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Modernity, history and emancipation in Siegfried Kracauer's Theory of *Cinema.*

Modernity, history and emancipation in Siegfried Kracauer's Theory of Film.

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes S. Kracauer's *Theory of Film*, in terms of the definition of anon-systematic critical theory of modernity. Far from an aesthetic theory of the cinematographic medium, this approach makes a deep criticism against the historically peculiar forms assumed by the modern experience. Kracauer defines cinema as the expression of a paradoxical society, which exposes both its mechanisms of oppression, and the emancipatory potentials that are immanent to it. In short, Kracauer's approach to cinema points to the possible transformation of the present towards a post-metaphysical organization of the social world.

Keywords: Critical Theory. Modernity. Rationalization. Crisis of Experience. Contingency.

RESUMEN

El artículo analiza la *Teoría del cine* de S. Kracauer, como el planteamiento de una teoría crítica no-sistemática de la modernidad. Antes que una teoría estética del medio cinematográfico, en la obra se construye una crítica frente a las formas históricamente peculiares que asume la

experiencia moderna. Kracauer aborda el cine como un medio de caracterización de las paradojas de esta sociedad, que expone tanto sus mecanismos de opresión, como los potenciales emancipatorios que le resultan inmanentes. En definitiva, el abordaje kracaueriano del cine apunta a la posibilidad de reorientar el presente hacia una organización pos-metafísica del mundo social.

Introduction

In this article I analyze S. Kracauer's Theory of *Cinema,* in order to reconstruct some elements that are central to a non-systematic critical theory of modernity[1]. Contrary to positions that turned the Kracauerian approach into a kind of philosophical ruin from which a political sense could hardly be derived (Hansen, 2012, p. 278), I will show that, in this work, Kracauer approaches cinema as a vector of critical understanding of modern society. It will be seen that, rather than a perimid aesthetic theory (Adorno, 2003), the Kracauerian conception offers important tools of analysis, not only in the face of the historically peculiar forms assumed by modern experience, but also the paradoxes inherent in this society. From his approach to the cinematographic medium, Kracauer exposes both the illuminist forms of oppression and totalization, as well as their immanent emancipatory potentials. From this perspective, cinema allows an estrangement that patents the spurious character of the second nature gestated in capitalist modernity, while announcing the possibility of its overcoming. From there emerges a conception of history that opposes any totalizing and finished idea in front of it, exposing its contingent and transitory character. In short, it will be seen that the Kracauerian approach to cinema points to the possibility of reorienting the present in terms of a post-metaphysical

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1 On the critical potential of the Kracauerian conception of cinema, (Hansen, 2012); (Schlüpmann, 1991); (Perivolaropoulou, 2004); (Agard, 2016); (Von Moltke, 2010); (Harbord, 2007); (Elsaesser, 2014).

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organization of the social world, within which differentiality is subtracted from the raid imposed by all abstract and oppressive forms of totalization.

Modernity and crisis of experience

The work of S. Kracauer addresses the transformations caused by the advance of the modernizing process that occurred during the first half of the twentieth century. In that world, the expansion of capitalism, the scientific vision of the world and the accelerated urban massification had gradually dissolved the traditional systems of belief and meaning that previously guaranteed social cohesion and stability (Kracauer, 1995, p. 129). Modernity meant the passage from an organic community (*Gemeinschaft)*to a technological-functional society (Gesellschaft), within which forms of socialization became increasingly abstract and impersonal (Kracauer, 1995, p. 13). Precisely, for Kracauer, the central feature of the modern rationalization process is defined by its growing tendency to abstraction. Just as the process of capitalist exchange is energized by virtue of the abstract growth of exchange value, and not properly of the satisfaction of concrete needs, science is not concerned with the "objects of ordinary experience", but with abstracting abstract formulas from them (Kracauer, 1960, p. 292). Underpinned by an "abstraction" [*Abstraktheit*] that does not include the human being (Kracauer, 2006, p. 266), within modernity, human interests are relegated to the background. With this, the logic of disenchantment of the world marked by the Enlightenment is partially reversed: instead of serving human emancipation in the face of mythical powers, instrumental rationality would have acquired a type of dynamics of its own that subjects every area of existence to its own form. Thus, and contrary to perspectives such as historicism or the enlightened metaphysics of history, Kracauer affirms that the process of modern demythologization leads to its opposite. Split from the concrete world, and turned into an abstract and totalizing shell (without an end beyond itself), enlightened rationality ends up repressing its progressive potentials, falling into the coercive realm of myth. In this re-enchanted world, individuals experience the social world as if it were a "natural process", neither historical nor created by them, that weighs on their backs as an objective and hostile burden (Kracauer, 1995, p. 130). Naturalized the present (eternalized in the form of the always given),

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transience is repressed, and the occurrence of the emphatically new, obstructed. As in myth, in that world the image of a society that apparently lacks outside and that, as such, could never be overcome is configured.

