



Forgetting Orpheus: Toward a Politics of Awakening

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ALESSANDRO CARRIERI
Università degli Studi di Torino
alessandro.carrieri@unito.it

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Abstract. This brief essay, based on a Kracauerian consideration of the *surface level* as the result of both a specific dominant economic and political rationality and the struggle between conflicting social instincts and drives, aims to highlight how this surface has never stopped to affect and shape, in turn, specific individual and social behaviours. The convergence between the offer of innumerable forms of unreality adorned with illusory promises of salvation and the inexhaustible demand resulting from the absence of reality itself, which present society compensates for with surrogate and consolatory expedients, produces a rarefied and narcotizing atmosphere, what Günther Anders called an *eschatological calm*. If it ensnares all criticism and every action, even and especially in the face of catastrophic events threatening the very survival of humanity, the decoding of its dreamlike images can still unveil its phantasmagorical essence and open our eyes to the *world in which we really live*.

Keywords. Siegfried Kracauer, surface level, phantasmagoria, ratio, dream.

1. Introduction

The radical changes in 20th-century life and thought, driven by the rise of mass society and mass media, bear many analogies to those shaped

today by globalization, the digital and virtual revolution, and the internet, which despite some obvious differences mainly constitute their natural heirs. Indeed, most of the traits ascribed to the emerging consumer society by some of its major interpreters¹ – the myth of progress and infinite growth, commodity fetishism, the primacy of the economic over the political, the phantasmagoria that envelops communication and social spaces, the scotomization of the tragic, social homologation, etc. –, not only persist but appear today at their apogee, having found two powerful allies in late neoliberal capitalism and postmodern technophilic nihilism². To say it with Augusto Del Noce, the technocratic consumer society is in fact permeated by a «blatant contradiction between the humanitarianism theoretically professed and the spirit of dehumanization practically implemented» (1970: 16), a «jarring contrast between an apparent tolerance and a real totalitarianism» (1970: 17). The emancipatory promises that such a society broadcasts through its constant self-promotion – «everyone can be happy if only they hand themselves over to it body and soul and relinquish their claim to happiness» (Horkheimer, Adorno [1947]: 124) – clash with the barbaric traits of a world, the real one, ruled by wars, oppression and social inequality, driven by the sole pursuit and defence of economic profit through the exploitation of nature and humans, a world that is gift-wrapped and barcoded, discounted and home-delivered but of which, actually, all that remains is a landscape of ruins and piles of junk and garbage³.

These premises should hopefully justify the theoretical attempt to borrow and actualize categories and concepts with which thinkers such as Siegfried Kracauer or Walter Benjamin – whose mutual contamination, especially concerning the social critique of expressive and aesthetic forms, is so intricate that it is quite impossible to mention one without the other⁴ – dissected their own time, exploring their applicability in the present. As a matter of fact, such conceptual categories seem to retain an unadulterated potential to crosscut the texture of the phenomenal real and unveil its imagistic and oneiric nature, representing thus a legitimate way of deciphering and describing the contemporary condition of society. The retranslation of the meanings transfigured there, therefore, can still

1 See Simmel (1905); Benjamin (1940, 1982); Kracauer (1963); Horkheimer, Adorno (1947); Debord (1967); Pasolini (1975) and Baudrillard (1970, 1986), just to cite a few.

2 See, to this extent, the considerations of some of the leading exponents of the so-called “Turin School,” notably Augusto Del Noce (1963; 1978; 1989), Luigi Pareyson (1995) and Giuseppe Riconda (2017).

3 On the dissonance between the perception of the “availability-world” – as a preconceived and illusory image of the world that portrays the infinite availability and abundance of resources – and the reality of a planet plagued by reckless exploitation and ecological collapse, see Cuozzo (2017).

4 For an in-depth focus on their reciprocal influence and on the affinities between some of their philosophical *leitmotive*, see Carrieri (2024).

effectively bring to light a certainly distorted and approximate, but nevertheless comprehensive picture of the existing, unveiling at one and the same time the constitutive unreality of a society ruled by a merely calculating and instrumental rationality and the reality that such a society had to renounce, which resurfaces transfigured in its most hidden and inapparent elements.

