

Mediations

Journal of the Marxist Literary Group



Volume 26, Numbers 1-2, Fall 2012-Spring 2013 • **Before and After Neoliberalism**

Robert Ryder. "Immer Aktuell." *Mediations* 26.1-2 (Fall 2012-Spring 2013) 181-185.

www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/immer-aktuell

Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno

Miriam Bratu Hansen

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012, 408 pp.

US\$29.95

ISBN 9780520265608

Immer Aktuell

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Today's rapidly changing media environment makes it difficult enough just to keep up with current technological innovations and their impact on politics and society, let alone stay abreast of the accompanying, often reactionary media theory that attempts to reconcile these innovations in relation to the longer perspective of early media history and theory. On one hand, there is a tendency to reduce the kaleidoscopic media reflections of the Frankfurt School to implicit references that are themselves deemed unproblematic. Terms such as "the optical unconscious," "mass ornament," and "aura" are treated as if they themselves carried a certain aura of originality and historical authenticity that need not be further questioned. The result is that such terms are then thoughtlessly appropriated to explain the current state of media technology and digital information culture. On the other hand, there is a countertendency to believe that the appropriation of critics such as Kracauer, Benjamin, Adorno, and others is misplaced because they are too far in the distant past, and so recourse to them cannot be considered critical in any genuine sense. The problem with this tendency is that in doing away with the critical theorists of the so-called Frankfurt School, media scholars believe they are breaking new theoretical ground, which seems appropriate since their object of study is the "new" media of the day. To successfully avoid these two tendencies, one must be both a thorough historian and keen theorist. Miriam Bratu Hansen was one such thinker, who consistently throughout her scholarly work up to and including her final book, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno* (U California P, 2012), successfully argues for the "currency" of these important German critical and cultural theorists with a breathtakingly clear understanding of the institutional, social, and political constellations through which

they moved. *Cinema and Experience* is without a doubt the single most important contribution to the understanding and “reopening [of] ostensibly closed chapters of film theory” (xvii) to be published in many years, and the pinnacle of her scholarly achievements.

Since there is so much to learn from the 280 pages that comprise the book, not to mention the nearly eighty extra pages of intricately researched footnotes, it is difficult to know where to begin. Let me start with the structure of the book, which roughly follows the three names that constitute its subtitle. Two chapters devoted to Kracauer begin the book proper. They also act as exemplary models of Hansen’s clear methodological style, which runs throughout the book: steeped in critical history and theory, Hansen’s text is nevertheless punctuated throughout with helpful and clearly-marked intentions, succinctly orienting her reader to the precise questions and problematics that motivate every section of every chapter. A short passage from early on in Chapter One illustrates her exacting style and frequent thetic markers:

The present chapter deals with Kracauer’s efforts to develop an aesthetics of film from the perspective of a particular experience and critique of modernity. The following chapter focuses on his exploration of modernity as a mass-produced and mass-consumed, highly ambivalent and contested formation, in which film and cinema were playing only one, albeit a crucial role. As a hinge between these perspectives, I discuss Kracauer’s essay “Photography” (1927), a text that displays key traits of his peculiar method. (6)

One might well argue that there is little left to say about Kracauer’s “Photography” essay, but Hansen contends that the essay’s insights lie beyond the typical reading that tends to assimilate “Kracauer to a genealogy of media pessimism” (27), and focuses instead on the question of historicity as well as the “gnostic-materialist vision of modernity” (39) in Kracauer as she moves easily between his more canonical works and the lesser-known film reviews and essays to ground her claims. Her exhaustive knowledge of Kracauer’s *oeuvre* is in fact what helps structure the book as a whole: the final chapter of *Cinema and Experience*, which constitutes the only break with the Kracauer-Benjamin-Adorno trajectory, involves a substantially updated revision of her original 1997 introduction to Kracauer’s *Theory of Film*. And yet, like all her chapters, whether revised from previous articles or written specifically for this book, there is a certain logic in the placement of this final chapter: “*Theory of Film* ranks as a canonical work, one of the last, of so-called classical film theory” (254). Throughout the three chapters on Kracauer, which act as bookends within *Cinema and Experience*, Hansen consistently emphasizes Kracauer’s “anticlassical stance” (14) and “material aesthetics” (37) in order to show how he attempted “to reimagine the conditions of possibility of experience” through specific encounters “with concrete physical reality

enabled through film” (266). Hansen puts into relief, with explicit references to thing theory (Bill Brown) and phenomenological media theory (Mark Hansen), ways in which Kracauer’s various explorations of material events in film anticipate similar observations in postmodern media criticism.

