

Minutiae, Close-up, Microanalysis

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1

History: The Last Things before the Last, an unfinished book by Siegfried Kracauer that was published after his death, first appeared in paperback in 1995. At the time, Paul Oskar Kristeller, who had contributed a foreword to the first edition in 1969, prepared a new preface. The twenty-six years that elapsed between the two Kristeller texts were marked by a veritable Kracauer renaissance, attested to by a number of new editions and translations, as well as critical essays in several languages that addressed this body of work. But in 1995, Kristeller pointed out, this belated recognition was marred by a tendency to eliminate from the presentation of Kracauer anything that could not be traced directly back to the Frankfurt school. As examples of this distorting approach, Kristeller cited the articles on *History* by Gertrud Koch and Inka Mülder-Bach that had appeared in the issue of *New German Critique* devoted to Kracauer in 1991. Kristeller wrote:

They neither summarize the book nor indicate that its content fundamentally differs from his earlier writings. Their footnotes cite only books and articles unknown to Kracauer and refer to Kracauer's earlier books as if the book on history were in complete agreement with them. They also fail to indicate that Kracauer, in the footnotes and bibliography of this book, cites for the most part historical, philological, and philosophical sources, never mentions his earlier writings, and very seldom refers to the sociologists that predominate in his earlier works.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are Gilbert's.

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And worst of all, they imply and even state that history was not his major concern. An adequate scholarly interpretation of Kracauer's last work is yet to be written.¹

This harsh judgment, handed down by the erudite scholar who gave us *Iter Italicum*, a monument of precision and scientific probity, contains some factual errors. A quick check reveals that in fact the two essays under accusation cite *virtually nothing but* Kracauer's writings, writings he was familiar with, and studies on Kracauer; the exceptions are two or three references to more recent articles on his work. More tellingly, and in contradiction to Kristeller's claim, the article by Müllder-Bach points out the divergences between the posthumous book and some of its author's earlier articles. How are we to take this lack of precision, so surprising coming from Kristeller? To what should we attribute it? To indignation, without doubt. When she emphasized "the extreme cultural and scholarly isolation" in which Kracauer ostensibly wrote his book on history, Müllder-Bach tacitly overlooked the assertion made by Kristeller—an assertion we have no reason to doubt—that the book emerged, rather, from intensive discussions the two friends engaged in over a period of years.² But I would like to underline something else: the clean break insisted on by Kristeller between *History* and Kracauer's earlier writings is utterly untenable.

Kracauer's posthumous book opens with an autobiographical statement: "I might as well mention that recently I suddenly discovered that my interest in history—which began to assert itself about a year ago [1960] and which I had hitherto believed to be kindled by the impact of our contemporary situation on my mind—actually grew out of the ideas I tried to implement in my *Theory of Film*. In turning to history, I just continued to think along the lines manifest in that book."³ Thus, continued Kracauer, "I realized in a flash the many existing parallels between history and the photographic me-

1. Paul Oskar Kristeller, preface to Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things before the Last* (Princeton, N.J., 1995), pp. viii–ix.

2. Inka Müllder-Bach, "History as Autobiography: *The Last Things before the Last*," *New German Critique*, no. 54 (Fall 1991): 139. See also Gertrud Koch, "'Not Yet Accepted Anywhere': Exile, Memory, and Image in Kracauer's Conception of History," trans. Jeremy Gaines, *New German Critique* 54 (Fall 1991): 95–109. See also Kristeller, preface.

3. Kracauer, *History*, p. 3; hereafter abbreviated *H*.

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dia, historical reality and camera-reality. Lately I came across my piece on 'Photography' and was completely amazed at noticing that I had compared historicism with photography already in this article of the 'twenties" (*H*, pp. 3–4).

So it was Kracauer himself who identified the continuity between history (in the double sense of process and narration or *res gestae* and *historia rerum gestarum*) and photography (broadly conceived so as to include film) as the bridge between the first and second phases of his output, which are divided by his experience of exile. One can hardly overlook such a declaration, though Kristeller implicitly does so when he contrasts the posthumous book on history with the earlier writings. Still, it remains to determine what the statement means, as the passage I just quoted sets side by side, without much emphasis, history and historicism (*Historismus*). Such a juxtaposition does not sit well with the criticisms to which Kracauer consistently subjected historicism. Both the continuity and the juxtaposition encapsulated in the adverb *already* are therefore debatable. Is this a tiny contradiction to be blamed on the incomplete state of the manuscript, or is it a clue to the existence of an unresolved issue in Kracauer's thought?