Faced with the open hiatus between rationality and the corporeal world, whose corollary is the mutilation of experience and the absolutization of the now, Kracauer advocates "redeeming material reality, freeing it from the chains imposed by an abstract, objectified and objectifying thought" (Vedda in Kracauer, 2008, p. 243). The task of overcoming this state of affairs, he affirms, imposes on conscience the demand to rediscover the concreteness and determination of the world (Kracauer, 1995, p. 140). This has theoretical and methodological consequences. Tributary of G. Simmel – whom he praises for having "opened the doors that lead to the world of reality", approaching things "but without being able to integrate them into a 'total image'" (Belke in Kracauer, 2008, p. 37) – Kracauer criticizes conceptual totalization, by rescuing the elements located on the *surface* [*Oberfläche*] of the modern world, dismissed by the philosophical tradition. Convinced that the unconditioned can only be achieved from a negative point of view, as a reflection of a reified reality, his philosophy seeks to focus on the "genuine" that is hidden in "the interstices between dogmatized beliefs about the world" (Kracauer, 2010, p. 243). His gaze seeks the elusive fissures to the eye that privileges abstraction over the concrete. To the constraints of rational discourse, which "makes things become uniform within their rigid conceptual frameworks," he counterposes "the subversive power of analogy, which can free reality from its 'grotesque conceptual petrifications' (Zohlen in Vedda, 2013, p. 83). Kracauer rests on that alienated surface, neglected or underestimated by the conservative and lapse critiques of modernity, those marginal areas of mass culture – such as cinema, photography, streets, shows – which serve as indicators of the most deeply rooted paradoxes of that society[2].

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2 W. Benjamin refers to Kracauer as an outsider who voluntarily inhabits the margins, a kind of "trapero" who collects "discursive rags" and "linguistic tatters", wastes that do not refer to a full unity, but to the fragmentarity and disintegration of the modern world. (Benjamin in Kracauer, 2008, p. 100).

In that sense, Kracauer shares and extends the Lukácsian idea about the aesthetic form as a vehicle of expression that makes the alienated historical moment legible (Lukács, 2010). But this return to the material and concrete forms that reverberate in modern everyday life –inaccessible to abstract thought– does not intend to recompose any supposedly lost significant totality (as happens in Lukács). On the contrary, doing justice to the individuality of its objects, this movement implies a critique of any attempt at abstract and totalizing apprehension of the social world (Vedda in Kracauer, 2008, p. 243). From a distrust of the whole, this micro-logical task aims to glimpse the fibers that make up the present (Kracauer, 1995, p. 140), without detaching from there macro-logical derivations that try to apprehend and exhaust the multiple as a whole, but keeping these surfaces as unfinished configurations (Hansen, 1991, p. 51). This elective turn towards surface phenomena, towards the trivialities of everyday life that emerge *anonymously* and discontinuously, has a political moment. It corresponds to a strategy of looking beyond what is immediately given, to demystify the modern world, dissolving its apparent naturalness. Such demystification does not pass through a unilateral rejection of modernity. Although the reenchantment of the world operated by the bourgeois ratio establishes a coercive shell that *tends* to encompass the world as a whole, Kracauer finds that in his immanence there is a powerful emancipatory promise. Neither lapse criticism nor romantic reaction, his perspective assumes that within modernity there is an excess of rationalization, but a lack of its radicalization. If the modern *ratio* is totalizing and mutilated (insofar as it is disinterested in human beings), it has a potential that can be put at the service of human beings. Kracauer thus proposes an overcoming gestated from the very immanence of the rationalized world, which would allow a reappropriation of the potentials constituted in it. In the mute, naked, and substanceless nature of the objectified world, Kracauer finds the loopholes of a social emancipation, which would result in a correlative emancipation of consciousness (that is, in the realization of a *full* rationality [*Vernunft*], concerned with the existence of human beings). Modern abstraction itself offers the means to redeem physical reality, and to think about the possibility of the existence of a social reality freed from the oppressive effects prevailing in the present. The task of immersion within the crevices of the objectified world will have as its purpose, on the one hand, to find the traces of a peculiar historical

configuration and, on the other, to find in its own immanence the flashes that would lead to a transformation of the social world. In Kracauer's eyes, everyday life, that temporary container of the waste of modernity, thus ends up expressing the paradox of a society that, simultaneously, appears as a *locus* in which the loss of meaning of the world in its current state is verified and, simultaneously, a promise of transformation and improvement is crystallized.

Cinema and disintegration of the present.

According to Kracauer, the way to break the petrification of the present, that eternization of the now caused by modern abstraction, is *the experience of things in their concretion* (Kracauer, 1960, p. 298)[3]. Cinema plays a central role in this claim. By recording the visible face of the world, films constitute "visible hieroglyphs" –carrying "a symptomatic weight"– of "the invisible dynamics of human relations", and, therefore, of the inner life of the society from which they emerge (Kracauer, 1985, p. 15). The emphasis on externality inherent in it represents an advantage of the cinematographic medium, through which the relationship between the contents of the inner world and the modern material world can be dialectically understood: "Perhaps the path to them, if such exists, leads through the experience of superficial reality? Perhaps, rather than a dead end or a mere distraction, is the film a door?" (Kracauer, 1960, p. 287). But what kind of door does Kracauer refer to, where does that door lead?

In his *Theory of Cinema,* Kracauer coats the cinematographic medium with a critical-social character. There, he affirms that cinema is essentially an extension of photography, and shares with it marked affinities inherent in the visible world: "[...] along with photography, cinema is the only art that exhibits its raw material" (Kracauer, 1960, p. 302)[4]. However, although Kracauer emphasizes the

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3 Kracauer does not assert an essential or primal idea of experience that would have to be freed from the veils imposed by modern forms of socialization. Reality is not for him an ontological fact, which could be experienced neutrally: "we can only experience the reality that is at our disposal" (Kracauer, Theory of Film 297). Within the multiplicity of possible realities, "not all these worlds are equally available to us." (Kracauer, 1960, p. 298).