Although there is no sustained comparison between Kracauer and Benjamin, Hansen nevertheless points to necessary contrasts between the two thinkers when meditating on convergent topics. Thus, when examining mass culture in Kracauer’s work, she writes that whereas “Kracauer self-consciously constructs the reality of the salaried employees through at once participatory and critical observation, Benjamin’s image of the masses, whether projected backward into the nineteenth century or forward into the not-yet of the proletarian revolution, ultimately remains a philosophical, if not aesthetic, abstraction” (63). This comparison offers an insight into one of the more important ways Hansen approaches Benjamin: as a media philosopher and aesthetician, whose “abstractions” she reveals in Part II as productive antinomies and tactical dichotomies. Comprising the greatest number of chapters and almost half the total number of pages of the book, Part II on Benjamin begins with a chapter entitled, “Actuality, Antinomies,” in which Hansen sets up multiple lines of inquiry that resurface in the subsequent chapters. Hansen outlines here what she calls “the antinomic structure of Benjamin’s thinking” as both “liquidationist” and “culturally conservative,” that is, as the tendency both to welcome the then-new media and to lament the decline of experience, respectively (81-82). While she is aware of the reductive nature of these two trends, Hansen wishes not to celebrate the importance of one over the other, but rather to maintain both in a productive antinomy that can generate the possibility of change, “but may just as well turn into a *mise-en-abîme*” (82). Much of her work on Benjamin can be read through the lens of this irresolvable tension or antinomy in his thought. Specifically, she puts “into question the liquidationist tenor of the [artwork] essay” (83), while later she reminds us that “we should guard against reading Benjamin too optimistically as assuming that the anaesthetization and alienation wreaked by technology on the human sensorium could be overcome” (146). But the most central argument for recognizing and maintaining the irresolvable tensions and contradictions in Benjamin’s work is that they are what make him most prescient:

His speculations on film and mass-mediated culture still speak to our concerns because the problems he articulated and the antinomies in which his thinking moved persist in the globalized media societies of today — in different forms and on a different scale, to be sure, but with no less urgency and no more hope for easy solutions. His actuality consists, not least, in ways in which the structure of his thinking highlights contradictions in media culture itself, now more so than ever. (80)

After this opening chapter on “Actuality, Antinomies” — a title which succinctly encapsulates the passage above — Hansen’s larger goal in subsequent chapters is to focus on key concepts that, despite their tendency to overlap and interact with each other, constitute a Benjaminian theory of cinema. For those who have read Hansen’s previously published articles on Benjamin, chapters four through seven will be familiar ground: Chapter Four is based on her masterful essay on aura in *Critical Inquiry* (2008), Chapter Six on “Of Mice and Ducks” in the *South Atlantic Quarterly* (1993), and Chapter Seven is a shortened version of “Room-For-Play” in *October* (2004). And yet, taken as a whole, this string of five chapters reveals her systematic methodology of reading Benjamin’s late work in order to recontextualize more fully, and therefore defamiliarize, terms that have become all too familiar. So, for instance, with Chapter Four she wishes to defamiliarize the concept of aura from its oft-repeated references in the artwork essay by examining “the broader anthropological, perceptual-mnemonic, and visionary dimensions of aura” which she takes “to be of interest for more current concerns” (105). Chapter Five traces the terms “innervation,” “mimetic faculty,” and finally “optical unconscious” in order to reconceptualize Benjamin’s oft-cited yet elusive optical unconscious as a singular combination of the former two terms, i.e., as “a form of mimetic innervation specifically available to photography and film” (133). Hansen returns in Chapter Six to her love for the figure of Mickey Mouse in Benjamin’s earlier versions of the artwork essay, but the chapter’s placement emphasizes how much Mickey Mouse functions as a collective extrapolation of the terms presented in the previous chapter. And the final chapter on Benjamin, specifically Hansen’s focus on *Spiel* in all of its multiple German meanings, acts as a culmination of Benjamin’s “alternative mode of aesthetics” coupled with his experiments in the “modern collective experience”; *Spiel* thus allowed Benjamin to imagine “an aesthetics that could counteract, at the level of sense perception, the political consequences of the failed — capitalist and imperialist, destructive and self-destructive — reception of technology” (183).