2

To parse this option, we should start from some texts pointed out by Kracauer himself, texts both illuminated and rendered more equivocal by the discussions of the last few years. We will begin with the article on photography that appeared in 1927 in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, later collected in *The Mass Ornament* (1963). Kracauer noted in this essay that historicism "emerged at about the same time as modern photographic technology," suggesting that both were products of capitalist society. But this intersection concealed, according to him, a deeper parallel. Representatives of the doctrine of historicism, like Wilhelm Dilthey (the explicit reference was removed by Kracauer when the article was republished), believe "they can explain any phenomenon purely in terms of its genesis . . . that they can grasp historical reality by reconstructing the course of events in their temporal succession without any gaps. Photography presents a spatial continuum; historicism seeks to provide the temporal continuum." To historicism and photography Kracauer contrasted memory and its images. These last are by definition fragmentary. "*Memory* encompasses neither the entire spatial appearance of a state of affairs nor its entire temporal course." Here we find the deep significance of the contrast between, on the one hand, historicism and photography and, on the other, memory and its images: "That the camera devours the world is a sign of the *fear of death*. What the

photographs by their sheer accumulation attempt to banish is the recollection of death, which is part and parcel of every memory image.”⁴

Still, it is true that in concluding this essay Kracauer proposed, with a sudden dialectical reversal, an emancipation of photography, a liberation from the flat recording of events and from the accumulation of the detritus of reality. He asserted the potential of film, which could, like dreams or the works of Kafka, rearrange those fragments of reality in unexpected ways, revealing a deeper order. But it remains no less the case that the Kracauer of 1927 subjected both photography and historicism to the same attack. To these he would contrast “history”: a history to be written, a history that did not yet exist.

3

Can we make out in these reflections, as Kracauer was to suggest later, the seeds of his posthumous book on history? Yes and no. The obstacle is a divergence connected, as has been noted, with the name of Proust—or, better, with a well-known passage from Proust. Proust makes no appearance—explicit or implicit—in the 1927 essay on photography, despite the discussion of memory and the images of memory.⁵ By contrast, when Kracauer analyzed the characteristics of film—in *Theory of Film* (1960)—and historiography—in *History*—he referred more than once to that passage in *The Guermantes Way* in which the narrator, returning home unexpectedly after a trip, sees his grandmother without being seen himself: for an instant he fails to recognize her.⁶ Let us look once more at a few sentences from that unforgettable passage:

Of myself . . . there was present only the witness, the observer, in traveling coat and hat, the stranger who does not belong to the house, the photographer who has called to take a photograph of places which one will never see again. The process that automatically [*mécaniquement*] occurred in my eyes when I caught sight of my grandmother was indeed a photograph. . . . For the first time and for a moment only, since she vanished very quickly, I saw, sitting on the sofa beneath the lamp, red-faced, heavy and vulgar, sick, vacant, letting her slightly crazed eyes wander over a book, a dejected old woman whom I did not know.⁷

4. Kracauer, “Photography,” *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (1963; Cambridge, Mass., 1995), pp. 49, 50, and 59. I have corrected a mistranslation in the first sentence of the last quoted passage.

5. On this point I disagree with Müllder-Bach, “History as Autobiography,” p. 141.

6. See Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, N.J., 1997), pp. 14–17, 20, 54–57; hereafter abbreviated *TF*. See also *H*, pp. 82–84.

7. Marcel Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, vol. 2 of *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York, 1981), p. 141.

De moi . . . il n’y avait là que le témoin, l’observateur, en chapeau et manteau de voyage, l’étranger qui n’est pas de la maison, le photographe qui vient prendre un cliché des lieux

Through the estranged, automatic gaze that Proust compares to the impassive lens of the camera, the narrator instantly grasps, in spite of himself, the thing that love had until then prevented him from seeing: his grandmother was going to die. So photography, for the Kracauer of 1927 the “sign of the *fear of death*,” became through Proust the tool that enables one to transcend this fear, to look death in the face. The premonition of death was at the heart of the passage from Saint-Simon’s *Mémoires* that, if I am not mistaken, inspired this passage. The duke of Saint-Simon pays a call on the Dauphin and finds him “on his close-stool among his valets and two or three of his principal officers. He terrified me. I saw a man with his head down, a purplish red, with a vacant look, who did not even see me approach.”⁸ In addition to the perception of physical decay, conveyed by the occurrence of analogous colors (purplish red, red), the device of presenting a person who fails to recognize the other is identical: “I saw a man” (Saint-Simon), “I saw . . . [an] old woman” (Proust). Behind the transformed features of the individual appears the anonymous destiny of the species, its mortality.