4 That affinity had already been highlighted by Kracauer in Photography. (2006). In Film Theory, Kracauer points out five inherent affinities between film and photography: disorder, the fortuitous, the undefined, the indeterminate, and the "flow of life." (Kracauer, 1960, pp. 60-74).

priority that the "realistic" tendencies of the filmmaker should have over the "formative" tendencies, this does not mean affirming the specular character of cinema. Not limited to its representational character, cinema is not a neutral *mirror* that records the physical world. Its raw material is kaleidoscopic fragments of the ordinary physical world – often unnoticed in everyday life: "Without any conscious notion of its destiny, cinema presents us with a world of organisms, interpenetrated and mutually influenced: and allows us to think of that world with a greater degree of concreteness" (Mumford in Kracauer, 1960, p. 299). Devoid of transcendental regulation, these fragments are isolated, decomposed and turned into malleable material, suitable for transfigured representation. Among the objects of cinema, Kracauer mentions the "phenomena that appear among the blind spots of the mind" of which "custom and prejudice prevent us from realizing" (Kracauer, 1960, p. 53). Among these "blind spots" are the "debris" of the world, *revelations* that allow the viewer to experience things obliterated by consciousness in everyday experience: "Many of the objects go unnoticed, simply because it never occurs to us to look at where they are [...] what we normally prefer to ignore is attractive to [cinema] precisely because of this common neglect"; the film can "offer the camera ample opportunity to satisfy its curiosity and its innate role as a waste scavenger" (Kracauer, 1960, p. 53).

These affinities with the material world make it possible to define the critical potential of cinema from a double point of view. First, cinema makes it possible to denature the world in which we live, to undermine the sclerotization of the present. In a society marked by decorporization – intrinsic to the economic process and scientific thought– within which physical reality is circumvented and individuals atomized, cinema allows "to overcome the barriers that separate us from our daily environment" (Kracauer, 1960, p. 53). Cinema can temporarily interrupt the abstract experience of the subject in front of the objective world, which leads him to reconnect with the material world and its qualities through an effect of *estrangement* [*estrangement*] in front of the supposed naturalness of the everyday world, that is, the world as it conforms to our usual (abstract) modes of thought and perception. Cinema makes it possible to reach a state of *exile.* The spectator becomes a foreigner placed in the quasi-emptiness of extraterritoriality, which can be removed from the naturalness of

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the world, and see its previous existence with the eyes of those who are not from the house (Kracauer, 2010, p. 122). This enhances a new sensory relationship with the material world, allowing new modes of mimetic experience, identification and sociability (Hansen, 2012, p. 4)[5].

Due to the fragmentarity exposed by cinema – and the equally fragmentary character of the consciousness of an individual immersed in a world irreducible to a consistent whole – the viewer never apprehends totalities, but "small moments of material life" (Kracauer, 1960, p. 303). Although cinema is organized according to a diegetic oriented structure – in which small units extracted from all kinds of imaginable areas converge, freely articulated by the filmmaker – each of the elements that configure it can generate by themselves an impact or chain of reactions in the viewer (unleashing, for example, processes of involuntary memory). While each of these elements "aims to advance the history to which it belongs, it also affects us to a great extent, or even mainly, as a fragmentary moment of visible reality, surrounded, so to speak, by a swath of visible and indeterminate meanings" (Kracauer, 1960, p. 303). The affinity of the photographic medium with the indeterminate (Vedda, 2011, p. 172) means that any singular gesture can be decoupled from the narrative course by the viewer. By triggering the occurrence of some effect on subjectivity, which may be common to each individual, though merely circumstantial or residual in terms of the diégesis that guides the film, cinema can "produce a toxic effect" (Kracauer, 1960, p. 303). A terrain in which the contingency of the world is expressed, cinema does not fully absorb the viewer in its own field of narrative immanence, but stimulates him, again and again, to leave the image – in different ways – and intertwine its elements with contexts of one's own existence; with this, the viewer "oscillates between self-absorption and self-abandonment" (Kracauer, 1960, p. 166).

From these wastes, available to everyone as part of everyday life –although often unnoticed– a broad dimension of meaning opens up that goes beyond the "superstructure of the specific history that contains them", which can even confront the viewer with respect to the ideas he has of the

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5 This refers to lukács's Peculiarity of the aesthetic, where he affirms that art does not replicate external objects, but fosters a strange and distanced gaze that subjugates the usual way of contemplating the world, imposing a new world, bringing objects to intuition as if there had never been a representation of that object. (Vedda, 2011, p. 180).

