Aesthetics and Politics: Parallel Revolutions in Siegfried Kracauer’s “Mass Ornament”

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Describing the cultural landscape in the decade following the October Revolution of 1917 and Germany’s own November Revolution in 1918, Siegfried Kracauer’s Weimar era essays, I argue, anticipate questions of mass media as an avenue of social experimentation in the midst of the stifling social control they would otherwise largely enact in the ensuing century. At the core of his collected essays in The Mass Ornament lie questions of realism which face the prospect of a revolutionary facelift in 1920’s Germany. On the one hand, Kracauer’s musings echo the 19th-century European challenge of navigating the selective abstractness of art and literature to locate essential societal conflicts so as to lend a critical eye to given conditions and to change them. On the other, Kracauer’s critiques emerge in an era in which the perceived concreteness of photography and film problematize realism even further, where guiding pre-industrial myths of the collective veer from a confrontation with a “false correctness” of growing populist and National Socialist ideology of the time to, as he puts it, the “false abstraction” of modern capitalism. The question of the “real” which places Weimar mass media and culture under Kracauer’s Marxist lens finds particular articulation in his well-known essay, “Calico World.” Here Kracauer finds the film studio system and production world of Babelsberg, Germany’s “Hollywood,” an easy object of attack as a “distraction factory,” built on illusion and designed to propagate fantasy further to the masses. Beyond what Kracauer regards as the stale and dangerous reproduction of middle-class-catering kitsch in German cinema at the time - including what would be regarded as “high cinema art,” with F.W. Murnau’s Faust and Fritz Lang’s Metropolis as examples, a select target of Kracauer’s critique is the technical manipulation of the audience’s imagination through “cinematic trickery” and special effects. These innovative techniques (such as double-exposure of film, filming with the so-called “unchained camera,” among others), served as a key allure for these productions and represent a brand of conceptual revolution in the hypermedium that film was emerging to be, which Kracauer was unable to see as parallel in many ways to his own vision of expressive liberation, which my paper seeks to elucidate. Returning to the decade following 1917 through the eyes and via the concerns of Kracauer as critic and chronicler provides a vital backscape for discourse which prevails today regarding revolutions in image production and the political possibilities, in addition to perils, vis-à-vis mass culture they may represent.
9:35 a.m.

The Russian Revolution and the Re-Turn to Moscow

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When we form an image of the Russian Revolution, we tend to see almost exclusively Petrograd-Leningrad. Perhaps as a result, scholars have devoted relatively little attention to Lenin’s decision in March 1918 to shift the capital back to Moscow. Even Richard Pipes' monumental study devotes only a few paragraphs to the transfer of the capital back to Moscow. Yet the legacy of this decision can still be felt around the world even today; arguably, it represents one of the most consequential transformations undertaken by the young Bolshevik regime.

Russian writers were quick to grasp the tremendous significance of the capital's transfer back to Moscow. Andrei Bely, author of the symbolist masterpiece Petersburg, commented on the cultural and symbolic importance of this shift as early as 1919, eventually producing a symbolically rich but little studied trilogy aptly titled Moscow (1926-1932). Andrei Platonov’s novel Happy Moscow (1933-1936) also focus on Moscow as a mythological and symbolic space, using the novel’s eponymous main character, Moscow Chestnova, as a condensed metaphor to explore the significance and trajectory of the Russian Revolution in relation to real and planned transformations in the Soviet capital. Mikhail Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita (1929-1940) and Boris Pasternak's Doctor Zhivago likewise focus on Moscow, and not Petrograd or Leningrad, in order to contemplate the root causes and the potential meaning of the Russian Revolution for Russia and the world. This paper will use Russian literature as a lens for analyzing perceived cultural, historical and geopolitical causes and consequences of the Bolshevik decision to return the capital to Moscow.

9:55 a.m.