“The face counts for nothing in film unless it includes the *death’s-head* beneath. ‘Danse macabre.’ To which end? That remains to be seen.”⁹ It is tempting to see these enigmatic sentences as Kracauer’s first reflections on that passage from Proust. They are drawn from a notebook that contains the rough draft for the introduction to a book on film: the project Kracauer initiated in Marseille, in November 1940, while anxiously waiting for official permission to emigrate to the United States with his wife. A later version of this project, written in English in 1949, opens with an explicit reference to the passage from Proust, a subject developed more fully in the final version of the book.¹⁰ In Marseille Kracauer had met Walter Benjamin, only a

qu’on ne reverra plus. Ce qui, mécaniquement, se fit à ce moment dans mes yeux quand j’aperçus ma grand’mère, ce fut bien une photographie. . . . Pour la première fois et seulement pour un instant, car elle disparut bien vite, j’aperçus sur le canapé, sous la lampe, rouge, lourde et vulgaire, malade, rêvassant, promenant au-dessus d’un livre des yeux un peu fous, une vieille femme accablée que je ne connaissais pas. [Proust, *Le Côté de Guermantes*, vol. 2 of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Pierre Clarac and André Ferré (Paris, 1954), pp. 140, 141]

8. “Il y était sur sa chaise percée parmi ses valets et deux ou trois de ses premiers officiers. J’en fus effrayé. Je vis un homme la tête basse, d’un rouge pourpre, avec un air hébété, qui ne me vit seulement pas approcher” (quoted and analyzed, but without any mention of Proust, by Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask [Princeton, N.J., 1953], pp. 429–30).

9. “Das Gesicht gilt dem Film nichts, wenn nicht der *Totenkopf* dahinter einbezogen ist. ‘Danse macabre’. Zu welchem Ende? Das wird man sehen” (Kracauer, Marseille notebooks, Kracauer Papers, Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar; quoted in Miriam Hansen, “‘With Skin and Hair’: Kracauer’s Theory of Film, Marseille 1940,” *Critical Inquiry* 19 [Spring 1993]: 447). In the introduction to the new edition of *Theory of Film*, Hansen links this passage to “the allegorical impulse from Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* book” (Hansen, introduction to Kracauer, *TF*, p. xxiv).

10. See Kracauer, “Tentative Outline of a Book on Film Aesthetics” (1949), in Kracauer and Erwin Panofsky, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Volker Breidecker (Berlin, 1996), pp. 83–92, esp. p. 83.

few months before the flight to Spain and to suicide. We know that during the time they spent together in Marseille the two friends spoke about Kracauer's project on film.¹¹ It is not terribly farfetched to imagine that over the course of their conversations Benjamin may have mentioned the passage from Proust, which he had translated with Franz Hessel some years earlier.¹² The analogy between the camera and the gaze of the narrator that mechanically records the physical decay of the grandmother without recognizing her clarifies the implications of the notion of the optical unconscious that Benjamin had set out in his essay of 1931, "A Small History of Photography."¹³

4

Through Proust—possibly mediated by Benjamin—Kracauer was to replace the analogy between photography and historicism that he had proposed in 1927 with an analogy of an utterly different sort, in some ways contradictory, between photography and history (in the sense of *historia rerum gestarum* or historiography), an idea raised more than once in *History*. Still, to appreciate Kracauer's analogy we need to remember that in the passage from Proust the photographer is the final term in a series of roughly analogous figures: "the witness, the observer, in travelling coat and hat, the stranger who does not belong to the house, the photographer who has called to take a photograph of places which one will never see again."

Living in exile, Kracauer quite naturally identified with the stranger and with the Wandering Jew, Ahasuerus, mentioned in a chapter title from his posthumous book on history (see "Ahasuerus, or the Riddle of Time," *H*, esp. p. 163). But there was—outwardly at least—nothing self-pitying about this identification. Kracauer insisted that the stranger, who lingers at the margins, who "does not belong to the house," can see things with a vision both broader and more penetrating. The inability to grasp what is happening opens the spectator's estranged gaze to the illumination of knowledge.¹⁴ Kracauer notes that it is not by chance that the greatest historians, from Thucydides to Lewis Bernstein Namier, were exiles: "It is only in this state

11. In addition to Hansen, "With Skin and Hair," see Klaus Michael, "Vor dem Café: Walter Benjamin und Siegfried Kracauer in Marseille," in *Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her: Texte zu Walter Benjamin*, ed. Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla (Leipzig, 1992), p. 216.

12. See Proust, *Die Herzogin von Guermantes*, trans. Walter Benjamin and Franz Hessel (Munich, 1930).

13. See Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," "One-Way Street" and *Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London, 1979), pp. 240–57.

