup>134</sup> Whether false, or nothing, or abstract, Adorno correctly identified the totality of our social order. The totality’s falsity, utopianism, abstraction, is our infinite possibility.

The ability to reorganize the totality through its very medium of abstraction completely up-ends the abstraction-to-fascism-teleology. In destabilizing the myth, we must declare the particular as nested within the abstract totality—or the “whole”—of political dependence and governance. This is imaginable because we know that abstract mediation does not *necessarily* liquidate the particular in the ways in which Adorno and Max Horkheimer argued in *Dialectic of*

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<sup>133</sup> Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 42.

<sup>134</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2005), 80.

*Enlightenment*.<sup>135</sup> Instead, I insist on abstraction's contingency. Abstract mediation of course can be mobilized to horrific fascist ends. However, it can also be mobilized toward the defeated global fascism in 1945. The inauguration of abstraction's either-or contingency opens new possibilities for social transformation.

At the same time, this study's return to abstraction's fraught past offers a fresh approach to contemporary political and cultural problems. As neoliberalism's austerity fueled political consciousness breaks down, it has exposed a path for new leftist movements, but at the same time, its long-lasting inadequacies have fueled neofascisms and neonationalisms across the globe. Whether due to Viktor Orbán in Hungary, to Marine Le Pen in France, to Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Brexit in the United Kingdom, and of course, Donald Trump in the United States, these neofascist, or fascist adjacent regimes and parties have renewed concerns over fascism in "the discourse" writ large, including in recent popular scholarship that suggests we are repeating the mistakes of Weimar.<sup>136</sup>

One finds both this renewed interest and past mistakes in recent left scholarship of fascism. A good example is Enzo Traverso's 2019 *The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far Right*, which argues that the right-wing movements of our time should be situated in the category of "postfascism." Traverso emphasizes the discontinuities between contemporary right wing movements and classical fascisms. I find his intervention useful, as it points to the need to embed considerations of contemporary right wing movements in their intraterritorial conditions. However, his text sits within the broader limits of the Liberal narrative that views abstract

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<sup>135</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 9.

<sup>136</sup> Madeline Albright, *Fascism: A Warning*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2018); Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*, (New York: Random House, 2018).

governance as an “intervention” into a pre-existent and isolated economy instead of law necessarily preceding any market formation, as neochartalism insists.<sup>137</sup> In writing about “postfascism,” Traverso argues that “this concept emphasizes its chronological distinctiveness and locates it in a historical sequence implying both continuity and transformation.”<sup>138</sup> Traverso puts an emphasis on postfascism’s contingent qualities. Rather than bluntly mapping contemporary fascisms onto the historical memory of classical fascisms, like Nazism, he insists on contextualizing these right wing movements. “In trying to define them,” Traverso writes, “we cannot ignore the fascist womb from which they emerged, insofar as these are their historical roots, but we should also consider their metamorphoses. They have transformed themselves, and they are moving in a direction whose ultimate outcome remains unpredictable.”<sup>139</sup> While I affirm Traverso’s foregrounding of the historicity of various fascisms, I find his metaphorical naturalization of the “womb” as the origin of fascism’s birth symptomatic of the myth I critique in this study. The feminization of the cradle of fascism’s political ideology necessarily implies Kracauer’s Frommian narrative of oedipal reversion, in which “isolated” figures revert to fascism for its mimicry of a motherly embrace. Given Scott Ferguson’s linking of the reduction of monetary care to feminized familialism, such a narrative has perpetuated the abstraction-to-fascism-teleology, as it implies that fascists are the only ones with access to the “womb” or teat of abstraction’s provisioning capabilities.

While fascisms are not the only ones with access to the abstraction’s capacity for care, whether or not their historical access to these abstract capacities has been foreclosed by

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>138</sup> Enzo Traverso, *The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far Right*, (New York: Verso, 2019), 4.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 6.

postfascist ideology must be central to the left's contemporary antifascist project. Therefore, the left must look to the monetary conditions and relations throughout postfascist ideology in its diagnosis of their threat. Upon such an endeavor, one finds that, unlike the fascism of the 1930s, postfascist parties tend to succumb to neoliberalism's foreclosure of money as a tool for productive mobilization. Whether it be Bolsonaro appointing the University of Chicago trained economist Paulo Guedes to be Brazil's Minister of Finance, who—as the *Financial Times* put it—is planning a “free market perestroika,” or the right wing obsession with the “decentralized” potentials of Bitcoin, which David Golumbia has catalogued, or the Brexiteers obsession with “taking back control” of their country to get—among other things—money back from the European Union for their National Health Service (NHS), money which they could have simply created through parliamentary appropriation, right wing movements across the world have demonstrated their austere monetary imagination.<sup>140</sup> This suggests that these movements represent more of a reactionary flailing against the forces of liberalism than an existential threat to the shape of modernity writ large. That does not mean that such flailing is not harmful. Bolsonaro's plan for economic liberalization will harm millions of Brazilians and could even threaten human civilization should it encroach into the Amazon rainforest. But many imperial liberalisms of the past and present have shown such a capacity. What it does suggest is that these reactions will struggle with squaring liberalism's insistence on scarcity as the fundamental principle of being. They will not be able to achieve what Robert Paxton has described as

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<sup>140</sup> John Paul Rathbone and Andres Schipani, “Bolsonaro's financial guru plans free-market perestroika,” *Financial Times*, February 11, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/fd0b68d0-2b25-11e9-a5ab-ff8ef2b976c7>; David Golumbia, *The Politics of Bitcoin: Software as Right-Wing Extremism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Peter Walker, “May's NHS ‘Brexit dividend’ claim draws scepticism and doubt,” *The Guardian*, June 17, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jun/17/theresa-may-nhs-funding-budget-rise-brexit>;



fascism's transcendence of the outdated "Right-Left political map."<sup>141</sup> The Nazis were able to rhetorically and monetarily enact this transcendence through the metaphysical assertion of infinity as a vitalist contraction of the social sphere, but these postfascist parties will struggle to without a reimagination of monetary relations. Contemporary analysts such as Traverso fail to diagnose this dimension of postfascism and thus ultimately overlook political and aesthetic means to move beyond it.

