Urban Space and the Spectacle of Progress:

Kracauer, Benjamin and marginality in Weimar visual culture

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In his famous 1947 history of Weimar film, From Caligari to Hitler, Siegfried Kracauer finds in German film from the 1920s the psychological preconditions for the rise of Nazism. Film, he argues, reflects and shapes the collective unconscious and, as such, can serve as a privileged locus through which the critic/analyst can understand historical and social developments. Interestingly, though, he constructs this reading through spatial metaphors.

> In the course of their spatial conquests, films of fiction and films of fact alike capture innumerable components of the world they mirror: huge mass displays, casual configurations of human bodies and inanimate objects, and an endless succession of unobtrusive phenomena. As a matter of fact, the screen shows itself particularly concerned with the unobtrusive, the normally neglected….Films seem to fulfill an innate mission in ferreting out minutiae.[1]

This description of filmic obsession with spatial conquest is a powerful and influential one, in particular configured as it is in terms of mass spectacle and everyday urban life. The work of Kracauer, as well as his Weimar contemporary Walter Benjamin, has been central to subsequent theorizations of film and/as urban life, with Kracauer her arguing that film both reflects and shapes the complex experience of the city and the repressive social regimes governing it. It is these connections that I want to take as my starting point and, through a discussion of urban space, visual culture and the spectacle of progress in Weimar Germany, develop the beginnings of a critical reading of Kracauer and Benjamin.

I want to read beneath the surface of Kracauer's account, however, by taking up his concerns with issues of social control and repression in relation to urban culture, but

[1] Siegfried Kracauer, From Caligari to Hitler. A Psychological History of the German Film. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947, p. 7.

extending them to other areas. For, I will argue, what the metaphor of spatial conquest also (and centrally) evokes in the context of Weimar Germany is *imperial* conquest and *imperial* desire. German colonial history was brief, extending from the 1880s to World War I, but this short duration did not lessen the significance of imperialism in German culture and politics. The loss and possible restoration of a German empire shaped the dreams of the Weimar period, and film was at the heart of this.[2] Even as film was extending the reach of the spectacle over urban space, it, and visual culture more generally, was profoundly implicated in material and imaginative projects of conquest outside the borders of Germany. And, I want to argue, those two projects of conquest, that of urban space and that of colonial space, were intertwined in fundamental ways.

These relationships are made clearer through a reconsideration of Kracauer's theorization of film and minutiae. By minutiae Kracauer had in mind film's obsession with the minor details of everyday life. But this was not all film was obsessed with. As he details, its detective-like uncovering also extended to the marginalized figures of everyday urban life in Germany, exploring the darkened worlds of the street at the same time as the grand spectacles of modern life. The conquest of space through visual culture thus involved the exploration and spectacularization of a range of figures of marginality which signified the troubled limits of modern, urban culture: the prostitute, the disabled, the homeless, the Jew, the criminal. And, as these configurations would suggest, the obsessions with the marginalized narrativized these spectacles through the myth of progress.

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[2] The significance of imperialism in German history is only beginning to be recognized. See for example Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox, and Susanne Zantop, eds., The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and its Legacy, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; Woodruff D. Smith, The German Colonial Empire, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978; Assenka Oksiloff, Picturing the Primitive. Visual Culture, Ethnography, and Early German Cinema, London: Palgrave, 2001.

The centrality of the marginal in Kracauer's work was echoed in that of Benjamin as well. Both recognized to a certain extent the ways in which practices of marginalization, the containment and policing of heterogeneity, sustained the capitalist social order. Marginalized figures marked the points at which the narrative of progress sustaining capitalist expansion degenerated and regenerated. In other words, they threatened to disrupt and expose the contradictions of the social order, but simultaneously their policing enabled the stabilization of that order. Kracauer and, especially, Benjamin appropriated these figures for their critical projects, deploying them to destabilize the practices which rendered them as marginal.[3]

The figure of the prostitute can serve as a good example. The prostitute was arguably the most pervasive signifier of Weimar urban modernity, one which was taken up by Kracauer and Benjamin, embodying for the latter in particular the contradictions of consumer capitalism. We have only to think of the work of Grosz and Dix, Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, or the many filmic representations of prostitutes to get a sense of the significance of the figure of the prostitute in the culture of the period, in particular in relation to the city.[4] What was not central in their work, as I will discuss in a moment, was a sustained awareness and critique of these *representational* practices of marginalization as being simultaneously material and embodied.