14. See Breidecker, "'Ferne Nähe': Kracauer, Panofsky, und 'the Warburg Tradition,'" in Kracauer and Panofsky, *Briefwechsel*, pp. 165–76. See also my own reflections in "Making It Strange: The Prehistory of a Literary Device," *Wooden Eyes: Nine Reflections on Distance*, trans. Martin Ryle and Kate Soper (New York, 2001), pp. 1–24.

of self-effacement, or homelessness, that the historian can commune with the material of his concern. . . . A stranger to the world evoked by the sources, he is faced with the task—the exile’s task—of penetrating its outward appearances, so that he may learn to understand that world from within” (*H*, p. 84).¹⁵

All this helps us better appreciate why Kracauer described his unfinished book about history as an extension of the theses he set out in *Theory of Film*. The identification of the historian with the exile is the terminus of an extended reflection on photography. The “active passivity” Kracauer recommends to historians is (as Volker Breidecker correctly noted) an extension of a page from *Theory of Film* devoted to Charles Marville’s and Eugène Atget’s desolate urban photographs. Kracauer notes,

Melancholy as an inner disposition not only makes elegiac objects seem attractive but carries still another, more important implication: it favors self-estrangement, which on its part entails identification with all kinds of objects. The dejected individual is likely to lose himself in the incidental configurations of his environment, absorbing them with a disinterested intensity no longer determined by his previous preferences. His is a kind of receptivity which resembles that of Proust’s photographer cast in the role of a stranger. [*TF*, p. 17]¹⁶

But this receptivity must be accompanied by choice and effort: photography is more than a perfect mirror of reality. One could compare the photographer, Kracauer notes, to “the imaginative reader intent on studying and deciphering an elusive text” (*TF*, p. 16). These remarks, which occur in the early (and by far the most interesting) part of *Theory of Film*, help us to understand why Kracauer wrote to Theodor Adorno that in this book film was a simple pretext.¹⁷ Kracauer, who spent years reading *Critique of Pure Reason* with the young Adorno, wanted to explore—in film and through film—a model of knowledge.¹⁸ This exploration continued in the posthumous book on history: the final stage, destined to remain incomplete, of an intellectual itinerary that exhibits a profound unity in spite of the variety of lands it passed through.

15. See the incisive observations of Breidecker in “‘Ferne Nähe,’” pp. 176–83. On the “great” Greek historians as exiles, see also Arnaldo Momigliano, “Tradition and the Classical Historian,” *History and Theory* 11, no. 3 (1972): 279–93.

16. Here Kracauer is commenting on Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day* (New York, 1949), p. 139.

17. See Hansen, “‘With Skin and Hair,’” p. 447.

18. See Theodor W. Adorno, “The Curious Realist: Siegfried Kracauer,” trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, *New German Critique*, no. 54 (Fall 1991): 159–60.

5

The famous essay on film by Erwin Panofsky also drew inspiration from Kant, especially when it evoked the “fascinating spectacle of a new artistic medium gradually becoming conscious of its legitimate, that is, exclusive, possibilities and limitations.”¹⁹ But, as Tom Levin has astutely shown, Panofsky’s essay heads almost immediately in a different—and less ambitious—direction.²⁰ Levin suggests that Panofsky’s most fruitful reflections on film should be sought instead in the essay on perspective as symbolic form, published in 1927 in *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg*.²¹ An indirect allusion to this essay is contained, as has previously been noted, in a letter Benjamin sent to Kracauer in 1928.²² But even if Kracauer never read the essay on perspective, he could have seized its most essential point through other works of Panofsky. Among the notes Kracauer drew up for the posthumous book on history is a page entitled “Emphasis on minutiae—Close up—micro-analysis,” to which Breidecker has rightly drawn attention. As an example of a close-up, Kracauer mentions the “principle of disjunction” described by Panofsky—this is the difference, commonly found in medieval art, between classical subjects represented anachronistically and images from antiquity that have been Christianized.²³ In the posthumous book on history, this brief note is developed in two directions. Panofsky’s principle of disjunction is first mentioned in the context of a photograph by Alfred Stieglitz, described as an example of the perfect balance between “realistic and formative tendencies”; subsequently the principle is presented as a “paradigmatic instance of micro histories” or “small-scale histories,” which are compared to close-ups (*H*, pp. 56–57, 105). In each case, the photograph (or the single frame of movie film) is used in a comparison, but here I shall deal with only the second of the comparisons.²⁴

Without cinema, without the close-up, would Kracauer have been able to speak of microhistory? This question is, of course, rhetorical. If Kracauer cites Vsevolod Pudovkin on the multiple points of view implied by film

19. Panofsky, “Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures,” *Three Essays on Style*, ed. Irving Lavin (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), p. 108. Note that this essay was first published, in a different form, in 1936; see Lavin, introduction to Panofsky, *Three Essays on Style*, pp. 9–10, p. 206 n. 22.