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world, or put him in front of his worst fears (Kracauer, 1960, p. 303). Cinema makes it possible to take a kind of distance from the present, it allows us to discern the spell that modernity exerts, to critically assume the primacy of the present that it imposes, and thus to locate it as a type of naturalized configuration (Kracauer, 2010, p. 52). Through cinema, the natural element becomes defined from its eternal expiration, as one more finitude between finitudes that, in its passing character, is subtracted from any field of immanence imposed or derived from any idea of invariability. Far from being an unappealable instance, in the naturalized social world history is now transluced in its transience, as a place of the event, the scope of the emergence of the qualitative and irreducibly new. Cinema exposes the world we inhabit as a realm of finitude that does not remain, of the finite that is renewed. He shows that all nature is eternally obsolete, therefore always different. As the moving objects on the screen seem to transform into something other than what they appeared, through interruptions, cuts, isolations, extensions and magnifications, the psychophysiological mimesis allowed by cinema gives the viewer the feeling of participating in this transformation, evoking the possibility –at once threatening and liberating– of diluting, momentarily, the fixed structures of the social world. Here Kracauer shares with Benjamin the idea according to which cinema, as an inventory of the surrounding world, increases, on the one hand, "the understanding of the forced course by which our existence is governed, arrives, on the other hand, to ensure enormous and unsuspected margins of maneuver" (Benjamin, 2019, p. 85). He *dynamites* the solidity of the world, so that "now we quietly undertake adventurous journeys among its vastly scattered ruins" (Benjamin, 2019, p. 86).

According to Kracauer, the cinematographic experience not only points to the dissolution of patent objectification in the objective world, but of its equally objectified subjective correlate. By representing the material world in motion in its fortuitous and ephemeral dimension, "as if it were captured *in route"* (Vedda, 2011, p. 177), cinema engages with the corporeal and sensitive individual "with skin and hair" (Hansen, 2012, p. 262), different from the abstract subject. The cinematographic experience allows to undermine the idea of the sovereign subject, identical to himself. In that direction, Kracauer refers to the "psychophysical correspondences" between the objective world

presented in the film and the subject to whom this world is revealed. The human being is essentially a physical being, rooted in the material and concrete world. By affecting the viewer's senses, "physiologically engaging him [kinesthetic responses] before he is in a position to respond intellectually," he weakens his consciousness, quiets his spirit (Kracauer, 1960, p. 158). This type of experience is not properly one of identification with the characters or with the narrative but, rather, describes, from a somatic and preconscious point of view, a mimetic form of identification that dissociates the self from the viewer: "[t]he tenacious insistence of Kracauer on the priority of physical reality has, above all, a negative sense, that is, it tends towards the negation of the principle of self-affirmation of the subject" (Schlüpmann, 1991, p. 123). As a film spectator, "the self as the primary impulse of thoughts and decisions renounces its power and control", and ends up dissolving individual identity (Kracauer, 1960, p. 159).

From the idea of *reverie,* Kracauer tries to show how in cinema the relations between subject and object are defined through a peculiar dialectic. On the one hand, turning to the French philosopher, Lucien Sève, Kracauer introduces the first category of dreaming "towards the object",and suggests that, on a basic phenomenological level, the cinematic image disturbs rather than affirms our preconceptions in front of objects. The idea of a spectator who is in a state of reverie [*between waking and sleeping*] allows us to think of thecinematographic object as an active agent that produces this effect – even being able to direct said reverie – and not simply as something that is given to be arranged by a subject who dominates it at will. Taking into account that the viewer is "drifting towards and within objects", and is led by the material world towards "inexhaustible searches" more full of concerns than certainties (Kracauer, 1960, p. 165), the cinematographic experience suspends the hiatus between subject and object. Kracauer assumes that the cinematic representation of things is linked more to subjective emotions accompanied by the object, although not limited to it. The physiognomic capacity of cinema offers a mode of somatic experience that blurs the analytical distinctions between subject and object, thus facilitating that things appear in their otherness. The weakening of the self brings to the surface subconscious or unconscious experiences of the spectator, against which cinema operates as a "spark of ignition", facilitating the alternative

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organization of its elements (Kracauer, 1960, p. 165). The double movement is therefore inseparable. The cinematic sequence takes the viewer away from the given image, leading him towards involuntary memories; the image itself recosted after having mobilized its previously repressed fears and desires.

According to Kracauer, due to the way in which it poses confrontations in front of unknown or ignored worlds, cinema, in its opening, induces the viewer to cede conscious or intellectual control, and to connect to the images presented on a more visceral level. The cinematographic medium "takes the viewer away from the given image towards subjective reveries [...] Once the viewer's organized self has surrendered, their subconscious or unconscious experiences, fears, and hopes tend to come out and take over" (Kracauer, 1960, p. 165). Cinema becomes a way of encounter with the otherness and finitude of existence, a mediated contact with respect to a world in which, although within everyone's reach: "we do not see nor can we see the current horrors because they paralyze us with a blinding fear" (Kracauer, 1960, p. 303). His images reproduce the appearance of these horrors, allowing them to be brought to consciousness. These suppose, then, a specular effect of a negative nature; they reflect events whose direct contact in real life would produce a petrifying effect. In that sense, the cinema screen operates as "the shining shield of Athena" (Kracauer, 1960, p. 303). As in the case of Perseus, for whom the shield fulfills the purpose of allowing him to see the terrible Medusa indirectly and thus behead her, the image on the screen induces the viewer to face the reflected horror, to experience the atrocity of reality without being paralyzed, to engrave in his memory the face of aspects of life that are too horrible to be seen directly (Perivolaropoulou, 2004, p. 39). But, in myth, beheading does not end Medusa's power. Perseus takes his head to Athena, who will use it to terrorize his enemies. Perseus, the *image viewer,* fails to definitively defeat the ghost. Perseus' greatest achievement, then, is not to behead Medusa, but to overcome her fears and look at her reflection on the shield, which, precisely, allowed him to behead her. In the same way, cinema makes that:

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In the experience of the rows of heads of calves[6] or the litter of human bodies tortured in the films made of the Nazi concentration camps, we redeem the horror of their invisibility behind the veils of panic and imagination. And this experience is liberating insofar as it removes a more potent taboo (Kracauer, 1960, p. 303).