Beyond the careful layering of concepts that simultaneously build from — and once “built,” continue to reverberate with — each other (an architecture, furthermore, that can only be grasped by reading all five chapters in order), Hansen reserves the last pages of the final chapter for Benjamin’s “actuality,” suggesting that Benjamin would likely “have welcomed digital technology for its potential to open up for human beings a further, globally enlarged *Spielraum*, a virtual space [...] that offers hitherto unimaginable modes of playful innervation” (202). While pointing to possible avenues for further study, including video game studies, Hansen nevertheless cautions her readers “against a reductive, applicationist version” (203). It is within these speculations on making Benjamin “up-to-date” in today’s media culture that I find Hansen’s overall motivations for Part II most revealing. Her exhaustive approach and carefully layered genealogies of theoretical concepts reflect the high scholarly standard that she would no doubt have expected when future scholarship attempts

to make Benjamin *aktuell*. In this sense, Hansen did all she could to bring Benjamin to the point where he can now be taken up and placed, albeit not uncritically, into new contexts and made “available for different readings” (83).

The single chapter on Adorno that constitutes Part III appears at first glance to lack the extensive erudition that makes up the five previous chapters dedicated to Benjamin. But to disregard her chapter on Adorno would be to weaken the overall impression of the book. First, it is clear that Hansen seeks the productive contributions that Adorno made, however indirectly, to the question of film aesthetics. Once again, her careful analysis of Adorno’s work as a whole allows her to move in a stepwise motion through key concepts like *Technik*, nature, and, finally, the experience of rhythm in his music aesthetics in order to discuss the extent to which they reverberate with his otherwise incomplete aesthetics of film. The result is an intense and well wrought chapter that succeeds in its recuperative project, i.e., of a film aesthetics for future readers of Adorno. At the methodological level, however, this chapter also suggests ways in which Adorno’s reflections on the culture industry and his philosophy of modern art can be made *aktuell* for film and media studies. This means, on one hand, a consideration of where his reflections might be relevant today: in her analysis of Adorno’s “Transparencies on Film,” for instance, she begins “by addressing the problem Adorno considered key to the question of an aesthetics of film — the relationship between technology and technique — a problem that, in new configurations, is still haunting today’s debates on cinema in the age of digital moving” (210). On the other hand, she also shows where Adorno’s “actuality” may be taken too far: just as she warns us of the applicationist approach that uncritically attempts to update Benjamin’s theoretical reflections, she is equally hesitant to install even Alexander Kluge, friend of both Adorno and Hansen, “as the proof text for the fruitfulness of Adorno’s aesthetics of film” (250). It is this cautious investigation into the future reception of Adorno in film and media aesthetics, informed precisely by looking back through his entire *oeuvre*, that makes this chapter consistent with the goals of the book in general.

Cinema and Experience is, in short, a faithful guide not only to three great thinkers’ elucidations of cinema, but also for any future endeavors that seek to extrapolate those elucidations beyond cinema and toward emerging global media networks and the accompanying information culture. Perhaps, more modestly, one is reminded of the metaphor Kluge uses on the back of the book, comparing Hansen to “a careful gardener.” In keeping with this metaphor I would extend it slightly: like its multiple footnotes that, despite their thoroughness, leave room for further speculation and encourage further scholarship, *Cinema and Experience* is like a well-tended garden whose keeper has left careful instructions precisely where and just how much to water.