20. See Levin, “Iconology at the Movies: Panofsky’s Film Theory,” in *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Views from the Outside—A Centennial Commemoration of Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968)*, ed. Lavin (Princeton, N.J., 1995), pp. 319–20.

21. Panofsky, “Die Perspektive als ‘symbolische Form,’” *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg: 1924–1925* (Leipzig, 1927), pp. 258–330; trans. Christopher S. Wood under the title *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (New York, 1991).

22. See Breidecker, “‘Ferne Nähe,’” pp. 186–87.

23. Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (Stockholm, 1960), pp. 82–100; see also Breidecker, “‘Ferne Nähe,’” p. 175.

24. On the first, see the excellent comments in Breidecker, “‘Ferne Nähe,’” pp. 176–91.

narrative when he wants to emphasize the connection between the macrohistorical approach and the close-ups drawn from microstudies, this is hardly by chance (see *H*, p. 122). Photography and its extensions (film, television) unleashed, much as linear perspective had, a range of cognitive possibilities: a new way of seeing, of narrating, of thinking.²⁵ The thoughts bound together in Kracauer's posthumous book on history were born out of the realization that a new world was emerging, one that we inhabit, now more than ever.

A new way of seeing, certainly—but how new? As T. S. Eliot wrote, every creative innovation reconstructs its own genealogy. And film is no exception to this rule. Sergei Eisenstein held, for instance, that D. W. Griffith's invention of the close-up had a literary ancestor: the representation of isolated details in the novels of Charles Dickens.²⁶ In another essay he cited the encounter between Emma and Rodolphe in *Madame Bovary* as a magnificent example of crosscutting of dialogue.²⁷ I failed to note this comment a few years ago when I analyzed a series of procedures used by Gustave Flaubert in *Sentimental Education*—above all the famous blank so admired by Proust—setting them in a context defined by photography, the panorama, the railroad train.²⁸ I also failed to note an early reaction to *Sentimental Education* that I shall now take up: a digression that should, if I do not deceive myself, help us better understand Kracauer's reflections.

6

In December 1869 a long essay entitled “Le Roman misanthropique” (“The Misanthropic Novel”) appeared in the *Revue des deux mondes*: it was devoted to *Sentimental Education*, which had just been published.²⁹ The author of the essay, Saint-René Taillandier, had written in his younger years (1843) a monograph on Scot Érigène and scholastic philosophy, inspired by Hegel and Schelling. Later he taught literature at a number of different universities (Strasbourg, Montpellier), and soon he would cap his career at the Académie Française.³⁰ In 1863 he had published in the *Revue des deux mon-*

25. I examined this issue in “Distance and Perspective: Two Metaphors,” *Wooden Eyes*, pp. 139–56.

26. See Sergei Eisenstein, “Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today,” *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. and ed. Jay Leyda (New York, 1949), pp. 195–256.

27. See Eisenstein, “Through Theatre to Cinema,” *Film Form*, pp. 13–14.

28. See Carlo Ginzburg, “Reflections on a Blank,” *History, Rhetoric, and Proof* (Hanover, N.H., 1999), pp. 92–110.

29. See Saint-René Taillandier, “Le Roman misanthropique,” review of *L'Éducation sentimentale*, by Gustave Flaubert, *Revue des deux mondes*, 15 Dec. 1869, pp. 987–1004; hereafter abbreviated “RM.”

30. See Taillandier, *Histoire et philosophie religieuse: Études et fragments* (Paris, 1859) and *Études littéraires* (Paris, 1881).

des an article on *Salammbô* entitled “Le Réalisme épique dans le roman” (“Epic Realism in the Novel”).³¹ From Taillandier, an academic critic from a Catholic background with conventional tastes, we might anticipate a condemnation of the novel’s “immorality” and of Flaubert’s stylistic daring. And indeed the condemnation arrives, as expected, but within a quite surprising critical discourse, particularly given how accustomed we are to reading *Sentimental Education* as a classic. Taillandier, who read it instead as the recently published novel of an admired but scandalous writer, conveys to us the unexpected impact of its originality: “Imagine an artist who claims to reproduce the strictest reality, and who begins by casting over this reality the bizarre veil of his system. He hopes vainly to reveal everything, like the ray of sunlight that crosses the camera obscura of the photographer” (“RM,” p. 988). Today the analogy between Flaubert and a photographer might seem banal; it is not, as shown by the sentences that immediately followed:

He tries in vain to be acidic, biting, like the saw that cuts stone, like the acid bath that fashions copper: so concerned is he with effect that he thinks above all about the procedure, the device, the tools, the acids. Farewell to nature’s rich variety! Here he is, locked up in a filthy laboratory. This crude laborer of realism will lose touch with the ways of the real world soon enough. Before his eyes are a few models, and these models, tired, disfigured, as bored as they are boring, will represent for him an image of all human destiny. [“RM,” p. 988]