There are naturally exceptions to this trend among postfascisms. As the leader of the right wing French party The National Front, Marine Le Pen's platform called for the "Bank of France to print money to cover French budget deficits."<sup>142</sup> This is a direct mobilization of neochartalism's insights, and connects Le Pen's postfascist political economic program more directly to the economic structures that conditioned Nazism's rise in Weimar. Le Pen has the tools to conduct her racist, militaristic, and exclusionary project in ways that other right-wingers simply do not. While I still suggest that the former category of postfascists—who foreclose money's power—necessitate a left response that mobilizes monetary abstraction's boundless possibility for just and inclusive goals, it is the case that in opposition of those like Le Pen—who understand money's power—such terms become more dire. However, this field of inquiry is one in need of more exploration. I do not think anyone yet understands what it means to be postfascist in a manner that seems to embrace the key monetary aspect of 1930s fascism. In spite of this uncertainty, I would speculate that should the worst happen in France, the election of Marine Le Pen as President, it is unlikely that we would see the sort of rejection of her policies

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<sup>141</sup> Robert Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 12.

<sup>142</sup> Matthew Yglesias, "I read the French far-right party's platform, and it gets one big thing absolutely right," *Vox*, January 12, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/1/12/7531357/national-front-platform>

that seems to be underway in the United States against Donald Trump, as she could give those to be included in her postfascist project the monetary support they yearn for.

While I understand that it is not always easy to delineate in real time between the two categories of postfascism, I nonetheless contend that integrating a monetary analysis of postfascist ideology is crucial for gauging the magnitude of their threat. Furthermore, across the entire spectrum of fascist menace, such monetary analyses must also inform our antifascist political responses, as Wladimir Woytinsky attempted to do in Weimar, and as we see in some of the rhetoric around US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Green New Deal today.<sup>143</sup>

To bring this expressly neochartalist anti-fascism back to where this project began, we must look afresh at German film studies and the adjacent field of late twentieth-century critical theory, both of which were responsible for shaping Kracauer's historical legacy and theoretical importance. Out of a renewed interest in the limits and prospects of the Weimar moment, German film and theoretical scholarship was all the rage during the late-twentieth-century. This is particularly important because German film and critical theory scholarship was roughly colored by the same socio-historical context as postfascism: late capitalism. Recently, however, the discipline's popularity has waned. Whether due to the passing of those like Miriam Hansen, or the impending retirement of those like Anton Kaes, we need a new crop of German film scholars and critical theorists to push the discipline forward, try out new methods, and reconsider long established norms.

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<sup>143</sup> Zach Carter and Alexander C. Kaufman, "The War On Climate Change Won't Be Won Quibbling Over The Green New Deal's Costs," *Huffington Post*, February 18, 2019, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/green-new-deal-costs-climate-change\\_n\\_5c66285be4b01757c369e3df](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/green-new-deal-costs-climate-change_n_5c66285be4b01757c369e3df)

This point also applies to works on the history of German critical theory, including Martin Jay's *The Dialectical Imagination* or Susan Buck-Morss' *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*. In the era of Margaret Thatcher's infamous phrase, "There is no alternative," film scholars reckoned with the sufferings, failures and prospects of their present moment by engrossing themselves in the sufferings, failures and prospects of the Weimar moment. Jay makes the explicit connection between the New Left, and thus its impending failure, and the critical theorists of Weimar of which he wrote.<sup>144</sup> Kracauer's words to Adorno in 1931, where he wrote that there was "no way out" of the calamity of Weimar unemployment, applied to the German film and intellectual scholars too. There was no alternative to the supposed "free market system," and therefore in many instances scholarship on Weimar recycled the limits of Weimar into the left's impotent struggle against late capitalist and neoliberal ideology. With some critical distance, however, we can begin to see new utopian futures that affirm abstract monetary relations as a tool for political reorganization. As such, our new moment demands a fresh look at the history of German aesthetics, at the ambiguities made visible by the lens of intraterritoriality.

In addition to the necessity for a new look at the aesthetic forms of Weimar, there must also be fresh engagement with the intellectual history of German film studies. Conceiving of the relationship between the discipline in the late twentieth century as a mirror of the hopelessness of the late-Weimar moment means that the discipline itself is shaped its own symptomology, one which once unearthed will allow us to better understand its neoliberal context, its aesthetic artifacts and our contemporary world.

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<sup>144</sup> Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, xxviii.

This leads directly back to Thomas Elsaesser's problematic epigraph that introduced this study. If you recall, Elsaesser affirms a "quasi-existential bond" between Weimar cinema and the "fate of the society that produced and consumed them." His work operated distinctly within the terms of this bond, and thus the terms of the myth of abstraction-to-fascism-teleology. Yet, his own semiological structure betrays his overarching thesis. The "quasi-" nature of the existential bond between the films and Nazism reveals a yearning for its own alternative, a contingency at the heart of Elsaesser's own determinism, one that he could not imagine, but one that we can see through the lens of intraterritoriality and its reflection of abstraction's promise.

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