The Romanian Revolution of ’89: The End of Communism, Commemorations, and the Undead

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Romania was the most totalitarian--Stalinist--of the communist party-states in Europe and one that verged on a form of dynastic communism similar to that of North Korea, a state the Romanian dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, and his wife Elena, visited, admired, and in many ways, desired to emulate in their corner of southeastern Europe. The most violent of the anti-communist revolutions of 1989 in central and Eastern Europe, the Romania Revolution is still an enigma. Tragic, cruel, liberating, absurd and macabre by turns, it is still undecidable whether it was a revolution or a coup d'etat. Yet things changed and Romania is now a part of the European Union and NATO. The mass media, and television in particular--both local and international--played a peculiarly significant role in initiating, accelerating, defining, legitimizing, and now commemorating, this...revolution.
Less Bread and Fewer Roses: Capitalism Hits the Wall

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On this auspicious anniversary I hope to explore revolution as a response to both exogenous crises and a crisis of inner meaning. As a system of promethean development, capitalism has rapidly transformed the material conditions of humanity while simultaneously destroying the conditions for its own reproduction. Equally debilitating has been the effect on cultural traditions, value systems and spiritual beliefs, those “psychic stabilizers” which help us process such change into meaning.

In 1972 the Club of Rome posed the question: can global capitalism, in any political form, overcome the barrier of ecological “limits”? In my paper I will argue that though humanity knows the answer to this question, this knowledge remains disavowed. Rather than an angry proletariat becoming capitalism’s “gravedigger”, it will be this intractable “metabolic rift” which finally ends industrial capitalism’s 200 -year experiment with market production and allocation.

Drawing on the work of Smith, Bellamy-Foster, Diamond, Fraser and others, I hope to demonstrate how the concurrent failure of political/ governmental and ecological life-support systems creates the conditions of possibility to usher in global eco-feminist-socialist revolution. I will argue that it is now only a question of how power is re-distributed throughout global societies rather than if.

At the same time, this eco-materialist rift is echoed by a traumatic rift in hegemonic ideological constructs. I conclude by arguing that for any nascent revolution, healing this fatal wound of symbolic structure will be just as crucial as insuring a just and equitable re-distribution of power and resources.

Between Personal and Social Healing

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"Re-evaluation Counseling" is a global grassroots organization for social change whose main goal is to advance social healing from different types of political oppression, by healing personal traumas. Therefore, RC proposes a practice of therapy with a political-social emphasis, rotating between the counselor and the counselee, such that the practice is free of payment and hierarchy.

This study analyzes the political aspects of RC, as an organization and a practice, on several levels: the subject, intra-personal relationships, organizational model and political activism. Methodologically, the study is a qualitative research ranging from the interpretive paradigm to the critical. Methods include interviews with members of the organization, textual analysis of the organizational publications, and reflexive writings of the researcher's experiences in the field.
Interim findings show that RC forms political subjects that act to promote social change in their personal life, in the RC community and in the world at large. The commitment to change is evident in the organizational behavior and in the intra-personal relations in the community. RC promotes struggles for equality and many of its members are highly involved activists. However, there seem to be gaps between its political positions and its conduct in practice, such as a tension between the desire to abolish hierarchies and the existence of internal hierarchies, and between criticizing social structure and reduction of internal criticism. Results shed light on the complex relationship between personal and social healing, and deals with the emotional part of revolutions and social and political activism.

1:40 p.m.

The Oversized Soviet Puppet

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Although an American, Earl Browder played a role on Communism’s world stage. History knows him primarily for his attempts to “Americanize” the Bolshevik Revolution and to promote harmony with the Soviet Union. His story is more than a mere curiosity, however. Under his leadership the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) became, during the mid-1930s, the most influential political movement left of the New Deal. While Browder was bringing his followers close to political respectability, he also helped commit the crime of the century.

My paper describes Browder’s pre-Bolshevik radicalism through his incarceration for conspiracy against World War I’s Selective Service law. Once freed, he journeyed to New York City and joined the embryonic Communist movement. Through underground work in China for the Communist International, he became the CPUSA’s unquestioned boss by 1932. His party was the first to protest the Great Depression’s mass unemployment through huge urban street demonstrations. Shortly after Hitler’s rise to power in Germany, American Communists began supporting President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s every action. At the same time, however, party-connected figures infiltrated the Manhattan Project and stole atomic bomb secrets.

The CPUSA’s unprecedented successes helped convince Browder of his international status. By 1944 he believed he enjoyed enough autonomy to launch domestic initiatives unpalatable to Joseph Stalin. Browder’s unwillingness to be humbled before domestic rivals cost him his position and membership after World War II. His steadfast refusal to cooperate with the FBI, however, probably spared him from KGB assassins.