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[3] Benjamin's The Arcades Project, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999 is the most significant work here. On the critique of the narrative of progress see also 'Theses the Philosophy of History,' in Illuminations, New York: Schocken Books, 1968, pp. 253-264 and 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian,' in Walter Benjamin Selected Writings vol. 3, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002, pp. 260-302. Kracauer's 'Farewell to the Linden Arcade' in The Mass Ornament, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995, as well as a number of other essays in the collection, engages with Benjamin around similar themes.

[4] Patrice Petro, Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989; Maria Tatar, Lustmord. Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

The visual cultural conquest of urban space detailed here also extended outward, to the 'discovery' of the mysteries of the world outside. Figures of urban marginality were complemented by (and often described in terms of) 'primitives' outside: the African, the South American, the Asian, the aboriginal and (in a common racist elision) the flora and fauna of the colonized world. Urban space and colonial space were in these ways interlinked. As Assenka Oksiloff details, in terms of film this involved a range of productions, including ethnographic film, documentaries, and 'exotic' adventure films, which situated the (white, male, bourgeois) German in relation to racialized others.[5] In the context of Weimar Germany, as indicated earlier, these representations were shaped by a powerful lack, a desire for lost colonies. In Benjamin and Kracauer's critical practices, however, these representations, let alone the material practices with which they were articulated, were largely repressed.[6]

This, I want to argue, comes in part out of the perspectives from which Benjamin and Kracauer were working. In many ways both were writing in the horizon of an early sociological orientation to modernity, one which was also fundamentally concerned with issues of social order and fragmentation. The late 19th and early 20th century in Germany had seen the publication of a range of what have become foundational sociological texts. These emerged out of growing concern and, often, fear and apprehension over the effects of capitalist, urban, industrial society, emphasizing in particular the alienating forces shaping modern experience and, for some, the ways in which to contain the social disruptions to which it gave rise. These sociological discourses were also increasingly

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[5] Oksiloff, Picturing the Primitive, pp. 1-95.

[6] Benjamin does develop critiques of imperialism, but deploys representations of non-europeans largely without any critical perspective. See for example his discussion of the 'apache' in 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,' [1938] in Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism, London: New Left Books, 1973, pp. 78-79.

articulated with state and capitalist practices of the maintenance of social order. Particularly influential for Benjamin and Kracauer were the writings of Georg Simmel, whose essay 'Metropolis and Mental Life,' for example, developed a highly nuanced reading of the relationships between urban experience and psychological orientations. As with all such early sociology, it was explicitly configured in terms of earlier 'primitive' struggles against nature or of a traditional, stable social order. Simmel's dichotomy was less starkly drawn than many (Tönnies, for example). Modern life, he argued, continued these earlier struggles, but in a new register; transformed by the incessant shocks of urban, industrial life the primitive struggle against nature became a modern agonistic, alienated struggle of men against men.[7]

The way in which Simmel theorizes metropolitan life here prefigures Kracauer's later description of film as spatial conquest. Although he doesn't use the term 'imperialist,' Simmel describes the modern metropolis in imperialist terms. To Simmel, the metropolis expands "in a wave-like motion over a broader national or international area."[8] But, especially in the The Philosophy of Money and his essay on 'The Stranger,' Simmel, like Kracauer, also configures this imperialist metropolis in terms of a range of marginal figures, including the primitive and the prostitute.[9] As we saw earlier with Benjamin, the prostitute here is the most significant figure, embodying the alienated circulation of bodies, commodities and money in modern society. But there is also a powerful fear which emerges here, linking his conceptions of gendered modernity directly to questions of race. Women are, he argues, primarily sexual, which makes

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[7] Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life,' in On Individuality and Social Forms, (ed. by Donald Levine), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971, pp. 325, 336.
[8] Simmel, 'Metropolis,' p. 335.
[9] Simmel, 'Prostitution' and 'The Stranger,' in On Individuality and Social Forms, pp. 121-126, 143-149; The Philosophy of Money, London: Routledge, 1990.

prostitution such a danger to women (but not to men). Because the relationship is determined by money and not by heterosexual marriage, he argues, it "has absolutely nothing to do with racial appropriateness."[10] Fears of women's sexuality and the subversion of gender boundaries and hierarchies flow together here with fears of racial degeneration.

The flip side of these gendered visions of the dissolution of social boundaries can be seen in Kracauer's famous discussion of the Tiller girls. For him (and for others at the time) they represent the mass spectacle, a desexed product of the culture industries. Where the prostitute signifies fearsome excess, these women signify rigid control, the processes of the assembly line.[11] Again, though, material practices of gender are elided here, Tiller girls and prostitutes both reduced to figures of modernity, not embodied agents situated in regimes of control.