Kracauer's concept of *surface level*, for example, seems to be particularly effective when applied to the virtual universe – as an amorphous reflection of reality, as a renewed dreamlike phantasmagoria and as a new ornamental configuration adopted by the masses. The *wall* of any social network is ultimately nothing but a form of surface, an epidermal manifestation constituted precisely by that *flow of life* that is the object of Kracauer's critical sociology. A surface that on the one hand gives rise to spontaneous – and therefore completely real – forms, expressions and instances of deep life, but on the other hand appears as a product and manifestation (or *mise en scène*) of that empty and abstract rationality that permeates the whole of society. For this reason, the phenomena that arise at this surface, just like the superficial and micrological ones analysed by Kracauer and Benjamin in their works, not only constitute worthy objects of reflection, but can conceal an «unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the *state of things*. Conversely, knowledge of this state of things depends on the interpretation of these surface-level expressions» (Kracauer [1963]: 75).

2. The mass ornamental configuration between dream and ratio

In his short essay *The Forbidden Gaze* (*Der verbotene Blick*, 1925), Siegfried Kracauer described the activation of a *Pianella*⁵ by a pub waiter – whose white «spreads a glow that arouses the illusion of a superior world and mercilessly exposes the misery of the real one» (Kracauer [1925]: 297) – as a mechanical action capable of «disturbing and awakening a furious mythical creature from its sleep» (Kracauer [1925]: 297). This operation, which the waiter performs with ritual and reverent movements, sets in motion a demonic mechanism which, with its gears and clanking levers, first evokes a «satanic military march without motive» (Kracauer [1925]: 298) and then, «once the monster has revealed its secret» (Kracauer [1925]: 298), stages a dance in an illuminated hall surrounded by mirrors, in which puppet dancers move to the sound of a «ghostly and remote»

5 This was a popular model of musical automaton (*Musikautomat*) – an instrument capable of reproducing, by means of a repeatable mechanical and pneumatic system, entire musical pieces by reading punched cards wrapped in rolls. Widespread in city venues and in some public places, the automaton sometimes included, as in this case, a glass box inside which a sketch was brought to life by puppets performing predefined movements, seemingly synchronized with the music, and at times even mimicking its execution.

(Kracauer [1925]: 298) music that seems to come straight «from Hell» or whose mechanised steps perhaps follow «lost sounds that remain inaudible» (Kracauer [1925]: 297).

The bliss produced by such a technical illusion lasts, according to Kracauer, «infinitely long» (Kracauer [1925]: 298): during the mechanical execution «time is forgotten», but when it came to an over, «one suddenly wakes up from the dream [...] and only now, precisely now, does the phantom appear», for it «can only appear in this hour, the hour in which one lingers like a night wanderer on the dividing line between dream and reality. It is the hour in which nothingness disappears, the hour of illicit glances that cling to the slippery abyss» (Kracauer [1925]: 298), in which it becomes clear that «every novelty is an illusion, every miracle a reflection resulting from the mirrors that always reflect the same thing» (Kracauer [1925]: 299) and the glittering world of modernity with its iridescent ornaments, dazzling illuminations and winking goods – just like the waiter's shirt – finally appear for what they are: «glassy phantasmagoria» (*gläsernen Phantasmagorie*) (Kracauer [1925]: 299).

The analysis Kracauer develops from this anecdote, which at first sight might seem to describe a world and an imaginary that are completely extinct today, is all the more relevant to the description of *our present condition*, just as Kracauer's method and categories do not seem to have lost their ability to dismantle the texture of reality. He describes the *surface* (*Oberfläche*) as the form that life (i.e. the depth) takes and suggests that it should be seen as «the surface level is the dream society dreams of itself and enables an interpretation of society» (Koch [1996]: 29). In this sense, it can be said that it is the substantive content of this dream that informs and consolidates the social basis of the dreaming mass: Namely, when the latter dreams in the form of its aesthetic ornaments, the dream in turn «illuminates the dreamers» (Koch [1996]: 29). In other words, as Koch recalls, Kracauer was firmly convinced that the collective unconscious contains the keystone to the consciousness that a historical epoch can achieve of itself: The phenomena, images and places that consciousness fails to illuminate are precisely those that enshrine the privileged threshold to the essential content of that consciousness and allow for a critical hermeneutics of it. In this sense, what Benjamin said about the last century has not lost its validity:

It is not only that the forms of appearance taken by the dream collective in the nineteenth century cannot be thought away; and not only that these forms characterize this collective much more decisively than any other – they are also, rightly interpreted, of the highest practical import, for they allow us to recognize the sea on which we navigate and the shore from which we push off. It is here, therefore, that the «critique» of the nineteenth century – to say it in one word – ought to begin. The critique not of its mechanism and cult of machinery but of its narcotic historicism, its passion for masks, in which nevertheless lurks a signal of true historical existence, one which the Surrealists were the first to pick up. To decipher tills signal is the concern of the present undertaking. (Benjamin [1982]: 391)

The visible exteriority of collective existence, its aesthetic configuration, within which it is possible to read «the world of objects contemplated as a picture» (Koch [1996]: 6), still represents in fact the constitutive surface of social reality, whose structure can become the object of a formal analysis that starts from the unconscious elements of this existence, from its lapsus, from what escapes consciousness or what it denies or removes. For just as the overall ornamental configuration that the mass assumes cannot be grasped by examining its individual elements, so too the flow of life in its entirety eludes our gaze and thus our understanding: we cannot fully grasp the meaning and course of events, since «all we see are the traces it has left» (Koch [1996]: 13).

Rather, starting from the superficial exteriority of phenomena, it is possible to reach the invisible structures that animate and govern *the world in which we really live* from within: Even «the most trivial event leads down into the shafts of the soul» (Kracauer [1920]: 253). On the contrary, given the inhomogeneous structure of the intellectual universe, philosophical abstractions and generalisations cannot but fail in their attempt to account for all the particular cases subsumed under them: truth unfolds *through things* and not above them. For however much abstract generalisation may tighten the meshes of its weave, there will always be something that escapes it, a residuum that cannot be assimilated, that is able of questioning the entire construction.

This is why, as Graeme Gilloch reminds us, «for Kracauer, as for Benjamin and Bloch, the inconsequential manifestations of the cityscape were “surface expressions”, “hieroglyphs”, “dreams” to be recovered and deciphered by the critical theorist. For them, such fleeting traces were the very stuff from which modernity was made and the very basis of its legibility» (Gilloch [2015]: 79). In other words, reality does not surrender to an abstract and generalising gaze, but can offer itself in epiphanic forms, in its fragments and superficial manifestations. Indeed, «it is what consciousness rejects, what it wilfully ignores, that contributes to its spatial configuration. [...]. Once the hieroglyph of a spatial image is decoded, this always reveals the ground of social reality» (Kracauer [1964]: 74).

Nonetheless, the unconscious aspirations, transcendental longings and innermost dreams of the collective constantly rise to the surface of social life – revealing the intimate link between forms of existence and social spaces, *habitus* and *dispositio* – and any attempt to suppress, imprison or manipulate them is always countered by the resurgence of an irrepressible repressed that not only overwhelmingly affirms what was intended to be removed, but also unmasks and denounces the removal itself. It is worth recalling here that Kracauer shares with Benjamin the conviction that the rise of rationality and the dissolution of traditional values in no way correspond to the decadence of myth and the emancipation from superstition, but rather contribute to their reproduction and strength-

ening, which justifies the persistence and rebirth of various anti-scientific and pseudo-magical beliefs in a seemingly hyper-rationalised society. Forms and tendencies of thought that Kracauer unmasked as essentially reactionary, as well as the current and increasing ones that deny the most elementary and established scientific truths: «Most of these movements are regressive in the sense that they revert to fashions of thought and argument preceding the scientific revolution. [...] Apathy spreads like an epidemic; the “lonely crowd” fills the vacuum with surrogates» (Kracauer [1960]: 291).