Taillandier admits that Flaubert “is certainly not a mediocre writer. . . . He writes little, but each of his works betrays intense reflection and an exacting execution [*une méditation intense et une exécution minutieuse*].” But a book like *Madame Bovary* “is a knowing dissection performed with icy dispassion [*une dissection savante accomplie avec une impassibilité glaciale*],” shocking not because of its subject but because of “its indifference” (“RM,” pp. 988–99). “The epic realism of *Salammbô* reveals the same trait of *in-human* imagination” (“RM,” p. 989); in that previous article Taillandier had not hesitated to speak of “the mark of a sadistic imagination [*un coin d’imagination sadique*].”³² So he was able to ask the following question: “What sort of writer assembles his work with such care, while remaining utterly alienated from it? What are we to make of this dispassionate painting?” (“RM,” p. 989).

31. Taillandier, “Le Réalisme épique dans le roman,” review of *Salammbô*, by Flaubert, *Revue des deux mondes*, 15 Feb. 1863, pp. 840–60.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 860.

Dispassion, dispassionate: these terms, which recur incessantly in the article, result from the initial comparison between the writer and the photographer. In this dispassion Taillandier sees “the result of a system, the expression of a hidden philosophy”: a misanthropy in the broadest sense. “Casting such insults at mankind means insulting the world and its creator, if we accept that the world has a creator. . . . A kind of atheism, such is this book’s philosophy.” But this philosophical intention is accompanied by the “desire to set down a page of history.” It seems that Flaubert wanted to convey “the idea of a work in which the public events [those of the century’s final quarter] would be explained in terms of individual morality. The education of the main character would be the education of Parisian society throughout a period in our history” (“RM,” p. 990). Taillandier continues:

Strange as this conjecture may be, it is difficult to avoid when one sees the author blatantly imitating the style of Monsieur Michelet in the final volumes of his *History of France*. It is the same buffeting, halting manner, the same art of fragmenting the story, of shifting abruptly from one scene to another, of piling up details while eliding transitions. The novel has never spoken with this sort of language; it seems more like a chronicle, a dry and terse journal, a collection of notes, of commentaries, of words, with this difference, that the historian’s comments are incisive, his words resonate, his notes summarize (whether poorly or well) important events, while the novelist’s knowingly and laboriously concise forms are applied to the most asinine actions.³³

I shall return in a moment to the comparison of Michelet and Flaubert. Taillandier realizes the lack of precision in the opposition that had occurred to him between the “important events” described by the former and “the most asinine actions” recounted by the latter. The reader of *Sentimental Education* is struck by something quite different, by the interweaving of private life and public events. Taillandier wants to see this as “a means of mixing up things both big and small, serious and ridiculous, to found on this promiscuity the doctrine of universal contempt” (“RM,” p. 999). Every-

33.

Si étrange que soit cette conjecture, il est difficile de ne pas s’y attacher quand on voit l’auteur imiter manifestement le style de M. Michelet dans les derniers volumes de son *Histoire de France*. C’est la même façon heurtée, saccadée, le même art de briser son récit, de passer brusquement d’une scène à une autre, d’accumuler les détails tout en supprimant les transitions. Jamais le roman n’a parlé ce langage; on dirait une chronique, un journal sec et bref, un recueil de notes, de traits, de mots, avec cette différence, que chez l’historien les traits sont incisifs, les mots portent, les notes résument bien ou mal des événements graves, tandis que chez le romancier ces formes savamment et laborieusement concises s’appliquent aux aventures les plus niaises. [“RM,” pp. 990–91]

thing is placed at the same level: "It is no longer a banal indifference: it is a commitment to the disenchantment of the world and the degradation of human nature."³⁴ The word *disenchantment* reappears in Taillandier's conclusion: "[Having finished reading the book,] one says to oneself that all this is false, that the author has painted neither love nor action, that he berates humanity, that life is something of great value, and that art repudiates itself when it insists on the *disenchantment* of God's creation" ("RM," p. 1003).