Cinema "helps to think *through* things and not above them" (Kracauer, 2010, p. 220). The viewer not only experiences aspects of physical reality as raw facts, but rather experiences through them their human meaning, and the traces of human life that can be found there. Confronting the viewer with its rootedness in physical despair, cinema connects ideas that have become abstract and apparently detached from the concrete world in which they are fully founded and have all their reality, and in which they do not cease to leave their marks. Cinema contributes to drilling abstraction and seeing the opposite of the Enlightenment head-on. Here comes to light the second moment that Kracauer attributes to the critical potentiality of cinema, linked not with its *corrosive* effect on the naturalness of the world, but with the possibilities of its effective transfiguration.

Cinema and utopian transfiguration.

For Kracauer, cinema is constituted as a contingent space, open to randomness, to fleeting interactions from which always renewed constellations are articulated. Unlike, for example, tragedy, which remains in the mythical immanence configured as "a finite and orderly cosmos", cinema "must tend towards the expansion of our reality – an indefinite and unlimited world" (Kracauer, 1960, p. x). While tragedy corresponds to a closed world where fate overcomes chance, cinema is a random flow "of events in which humans and inanimate objects are involved equally" (Kracauer, 1960, p. x). Due to this flexibility, cinema not only allows you to notice the everyday elements of the material world, but also to broaden your horizons. By opening the confines of experience, films "virtually make the world our home" (Kracauer, 1960, p. 304). The viewer sees the images on the screen in a *dream-like state;* in it he apprehends physical reality in its concreteness, experiences an infinite flow of

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6 Kracauer refers to Le sang des bêtes (1949), a film by Georges Franju.

contingencies and events – substantial and insubstantial – changing, scattered objects and indescribable forms, "the fugitive, the indeterminate, the amorphous, the singular, the nameless" (Agard, 2016, p. 247)[7]. Against the Adornian consideration, for whom the cinematographic medium does not reveal or alter phantasmaging and suffering (Gilloch, 2015, p. 190), Kracauer sees in cinema a medium that allows the human being to be reconnected with what is daily denied to him within the rationalized world. By offering the world of life [*Lebenswelt*] in its incompleteness, the viewer finds in cinema the full life that society denies him (Kracauer, 1960, p. 165) – "the image of utopia and its impossibility" (Hansen, 2012, p. 265) – the world as "given and undected" (Kracauer, 1960, p. 268), but also "the understanding that the world 'could be different and still exist' (Hansen, 2012, p. 265).

According to Kracauer, beyond alienating the viewer from the everyday and familiar world, cinema helps to experience new types of subjective sensations, or attitudes towards the material world. Developed from photography, cinema has similar functions and shares its same determinations. If the revelation of the human world as fragmented, transitory and in ruins is achieved through photography, cinema has this same tendency, going even further. While photography contributes to the disintegration of a world [*Weltzerfall*] that seemed familiar, cinema is the technology that attempts to bring these elements together again in a meaningful way. As M. Hansen states, "[i]n photography reflects the detritus of history as simple disorder, cinema has the possibility of advancing on this disorder" (Hansen, 1991, p. 56), rearranging the material elements it records, and reconfiguring the elements of the world as they are presented to us.

Endowed with a transfigurative vocation, cinema makes clear the possibility of redeeming the reified world. Referring to a visit to the UFA facilities, Kracauer states that this is a world "made of *papier-mâché"*, where everything is completely unnatural and everything is exactly like nature (Kracauer, 1995, p. 281). The things that inhabit it "do not belong to reality. They are copies and distortions that have been torn from time and confused. They stand motionless, full of meaning from

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7 Kracauer echoes Benjamin, for whom, through a myriad of mechanisms, cinema shows completely new structural configurations of matter; in the motifs of the already known world he discovers others completely unknown, peculiarly slippery, floating, supernatural. Faced with a conscious dimension, cinema opens the knowledge "of the optical unconscious" (Benjamin, 2019, p. 86).

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the front, while from the back they are an empty nothingness. A bad dream about objects that have been forced into the corporeal realm" (Kracauer, 1995, p. 281). There the mythological powers, stacked like the ruins of the universe, become divertimento. Each object is as if subtracted from the flow of time, frozen and split from the world: "Here all objects are only what they are supposed to represent at this moment: they know no development over time" (Kracauer, 1995, p. 283). Each object, separated from relationships with others, seems refractory to the effects of history: "[t]he owners of this world show a gratifying lack of sense of history," they construct and destroy cultures at will (Kracauer, 1995, p. 283). For them, nothing exists to endure. Every creation aims, in advance, at its demolition. Here it is impossible to foresee what configuration will come in the future, "[t]he laws of these metamorphoses are unchangeable" (Kracauer, 1995, p. 283). In this realm of arbitrariness, the real world is not a limit; through the use of innumerable effects that create illusions from illusions, it moves in multiple directions and temporalities, making reality an unfinished product. That cosmic world reveals its secrets only in front of the camera. The cinematographic montage weaves an almazuela of calicos, in which each phenomenon corresponds to a peculiar plane, whose joint ends up constituting a heterogeneous network of interpretations that are never definitive (Díaz, 2015, p. 190). Rather than leaving the world in its fragmented state, each element becomes stone from a mosaic, part of a reconfigured world. Objects previously separated from all context are now reinserted into a polycentric cosmos, "their isolation erased and their grimace softened" (Kracauer, 1995, p. 287). Taken from their graves, the ruins of the objectified world awaken to a life that does not follow a linear or sequential course; they "are sifted, spliced, cut, and labeled until finally out of the enormous chaos emerges a small whole" (Kracauer, 1995, p. 288).