What I want to highlight here are the ways in which the deployments of images of marginality in these social critiques ultimately founder on the fear they generate, a fear which, I want to argue, comes out of a lack of analysis of what I will call the eugenic or hygienic orientation. The fear of an often racialized feminine sexuality which emerges in these sociologically oriented accounts serves to block critical practice. Deploying marginality to trace and critique the workings of money, industrial labour, urban life, and capitalism, they simultaneously reinscribe boundaries and practices of marginalization in other ways.

Along with the sociological, the eugenic was in many ways the other major mode through which responses to modernity were articulated in Weimar Germany. By

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[10] Simmel, Philosophy of Money, pp. 376-383, quotation p. 381.
[11] Kracauer, 'The Mass Ornament,' in The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 75-88.

eugenics here I am referring to the broad range of ideas and practices through which bodies, both individual and social, were subjected to medicalized regimes of hygiene.[12] It is important to remember in this respect that eugenics was a complex and heterogeneous set of discourses and practices, as well as a significant social movement, which went far beyond the politics of the right. Early eugenics in Germany was in fact associated with anti-clerical, anti-aristocratic liberal reform movements, a far cry from the associations with Nazi racial policy that the term tends to conjure up. In other words, eugenic or hygienic orientations permeated social thinking and practices in the Weimar period.

Unlike the sociological approach which tended to emphasize mechanistic metaphors, the eugenic was based on the fundamental association of individual bodies with the social body through organic metaphors of health and hygiene. A brief look at prostitution in Weimar Germany brings out these differences from the sociological vision, and returns us to some of the issues raised earlier. Officially illegal in Weimar Germany, prostitution was policed and regulated in a host of ways, configured primarily through discourses and practices of hygiene. Spatially, prostitution was contained in specific districts, generally located adjacent to working class areas (prostitutes being of course workers themselves). These material practices of containment were articulated with medicalized concerns with hygiene in which fears of syphilis, moral hygiene, and racial degeneration sustained and extended the marginalization of prostitutes, and also served to limit women's access to and performance in public space more generally. The class politics here was also significant; it was only from segments of the working class that support for prostitutes as workers emerged, but in these contexts the proliferation of

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[12] A thorough account is Paul Weindling, Health, race and German politics between national unification and Nazism, 1870-1945, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

eugenic discourses also served to drive a wedge between these different groups of workers by physically and morally zoning them apart.[13] Eugenics was thus also part of class warfare. These connections are, however, largely lost in Simmel's or Benjamin's accounts.

Simmel, Benjamin and Kracauer do theorize along these border zones, but they largely miss the significances of these eugenic practices. These practices, focused on the (white, German) body in order to sustain its racial health, find their counterpart in the anthropologized bodies of the subjects of a wide range of filmic and other visual cultural representations. As indicated earlier, in its emergence in Germany (and elsewhere) film was immediately implicated in practices of representing non-western peoples. Whether in the form of 'scientific' films made by anthropologists or medical practitioners, documentaries, or in exotic adventure films, the explicitly non-urban bodies of non-white people served as crucial supports for the constitution of the urban spectacle of progress, embodied especially in the imperialist dream. This was replicated in municipal colonial exhibitions, museums and traveling shows which drew viewers into the visual spectacle of imperial conquest. It was in the 1925 'Berlin Colonial Week and Exhibition,' for example, that Stresseman launched the powerful slogan 'Volk ohne Raum' ['people without space'] which, a year later, formed the title of Grimm's massively popular book arguing that Germans needed more space to grow, and crystallizing the orientation of German imperial ideology into the Nazi period.[14]

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[13] Nancy Reagin, A German Women's Movement: Class & Gender in Hanover, 1880-1933, Chapel Hill, 1995; Lynn Abrams, 'Prostitutes in imperial Germany, 1870-1918: Working Girls or Social Outcasts,' in Richard Evans, ed., The German Underworld: Deviants and Outcasts in German History, London: Routledge, 1988, pp. 189-209.

[14] Friedrichsmeyer et al, 'Introduction,' p. 16.