Foreseeing by two decades some of the theses that Horkheimer and Adorno would later expound in *Dialectics of the Enlightenment* (*Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 1944; 1947), in *The Mass as Ornament* (*Das Ornament der Masse*, 1927) Kracauer intuited that the *ratio* of the capitalist economic system (i.e., of its later forms as well), «is not reason itself but a murky reason» (Kracauer [1963]: 81), a blurred and debased rationality exhausted in the constant self-reiteration of its own formal structure. Its greatest «core defect» is that «it rationalizes not too much but rather *too little*. The thinking promoted by capitalism resists culminating in that reason which arises from the basis of man» (Kracauer [1963]: 81). In the presence of Reason, he states, *ratio* barricades itself and «gets lost in an empty formalism [...]. The prevailing abstractness», Kracauer continues, «reveals that the process of demythologization has not come to an end» (Kracauer [1963]: 82). The ratio of modern society – which «for irrational reasons» produces «abstract-formal relationships that are indifferent to rational [*vernünftige*] reality» (Kracauer [1927]: 44) –, is constitutively antinomic and paradoxical: «The rationality with which society proceeds in the areas of technology and economics is determined by the immediate practical interest, which in many cases closes itself off to true knowledge», because «the exclusion of the real content of knowledge from the social context leads to its repression» (Kracauer [1927]: 44).

On closer inspection, however, such considerations not only provide the basis for the so-called *Critical Theory*, that was to mature at the *Institut für Sozialforschung* in the following years, but also contain *in nuce* the reasons that were to lead Kracauer to gradually diverge from it, as well as the seeds of his later aversion to Adorno's negative dialectics – which seemed to him «inseparable from a certain arbitrariness» (Kracauer [2012]: 128):

In sum, all that exists, exists only to be devoured in the dialectic process which Teddie keeps going on and on because of his lack of substance, of vision. To Teddie, dialectics is a means of maintaining his superiority over all imaginable opinions, viewpoints, trends, happenings, by dissolving, condemning or again rescuing them, as he pleases. Thus he establishes himself as the master controller of a world he has never absorbed. [...] all his undeniable finesse in this respect is, alas, used in such a way that it results in sheer adornments of an otherwise hollow and insubstantial dialectics. The aesthetic concretions at which he arrives do not really enter into action. (Kracauer [2012]: 131)

The fundamental objection he addresses to orthodox critical theory concerns its constitutive intransigence, which leads it to overlook crucial material dimensions of reality – especially the more interstitial, marginal, and obscure – and which condemns it to a substantial immobility, hindering its potential to be translated into praxis. In fact, both Kracauer and Benjamin – drawing quite different conclusions from those reached by, for example, Horkheimer, Adorno or Günther Anders – transcend the preliminary negative diagnosis about media and mass culture products, recognizing in them an albeit weak and latent utopian-political and redemptive-revolutionary potential.

I ruthlessly hit Teddie some more by drawing a graph illustrating his, Benjamin's, and my own way of thinking. Both Benjamin and I coinciding in not accepting immanent dialectics, I subtly implied that we are engaged in terms of substances. We think under a sort of ontological compunction, Utopian or not, whereas Teddie is, indeed, free-hovering and does not feel any such compunction. At this point, I believe, Teddie was at the end of his rope. I am sure, however, he will not admit this to himself – nor will Gretel – but immediately manage to believe that all my thoughts are in reality his own, annex these thoughts, which he already considers his property, to his «system», and pass them off as the natural outgrowth of the latter. There is something paranoiac about him. You cannot upset Teddie; he grabs everything he is told, digests it and its consequences and then takes over in a spirit of superiority. (Kracauer [2012]: 129-130)

The pathological enthusiasm for the ephemeral of mass society, as well as the emerging (trivial) aesthetic cults, according to Kracauer, are primarily expressions of a metaphysical emptiness resulting from the decline of religious beliefs and values, which the atomized man of modernity tries to sublimate with compensatory phenomena (cinema, travel, dance, etc.). Among these, we should today include, in addition to video games and endless forms of entertainment, the so-called *second life*, the *web-society*, and *virtual* (immersive) *reality*, which often exceed and overwhelm the model to which they refer, the *non-place* where everything seems possible and can be simulated, where each individual, like an omnipotent Prometheus, can turn himself into whatever he most desires. In Kracauer's analysis, these phenomena take on a downright theological character, as they reveal elements of an irrepressible longing for redemption: in the liberating tension that these can generate, human beings are in fact searching for that transcendence that is constantly denied by the «murky reason» (Kracauer [1963]: 81) of capitalism.