7

An author placing himself outside of his creation, the search for narrative devices for their own sake, dispassion, indifference, a story in which public events are interwoven with private affairs devoid of significance, general meaninglessness, disenchantment of the world. One readily finds in Kracauer's posthumous book on history the same themes that he underlined in his reading of *Sentimental Education*: estrangement, alienation, interweaving of micro- and macrohistory, rejection of the philosophy of history, that is, of the search for some overall meaning in human history. Kracauer probably did not read Taillandier's article, but he did read Flaubert; during his Weimar years he took dispassion as an ideal, and in 1944 he considered writing an article on the pessimism of Flaubert and the intellectuals of the Third Republic.³⁵ But the convergence that I have indicated implies something more complex than two very different readers reacting to the same author across the span of a century. This is not a case of simple reception but of reception and production at the same time. In a splendid book that is not yet used enough, Michael Baxandall showed that Italian quattrocento painters addressed a public that was capable of decoding their works thanks to a shared set of social experiences: sermons, dances, elementary mathematical textbooks.³⁶ One could repeat the experiment, using photography and a specific trajectory: France toward the middle of the nineteenth century, Germany in the first decades of the twentieth century, Europe at the beginning of the twenty-first century. We must be clear: such an approach has nothing to do with determinism. If man is, among all the other definitions that have been proposed, a metaphorical animal, then we can say

34. "Ce n'est plus qu'une banale indifférence, c'est un parti pris de désenchanter le monde et de dégrader la nature humaine" ("RM," p. 1002).

35. See Karsten Witte, "Light Sorrow: Siegfried Kracauer as Literary Critic," trans. Sara S. Poor, *New German Critique*, no. 54 (Fall 1991): 93–94, for a discussion of Kracauer's review of Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*. See also Kracauer, letter to Panofsky, 8 Nov. 1944, in Kracauer and Panofsky, *Briefwechsel*, p. 38.

36. See Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford, 1972).

that the textbooks, photography, and so on offer to the artist and his public a number of experiences that may be treated as metaphors, as worlds *als ob*, in relation to the fictive world constructed by the work. In the case under consideration, photography offered Flaubert the chance to carry out a series of narrative and cognitive experiments, while offering his readers the chance to decipher them. When Taillandier offers the hypothesis, without a specific citation, that Flaubert drew on the style of Michelet—"It is the same buffeting, halting manner, the same . . . eliding [of] transitions"—it is impossible not to think of photography and, anachronistically, of cinematic montage.

Let us try then to test Taillandier's hypothesis against a passage drawn, almost at random, from the nineteenth and final volume of Michelet's *History of France*. This is a description of one of the revolts against the nobility that preceded the great revolution, the so-called Day of the Tiles, a riot known to have taken place in Grenoble on 7 June 1788. Michelet looked at a dozen narratives focusing on that day: "The best, written by a cleric, is charmingly naïve."³⁷ Thus far I have been unable to consult this manuscript, which is preserved in Grenoble's library; therefore I am unable to say how Michelet used it and, possibly, changed it (starting from its punctuation). Here is Michelet:

The women triumphantly brought back the keys [of the town], went to the churches, climbed into all the belfries, and furiously rang the tocsin.

It was noon. This sinister sound echoing through every byway of the deep valley, the rough peasants of the Tronche and the neighboring communes, in a terrible frenzy, seized their rifles, came running. But the gates were nailed shut. They went to find ladders. Unfortunately, they were short. They ended up breaking through a wall that concealed a false door. It took time, but their presence alone showed that the country was one with the town.³⁸

37. Jules Michelet, *Histoire de France*, 19 vols. (Paris, 1879), 19:361; the preface to the first edition of this work is dated Paris, 1 Oct. 1855. See Octave Chenavez [attributed], *La Journée des tuiles à Grenoble (7 juin 1788): Documents contemporains en grande partie inédits recueillis et publiés par un vieux bibliophile dauphinois* (Grenoble, 1881).

38.

Les femmes rapportent les clefs [de la ville] en triomphe, vont aux églises, montent dans tous les clochers, et sonnent furieusement le tocsin.

Il était midi. Ce bruit sinistre, retentissant par les détours de la profonde vallée, les rudes paysans de la Tronche et des communes voisines, dans un terrible transport, saisirent leurs fusils, coururent. Mais les portes étaient clouées. Ils vont chercher des échelles. Par malheur, elles sont courtes. Ils finissent par percer un mur qui fermait une fausse porte. C'est long, mais leur seule présence faisait voir que la campagne était une avec la ville. [Michelet, *Histoire de France*, 19:361]

Opposite this series of visual and auditory sensations, marked by brief phrases, cut up like film frames, that go on page after page, one might set the memorable scene of the death of Dussardier in *Sentimental Education*.³⁹ Instead I shall cite a passage written in the flat prose of a filmmaking manual:

In order to receive a clear and definite impression of a demonstration, the observer must . . . climb upon the roof of a house to get a view from above of the procession as a whole and measure its dimension; next he must come down and look out through the first-floor window at the inscriptions carried by the demonstrators; finally, he must mingle with the crowd to gain an idea of the outward appearance of the participants. [Pudovkin, quoted in *H*, p. 122]

This is the passage from Pudovkin that Kracauer cites to substantiate his thesis of a reciprocal relation between macro- and microhistory, between wide shots and close-ups. And I would happily cite Kracauer's writings to support my own thesis of the cognitive (and not simply rhetorical-ornamental) implications of every sort of narration.⁴⁰ On this subject, Kracauer appears today, more than ever, to be an indispensable interlocutor.