From here, Kracauer attributes to cinema the ability to move towards the utopian "valid organization of things", which he had already postulated as the task of thought in the essay *Photography:*"[t]he capacities of cinema in terms of displacement and disjunction, of figuration and disfigurement, harbor a utopian possibility, faithful to the messianic tradition" (Hansen, 1991, p. 56). Cinema not only represents and reveals what it has recorded with unprecedented fidelity, but also allows for the critical reconfiguration of visual material (Gilloch, 2015, p. 190). He enables a "profane

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illumination, of an enchantment that serves to disenchant" (Gilloch, 2015, p. 191). Because it can reaccopy the elements of the objective world, cinema represents a paradigmatic mode of experience –of encounter and discovery– of the world immersed in a historical crisis, which points beyond it. These effects of cinema have to be read as potentiality and not as effective reality, as a prescriptive consideration of what cinema *could* carry out, under existing social conditions, in terms of the possibilities of self-alienation and alternative modes of interaction with the material world (Hansen, 2012, p. 263).

Cinema, like the photographic medium, is justified only in that, like a thread of Ariadne, it allows us to do something better than other things: "to go to the limit by recording and penetrating physical reality" (Kracauer, 2010, p. 97). Except for its merely ideological or purely artistic uses, in which the preconceived idea is projected from above towards materiality with the intention of molding it, Kracauer affirms that cinema: "is materialistically oriented; proceeds from *the bottom up"* (Kracauer, 1960, p. 309). By allowing the *revelation* of the material world with its psychophysical correspondences, insofar as "animated by the desire to portray the most transient material life, life in what is most ephemeral" (Kracauer, 1960, p. ix), cinema is a channel to promote the redemption of physical *reality.* His images allow us to "take with us the objects and occurrences that comprise the flow of material life" (Kracauer, 1960, p. 300). Here, the idea of *revelation* does not mean mere unveiling, but has an eschatological sense, as a prefiguration of a renewal of nature. Rescuing material reality, cinema consumes, at the same time, "a medial resurrection of the body, and functions, in this way, almost like a *medium* of the day of The Last Judgment, in which the world is reordered and transposed to its original state" (Butzer in Vedda, 2011, p. 177).

Cinema is now linked, not with the creation of totalities, nor with the circumscription and determination of the full and transparent senses that this entails, but with a tendency towards disintegration and contingency that are, simultaneously, inherent to it. This simultaneity expresses the paradoxical relationship existing in modernity between coercion and emancipation. Cinema facilitates the approach to the reified present, and exposes its fragmentarity and contingency –and therefore its *transience*– making visible –with all the sensory and corporeal load that this implies– the

deepest contradictions of modernity. From there it is possible to understand that, although this society is inseparable, from its own foundations, a systemic form of alienation, a substitution of nature, now become social coercion, it is also intrinsic to the possibility of overcoming this state, allowing us to think about the possibilities of engaging in different types (overcomers) of the relationship of consciousness in front of nature. Instead of offering a path to the reminiscence of previous moments –even not lived by consciousness– to which the viewer would be transported, cinema abruptly bursts into the present, as a sign, both of the spectator's own physical transience, and of that of all the given configurations –social, political, economic, cultural etc. Ultimately, cinema stands on a threshold between that dead and objectified world, and its possibilities of overcoming, opening the doors to "a rescue of material existence, against the abstraction engendered by the process of rationalization of the world" (Traverso, 1998, p. 205).

When Kracauer refers to the world as "indeterminate to meaning" (Kracauer, 1960, p. 68), he affirms an absence of definitive meaning. As a result of the tension between the automatism of the camera and the gaze of the spectator, cinema is able to find that indeterminate character of the world, while allowing its configuration as a unit, turning it into a horizon of possibilities. [8]The corrosive moment of cinema opens the way to a possibility of general recomposition of a world that has reached an extreme point of disorganization. According to Kracauer, this could be the role of cinema: undermining objectified reality, prefiguring an alternative order, a recomposed social world. Stripping the world of a further meaning means a gain, for a world without meaning opens the doors of meanings. Setting aside meaning frees us from the idea of a supposed self-sufficiency of the world in its current state.

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8 Kracauerian analysis finds an echo in contemporary thinkers such as J. Ranciére. This refers to the "frustrated fable" that is at the heart of cinema "whose basic principle is the unification of conscious thought and unconscious perception." For Ranciére, like life, cinema presents situations open to all directions, due to the conjunction of two "intelligences", that of the filmmaker who seeks to develop a plot, and that of the camera mechanism that does not build stories, but registers an infinity of micro-movements, alien to any plot and outcome. This does not imply that the camera records the identity of reality, but, rather, that it transforms the very status of reality. The camera records things just as the human eye does not see them. From there, Ranciére affirms the investment operated by the cinema with respect to the mythos-opsis hierarchy, the first as a rationalization of the plot and the second as a sensitive effect on the viewer, allowed by the aperture offered by the camera (Rancière, 2001, pp. 7-11).