In their desire to once again give man a link to nature that is more solid than the one he has today, they discover the connection to the higher sphere, not by

appealing to a still unrealized reason in this world but by retreating into mythological structures of meaning. Their fate is *irreality*, for when even a glimmer of reason shines through at some point in the world, even the most sublime entity that tries to shield itself from it must perish. (Kracauer [1963]: 86)

3. *Don't look back: the ecstatic elation and the end without tragedy*

Today, more than ever, the real is swept with a magical blow of broom beneath the phantasmagorical carpet of virtual, simulation and appearance, leading to a constant and ever more irruptive emergence of a repressed – no longer only psychological, social and historical, but also and above all ecological: «No sooner do we emancipate ourselves from the “ancient beliefs” than we are led to eliminate the qualities of things. So the things continue to recede» (Kracauer [1960]: 300). Far from being the realized utopia it claims to be, the present technological civilization, which produces a growing number of marginalized and oppressed people, is still ruled by a blind and narcotizing faith in progress «as a historical norm» (Benjamin [1940]: 392), even in the face of self-evident ecological and geopolitical catastrophes. Such an «emphasis on progress without limits, rights without responsibilities, and technology without cost» (Postman [1993]: 179) is indeed not located in a rational and empirical sphere, but in an irrational and dogmatic one, and its main purpose «is to produce functionaries for an ongoing Technopoly» (Postman [1993]: 179). If the eternal return of the new, the production of the ever-identical, seems to be the necessary consequence of the «shallow rationalism» inherent in the belief in progress, then this latter «turns out to be part of mythical thinking» (Benjamin [1982]: 119).

Underlying the longevity of this myth is the clearly false belief that progress is an indisputable good and necessarily leads to emancipation and social justice; «such a concept, which in the past was a thorn in the side of the restorers, had now become an argument for successful restoration» (Anders [1980]: 14). Indeed, present society is still flattened onto a wholly immanent dimension, exclusively oriented to the present, perfectly pacified, and liberated from «every echo of a “lament”» (Benjamin [1940]: 401): its order – under whose dominion «men are reduced to atoms or complexes of atoms» (Kracauer [1971]: 114-115) – appears therefore as a «caricature of the real order» (Kracauer [1971]: 157).

The Edenic and immortal expectation that the myth of progress brings with it finds new nourishment in virtual reality, which is able to wrest the individual from factual reality and, above all, can analyse, predict and organise his needs and preferences. Cyberspace as a new comforting and domesticating chimaera promises social relationships, emancipation and diversity, but on closer inspection the individual has never been so isolated, delegitimised and homogenised.

To say it with Baudrillard (1981), the proliferation of simulacra, the loss of any referentiality, the overlap of reality and fiction, mark the advent of *hyperreality*, where the desire for simulated reality fuels its further production and consumption. Thus, the derealized society achieves its state of *relaxation* (*Entspannung*) precisely through the expulsion and abolition of every tragic element, every pain, and every transience – which, on the contrary, constitute, for both Kracauer and Benjamin, the starting point for any possible redemption, for any *eschaton*, which can only occur in that *tension*.

In the face of the objective tragedy of a world torn apart by conflicts, inequality, and ecological upheavals, today's spectators – unlike the Greek spectator who, as Jean-Pierre Vernant (1982) writes, identified with the protagonist due to the verisimilitude and the probability and necessity of the catastrophe represented – are completely detached and unable to empathize even with themselves. If the Greek *agon* was indeed «the *constitutive core* of the political in the *polis*» (Moro [2023]: 36), the spectacle today seems to represent its essential negation. Instead of witnessing a radical and redemptive transformation, we are currently experiencing the course of a «air-conditioned» Apocalypse, to borrow Jean Baudrillard's (1982) expression, marked by a veritable «eschatological calm» (Anders [1956; 1980]). As Slavoj Žižek underlines, «the gap which makes these paradoxes possible is that between knowledge and belief: we know the (ecological) catastrophe is possible, probable even, yet we do not believe it will really happen» (Žižek [2010]: 328). That's precisely what Anders (1956) defined the «apocalyptic blindness» (*Apokalypse-Blindheit*).