8

"There is no Cosmos on the screen," wrote Roland Caillois. Kracauer, who expressed heartfelt agreement with these words when he quoted them, went so far as to claim, "Art in film is reactionary because it symbolizes wholeness" (*TF*, pp. 266, 301). This stubborn rejection of wholeness, which fueled Kracauer's resistance to all philosophy of history, casts an ironic light on the sentences written in Marseille in November 1940: "The face counts for nothing in film unless it includes the *death's-head* beneath. 'Danse macabre.' To which end? That remains to be seen." "Zu welchem Ende?" The question mark leaves open the possibility that besides the end, which is taken for granted, there is also a telos, a finality. But the subtitle, itself also ironic, of the unfinished book on history—*The Last Things before the Last*—evokes the world of contingency, the disenchanted world for which Flaubert (as Taillandier wrote) and Max Weber battled.⁴¹ It seems to me that all this

39. I quoted and commented on it in "Reflections on a Blank."

40. See my *History, Rhetoric, and Proof*. According to Peter Burke, Kracauer was "the first to suggest that . . . Joyce, Proust and Virginia Woolf offer[ed] a challenge and an opportunity [for] historical narration" (Peter Burke, "History of Events and the Revival of Narrative," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Burke [Cambridge, 1991], p. 237; quoted in Breidecker, "Ferne Nähe," p. 147 n. 80). But Kracauer cites Erich Auerbach; see *TF*, p. 219.

41. See Kracauer, "The Hotel Lobby," *The Mass Ornament*, p. 178. According to T. J. Clark, the expression "disenchanted world" can be traced to Schiller; see T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*:

helps us fend off the temptation to enroll Kracauer, as some are wont to do, as one of the true believers in one or another messianism, no matter how mild.⁴² The “NO!” that Kracauer wrote in his copy of the collection of Benjamin’s writings published in 1955, next to the last sentence of the seventh thesis on the philosophy of history, indicates a disagreement unmitigated by the tragic death of his friend.⁴³ It is worth the trouble to reread what Benjamin had written:

To historians who wish to relive an era, Fustel de Coulanges recommends that they blot out everything they know about the later course of history. There is no better way of characterizing the method with which historical materialism has broken. It is a process of empathy whose origin is the indolence of the heart, *acedia*, which despairs of grasping and holding the genuine historical image as it flares up briefly. Among medieval theologians it was regarded as the root cause of sadness. Flaubert, who was familiar with it, wrote: “*Peu de gens devineront combien il a fallu être triste pour ressusciter Carthage.*” [Few will be able to guess how sad one had to be in order to resuscitate Carthage.] The nature of this sadness stands out more clearly if one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor.⁴⁴

Kracauer, who fancied himself a defender of lost causes and associated the close-up with the theme of David and Goliath, that is, the conviction that the most significant powers appear in that which is both small and insignificant, could not accept Benjamin’s conclusion.⁴⁵ But he was even less willing to accept that which preceded it: the condemnation of melancholy, empathy, and Flaubert assimilated to historicism. As to historicism, by the way, his views were ambiguous. But confidence in the idea of progress, expressed by Dilthey (though not without vacillation), struck him as unacceptable. Flaubert’s pessimism was much closer to his way of thinking.

9

I would like to conclude on a personal note. I read Kracauer, and specifically *History*, very late, much too late. Still, when I read it I experienced

Episodes from a History of Modernism (New Haven, Conn., 1999), p. 7. But Schiller probably knew the book by Balthasar Bekker that had that phrase as its title.

42. See Hansen, “With Skin and Hair.”

43. Quoted in Breidecker, “Ferne Nähe,” p. 179.

44. Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969), p. 256.

45. See Kracauer, “Tentative Outline of a Book on Film Aesthetics,” p. 91 and *H*, p. 219.

a strange sensation. Even the most unexpected pages, such as the utterly remarkable ones on microhistory, spoke to me in a familiar language.⁴⁶ It seemed as though an echo—quite fragmentary, certainly—of the conversations Kracauer carried on continuously with some of his interlocutors—Benjamin, Adorno, Panofsky, Auerbach—had reached me through their writings. But only the writings of Kracauer himself permitted me, as they have all his readers, to make out the incomparable timbre of his voice.

46. See Ginzburg, "Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It," trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi, *Critical Inquiry* 20 (Autumn 1993): 10–35.