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The Kracauerian perspective does not seek to discover further meanings, nor to provide any systematic or definitive theory, referring its observations to digressions in front of its objects (Gilloch, 2015, p. 189). The knowledge that results from this turn in terms of the approach to the world, which takes as its object that which appears as unnoticed, cannot be conceived as a "model of any theory", but, rather, as "exemplary cases of reality" (Kracauer, 1998, p. 26). This assumes that "the meaning of the phenomena themselves is no longer given or is not yet defined; they are symptoms that need to be observed, described, deciphered and interpreted" (Hansen, 2012, p. 25). Rather than turning them into self-referential and abstract theoretical propositions, with no connection to the material world, Kracauer assigns to the knowledge of these residues a practical function; this is not only "the precondition for all change, but it really entails a change: once the situation in question is exhaustively known, one must act on the basis of this new knowledge" (Kracauer, 1998, p. 25). The goal of such a movement is not merely aesthetic or speculative. The remnants of this disintegration open up as possible paths to the transformation of reality. In this task undertaken by Kracauer, that of a "trapper, at dawn: at dawn on the day of the revolution" (Kracauer, 2008, p. 101), the elements found on the surface become indications that point a way to the transformation that is expected to take place, although the moment of their occurrence is not clear (Kracauer, 1995, p. 140). Philosophy that includes, as in Benjamin, the possibility of "predicting the future from the erase of coffee" (Vedda, 2013, p. 81), in Kracauer, the problem of criticism has to do, then, with a concern to glimpse the tissues that thread the set of interests of modern life, not to build, confirm or reinforce a conceptual system, but to show that those:

> [...] so incoherent on the surface, they end up having served in one direction, [...] for a single purpose: the rehabilitation of goals and modes of being that do not yet have a name and are therefore overlooked or misrepresented. (Kracauer, 2010, p. 52).

Cinema, opening of history and "thinking of the anteroom".

Kracauer's is an effort to think that the conditions under which a kind of closure of the world is currently defined would not be definitive. Recovering the history contained in the objects of the

world, its transience, cinema becomes a means of profane illumination and a weapon for an explosive political critique (Gilloch, 2015, p. 192). The scope of this profane illumination will be expressed in his latest work*, Historia, las últimas cosas antes de las últimas,* where he affirms the correlation between cinematographic medium and history. Both, he argues, are characterized by their discontinuous and incomplete character. Neither cinema nor history can be definitively exhausted; both escape all totalizing pretensions. Endowed with a transitory character, like the material they deal with, neither of them can claim to attain an ultimate truth. Hence, both lands can be defined as *anteroom areas* (Kracauer, 2010, p. 218). Thought from an ideal of travel that does not reach anywhere (Agard, 2016, p. 162), cinema and history never reach the "last things", but focus on "the last things before the last" (Kracauer, 2010, p. 220).

The socio-historical universe, to a large extent, avoids being grasped by laws, whether natural or philosophical: "[t]he human affairs, [...] transcend the dimension of natural forces and patterns determined causally" (Kracauer, 2010, p. 74). Against any suffocatingly closed system, which cancels out the lost causes, the unrealized possibilities, for Kracauer, history constitutes "a material that is for long periods incipient, heterogeneous, obscure. Much of it is an opaque mass of facts" (Kracauer, 2010, p. 76). Questioning that teleological imperative that leads to the last things, Kracauer's thought becomes elusive both in the face of uniform narratives of progress and metaphysical self-affirmation of the superiority of the present, and in the face of the supposedly anti-teleological surrender to a contingencyism dependent on veiled forms of "last things." Approaching the "last things before the last" means immersing oneself in history, as cinema allows, from its asystematic particularity. This rehabilitation of singular entities, of detail, of the discontinuous, allows to liberate new regimes of meaning, irreconcilable with the general and closed meanings proposed by the great historical accounts, based on a global vision of human actions (Despoix & Schöttler, 2006, p. 209).

Like cinema, for Kracauer, history is not based on an orderly cosmos. Both are closer to the random and indeterminate infinity of *Lebenswelt* than to abstraction; they comprise "inanimate objects, faces, multitudes, people who intermingle, suffer and wait" (Kracauer, 2010, p. 100). By the theming life in its fullness, life in its varied forms of everyday expression, cinema does not intend,

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primarily, to offer great constructions of absolutes or universal abstractions. He opens the possibility of giving an account of the historical contingency, a task in which, as with photography, the material is not consumed in its entirety (Machado & Vedda, 2010, p. 20). Chamber reality and historical reality are in ahalf-cooked state [*semi-cocción*] that permanently points towards the "threshold" of possible unexplored senses. Analogous to the "great shots" of photography or cinema, to "the non-human optics of the camera", the story appears as ambivalent, structured and, simultaneously, without finished form (Despoix & Schöttler, 2006, p. 18).