Nonetheless, the disappearance of the tragic, the power of distraction, and the phantasmagoria of the everyday, distinctive and indispensable elements of the techno-capitalistic society, produce a narcotizing slumber in relation to the *end* – which is entirely banished from the collective imaginary. The Adam McKay's movie *Don't Look Up* (2021) has masterfully revealed this complete lack of awareness and the schizophrenia of a civilization that constantly rejects and removes its own end – even when it stands right before its eyes or looms over its head. Such emerging social schizophrenia can be understood through a dual dimension. On one hand, there is individual dissociation, where viewers fail to emotionally identify with others or with global crises. On the other hand, there is collective dissociation, where the whole society seems to deny its own vulnerability and the ongoing issues, pervaded by a kind of collective blindness, a collective ostracism of reality that hinders an effective response. Political polarization, denial of scientific facts, and a lack of coordinated action hinder the creation of common ground where people can address and overcome collective challenges. The fact that the movie was received and digested only as a hilarious entertainment comedy, while the desperate cry of alarm it sought to convey largely fell on deaf ears, epitomizes again the complete disconnect between the real and the perceived.

The scotomization of the tragic and the «eclipse of the death» (Redeker [2017]), coupled with a culture of opulence and the myth of progress promoted by the technocratic consumer society, not only impoverish humanity of any sense of transcendence and annihilate any critical faculty of judgement – what Pier Paolo Pasolini (1973) called a «shrinking of intellectual and moral faculties» –, but also generate the apocalyptic blindness mentioned above. Indeed, the further the hyperreality we inhabit diverges from its model, the more individuals dull their emotional, ethical and critical faculties to the point of complete anaesthetisation⁶. Not in the sense that the whole of contemporary aesthetics should be understood as an *an-aesthetics*, as Susan Buck-Morss seems to suggest⁷, but rather in the sense that the cloak of virtuality, simulation and spectacle, which together give rise to a perpetual, pervasive and inescapable synaesthesia, produce a kind of numbness, a blunting of the very faculties of feeling. If, as Anders already asserted, our imaginations and emotions are in fact unable to embrace the enormity of our technologically mediated actions, let alone controlling or even predicting their effects⁸, the actual proliferation of what Timothy Morton (2013) calls *hyperobjects* can only exacerbates the cognitive dissonance between perception and reality. Humanity, co-opted by a permanent and highly invasive *colonisation of the imaginary*⁹, seems to welcome the given state of things with exultation and naivety, in the sign of a total laceration between human and world, *logos* and *kosmos* and of the triumph of a nihilist and bioclastic acosmism (Cuozzo [2013]) – ready to mortgage the future in the name of the immediate satisfaction of some present vice – which sets the stage for the final act of the human tragedy. The affirmation of a «soft and climatized» nihilism (Baudrillard [1970]), able to obliterate every non-economic value and to scotomise every sense of the tragic, proceeds synchronically with the liquidation (or the absorption) of every instance that could undermine the statute of the existing (Del Noce [1989]; Riconda [2017]).

The everyday phantasmagoria transfigures «the messianic end without implying the reality in which the end can be tested» (Kracauer [1971]: 205). Like that offered by the *DetektivRoman* analysed by Kracauer, the one toward which humanity rushes breathlessly, without ever looking back, appears indeed as an «end without tragedy» (Kracauer [1971]: 205), a *catastrophe without catharsis*, an *apocalypse without redemption*. In other words, it is a caricature of the *parousia* and *apocatastasis* since, as Kracauer writes «if there is an end, it exists only where there is tragedy» (Kracauer [1971]: 205), which constitutes the true and indispensable «sign of reality» (Kracauer [1971]: 204). Indeed, as Benjamin also

6 See Baudrillard (1981; 1986) and Anders (1956; 1980).

7 See Buck-Morss (1992).

8 See Anders (1956; 1980).

9 See Castoriadis (1975; 1996).

asserted, only «in tragedy demonic fate is breached» (Benjamin [1919]: 203): the latter is defined as «the guilty context of the living. It corresponds to the natural condition of the living – that semblance [*Schein*], not yet wholly dispelled, from which man is so far removed that, under its rule, he was never wholly immersed in it but only invisible in his best part» (Benjamin [1919]: 204).