These practices, so central to the context of film, extended to a range of other forms of visual cultural production. Photography also played a central role in this, with the imperial camera enabling the collection of data out of which racial typologies and hierarchies could be constructed. These were systematized by, among others, the racial theorist Hans H.K. Gunther, who constructed elaborate racist typologies tracing the borders of the German nation and the white race.[15] With Gunther and many others, these were then articulated as well to photographic practices which represented and categorized urban degeneracy.[16] It is around these latter practices that Benjamin and Kracauer construct critical perspectives, emphasizing the articulations of photography as well as film with the rise of urban industrial life, and forms of social control associated with it. Thus, the photography of Eugene Atget or August Sander, with their depictions of urban types (especially marginal figures), are seen as key moments in the development of urban life.[17] However, their experiments in photography in these contexts tend to remain at the sociological level, not really getting at the eugenic and imperialist practices with which they were simultaneously articulated.

These imperialist representations ran through a range of forms of visual cultural production. I want to briefly look at two, one ‘mass’ and the other ‘high’ cultural, to bring out some of the issues at stake here. The first is the circulation of postcards. The eugenicist depictions of racial types emerged simultaneously with the development of a significant colonial postcard industry, in particular in the then German colony of what is

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[15] Hans F.K. Gűnther, Rassenkunde des deutschen Volkes, Munich: Lehmann, 1930; The Racial Elements of European History, London: Methuen, 1927.

[16] For a number of relevant essays see Claudia Schmölders and Sander Gilman, eds., Gesichter der Weimarer Republik. Eine physiognomische Kulturgeschichte, Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 2000. On the left as well these sorts of depictions were deployed, albeit in the service of a different critical project. The urban grotesques of George Grosz and Otto Dix are but the best known examples.

[17] Benjamin, ‘Little History of Photography,’ in Walter Benjamin Selected Writings vol. 2, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 507-530.

now Namibia. The popularity in Germany of these postcards grew significantly after the 1905 genocide of the Nama and Herero by the occupying German military, and the so-called 'Hottentot election' in 1907 which pushed the issue of imperialism even more into the public eye. Not surprisingly given these contexts, images of colonial control, in particular beatings of Africans by the military and pornographic images of African women, were the most popular representations.[18]

Postcards were also commodities which for a very low price could enable the vicarious participation of broad social strata in the imperial project. Purchased in significant number by precisely those social groups in Germany who were the targets of social control, the circulation of these colonial postcards can be seen as forms of displacement by which colonial desire acted to contain resistance within Germany. The depictions of violent forms of social control themselves were deployed in ways which served to strengthen social control. The connections between the photographic images of urban marginality with colonial photography, linked through eugenic and hygienic discourses and practices, were extremely complex, but also of crucial importance.

The second are the practices of avant garde art, which also worked in and through the photographic medium. In Dada and post-dada forms of art, for example, montage was a key mode of representing the fragmented and discontinuous nature of urban experience. However, avant garde art configured this urban vision, one with an explicit sociological critique, through a reinscription of the representations of non-western people

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[18] Wolfram Hartmann, Jeremy Silvester and Patricia Hayes, '"This Ideal Conquest": Photography and colonialism in Namibian History,' in Hartmann et al, eds., The Colonising Camera: Photographs in the Making of Namibian History, Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1998, pp. 10-19.

and an invocation of the primitive to characterize their own practices.[19] Similarly to Benjamin and Kracauer, the avant garde was often anti-imperialist in their stated politics, but these more critical forms of art likewise deployed the 'primitive' in ways which did not contest dominant eugenic orientations. This was, I do want to indicate, not always the case. For example, Hannah Höch's series of montages 'From an ethnographic museum,' as well as other works which address questions of gender, throw a certain critical light on the eugenic practices outlined here. While often problematic, her work and that of others does demonstrate that the resources for the construction of critical projects were available, although I don't have the time here to elaborate on these more emancipatory possibilities.

I want to end with this intimation of the possibility of emancipatory directions. This possibility is of particular significance when discussing Kracauer and, especially, Benjamin, for their projects were first and foremost concerned with emancipatory politics. The scope of their impact on the fields of cultural studies calls for us to carefully locate them in their specific contexts. As both Benjamin and Kracauer would caution us, this location is not an historicizing project, but rather one which can open up the critical terrain for taking up their emancipatory projects in the contemporary context. It is crucial to bring out what Benjamin in another context calls their 'optical unconscious,'[20] to render visible the invisibilities structured into their work as read out of the context of their time.

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[19] As Oksiloff points out, this was also the case in early film theory (for example, that of Bela Balazs and Georg Lukacs), which often argued that film offered the possibility of a return to more unmediated and primitive modes of vision. Oksiloff, Picturing the Primitive, pp. 117-158.

[20] Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography,' p. 512.