History and cinematographic medium, very much in spite of the apparent continuity they express – continuity of events, continuity of images – share a space for contingency and spontaneity, in which fissures free of senses imposed heteronoma and in advance are prefigured – in the case of history, imposed by the philosopher or historian, and, in the case of cinema by the director, which remain open to the creation of new meanings, thereby prefiguring doors for the *redemption* of the objectified world (Díaz, 2015, p. 19). Against the unjustified confidence in the unlimited scope of the philosophical concept, the Kracauerian perspective of the anteroom, prefigured by its understanding of cinema, thus advocates a perception of the non-homogeneous and non-definitive structure of the socio-historical world. This paves the way to give voice to the unrealized and forgotten possibilities, to those unnamed possibilities that are waiting for their redemption from the inevitable fractures that break the illusory closure of universal truths. The way to access these hidden possibilities does not go through their deduction from a subsequent principle or truth, but can arise "from the concentration in configurations of individuals" (Kracauer, 2010, p. 240). Thus, once the same rationality that is claimed to be self-founded and self-sufficient becomes aware of its own limitation, the blurred portraits of those who contested and denied it, now belatedly vindicated by the work of memory, become visible from the gloom of that history of the victors and the progress that accompanies it, which hides the defeated and failed individuals. Ultimately, in conceiving that the past has an excess of moments to redeem, the Kracauerian perspective contains an ethical-political impulse to bring to light the hidden and forgotten acts of oppression, to find a kind of memorial justice.

In short, from the potentialities of *estrangement* offered by the cinematographic medium, the Kracauerian approach opens a different perspective in terms of the consideration of the relationship between history and memory that leads to the configuration of a type of *"sui generis* historical memory", an interstitial space –applicable to socio-historical reality, its experience and transformation– constituted by the integration of the experience of the spectacle. Between individual memory and collective memory, historical knowledge and lived experience (Machado & Vedda, 2010, p. 65). In this sense, cinema could be the harbinger of a living appropriation of history by human beings, which would give meaning to this dissociated world, pointing to the possible existence of a social world in which they are no longer dominated by their own abstractions, in the manner of metaphysical and apparently transcendent entities that are imposed on them without regard to their own interests and differentialities.

Conclusion.

In his quest to understand the effects unleashed by the process of modern rationalization, Kracauer opts for an interstitial gaze that takes as its object the unnoticed, those material wastes of the social world, traditionally dismissed by the philosophical gaze. Reluctant to reach an ultimate truth or to construct a systematic theory, Kracauer turns his gaze to the most anodyne expressions of the everyday world, digging into the "garbage of facts" (Kracauer, 2010, p. 126), to understand the determining features and the most deeply rooted contradictions on which modernity is based. From there, and contrary to the enlightened teleology of history, which places the modern present as the peak moment of a linear and irreversible process of demystification, Kracauer affirms the recomposition within it of a mythical world, in which human beings are coerced by heteronomic forces, abstract and anonymous, apparently natural and alien to their own interests.

Critical theory imbricates two moments. One linked to the realization of an explanatory diagnosis of the present and another with the anticipatory utopian prefiguration (Fraser, 2007, p. 207). Both moments must be articulated from a position of immanence from which the criticism is elaborated, and not from a transhistorical position, valid for all times. In this direction, Kracauer turns

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the cinematographic medium into an instrument of critical knowledge, from a double point of view. According to him, on the one hand, cinema is a simultaneously sensory and reflective medium that uniquely adapts to capturing the continuous disintegration of the world. His images allow us to glimpse the traces of the tearing and incompleteness of this society, denaturing the present, and breaking its petrification. Approaching the materiality of the world, cinema allows us to glimpse the expiration of everything that is affirmed as natural and finished. Cracking every form of totalization, simultaneously, allows to capture the material world in its random character. His images free thought from the moorings of abstraction and fixed senses. Its logic of operation does not obey predetermined or transcendent sequences, but to temporal fragments that allow the viewer to become an extraterritorial in front of the world he inhabits, being able to experience the full dispersion of his own daily world. Cinema raises the distance between subject and object, and awakens emotions that lead to question the current state of the world. Exposing it as a ruin, cinema points to the desacralized character of modernity, becoming a mimesis of its negativity.

From this negative register, cinema reaches a second critical moment, referring to the dynamic recomposition of the social world. Kracauer insists that the reified world is not unilaterally oppressive. He harbors in his bosom an emancipatory moment, an always open possibility of reconfiguration of the order of the world from his own sediments. By gathering fragments around nothing, cinema shows that the world is not closed, that the order of things can be altered. Its affinity with the indeterminate allows to decouple every element of the narrative course, inciting to think that the world could really be something else, completely different from what it is in the present. Cinema thus opens a space for contingency and spontaneity, in which fissures free of heteronomaly imposed senses are prefigured. It allows the alternative reconfiguration of time and space, becoming a critical-cognitive instrument from which it is possible to prefigure an alternative to the reified world, in which the primacy of diseincarnate abstraction gives way to the primacy of human interests. Thus, cinema – the hinge between second nature and a possible redeemed future world – becomes a means of expression of an eschatological sense, according to which modernity could be overcome – and surpass itself – only through the full realization of all its disintegrating potential. In short, and due to

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the affinity of the camera with the indeterminate, cinema becomes a privileged means of disruptive lighting in the face of the petrification of history, whose corollary is the paralysis of the present. Allowing the confluence of individual and collective memory, historical knowledge and lived experience, the cinematographic medium allows us to approach the transience of the phenomena of the objectified world, pointing towards a horizon in which multiple possibilities of reconfiguration of the socio-historical universe are glimpsed, in terms of its redemption in the face of oblivion and death.

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