Somehow, it is as if humanity, having taken too seriously the lesson offered by the myth of *Eurydice* and *Orpheus*, proceeds without hesitation along its trajectory – illusioned that it leads to earthly bliss – never looking back, lest it lose all progress acquired so far. The myth that dominates our civilisation appears as a reversal of the original: if humanity (*Eurydice*) wants to be free – as promised – it must blindly follow progress (*Orpheus*), which will eventually lead it out of *Uranus* into the realm of earthly bliss; but only on the condition that it never turns back. As in the mythical tale, the enchantment would vanish into darkness if humanity looked behind: if it did so, turning its back on the future – like Benjamin's angel –, it would see nothing but a heap of ruins and rubble, and the fairy tale of progress would turn out to be what it really is: a «glassy phantasmagoria [*gläsernen Phantasmagorie*]» (Kracauer [1925]: 299). The ironic paradox lies precisely here: contrary to the myth, such a halt and a look back would likely be the only possible hope for salvation. The only conceivable redemption today seems to lie in the act of stopping such an arduous and optimistic journey, in *awakening* meant as the irruption of «awakened consciousness» (Benjamin [1982]: 388). The illusion of a promise of ever-renewed and never-fulfilled happiness, repeatedly deferred and postponed, is actually a trap of *Hades*: the infinite task of progress as ascent from hell and access to paradise is, upon closer examination, the very hell itself.

4. Conclusion: Transfiguring the transfigured to redeem reality

So, if on the one hand the aesthetic and ecstatic atmosphere of the technocratic society of the virtual and the spectacle reproduces and spreads an apologetic and narcotizing nihilism, on the other hand it can be subjected to that «minimal operation» that Kracauer ascribed to «aesthetic existentiality: to constitute from the blindly swirling elements of a world in ruins a totality that – although it only apparently reflects this world – contains it in its wholeness and thus enables the projection of its elements onto the real facts» (Kracauer [1971]: 113); that is, the analysis of «the way in which it distributes weights and connects events allows the non-speaking world to speak» (Kracauer [1971]: 111-112). Like Benjamin, he was convinced of the fundamental impossibility of grasping the essence of reality through generalizations and abstractions from top to bottom, and of the

resulting necessity of identifying and gather together those intermediate and residual elements that necessarily elude any ostensible systemic unity: «In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in lightning flashes» (Benjamin [1982]: 456).

The phantasmagorical atmosphere enveloping society and conditioning its existence is not a work of art, it has nothing to do with the aesthetic experience it evokes, nor does it exhaust its atavistic and spiritual need. On the contrary, the «lower life slips, the more it needs the work of art, that unseals its closure and puts back in their place the elements lying scattered alongside one another, enriching them with connections» (Kracauer [1971]: 85). In fact, the aesthetic and cultural manifestations of society can act as a mirror of the instincts, struggles and tensions dwelling within it, providing an undoubtedly deformed but nevertheless integral and detailed image: although they represent only an opaque and distorted reflection of the world, a disjointed mosaic of transfigured images of reality, the retranslation of these reflections can unveil the «world of appearances» (Kracauer [1971]: 91), that is, the mythical phantasmagoria that surrounds derealized society. In other words, it is a question of adopting a deforming perspective in order to liberate the true meaning of reality which is concealed in the appearance of the everyday. The latter, Benjamin would say, reveals its «true – surrealist – face» (Benjamin [1982]: 464) and betrays its essentially oneiric character: «The social in its present state is the manifestation of spectral and demonic powers» (Benjamin [2014]: 95-96).

The image offered by this mirror, Kracauer also warns, «is frightening enough: it shows a state of society in which the disinhibited intellect has achieved the final victory, a confused and now purely external collection of facts and figures» through which the disengaged intellect «transforms an artificially removed reality into a grimace» (Kracauer [1971]: 102). Ultimately, all manifestations emerging to the social surface represent and describe a specific portion of unreality on the one hand, but on the other hand betray a reference to a denied but not-quite-obliterated reality, whose absence and nostalgia faintly surface there.

Furthermore, if, as Guy Debord (1967) observed, the spectacle presents itself as society itself and *vice versa*, it is quite possible to decode the latter with keys and interpretive tools usually reserved for its cultural productions. Agreeing with Baudrillard that reality is nowadays completely indistinguishable from fiction, simulation and the virtual, we can ask ourselves whether the spectacle, which has now taken hold of all areas of life, – can still convey and awaken a critical consciousness and a political content, or whether it does not rather inevitably disarm and render harmless it by exhausting all its potential in the spectacle itself. If Baudrillard's intuitions are correct and there is nothing but the spectacle, then the second option is correct, but this would inevitably mean that any interpretation or action, whether individual or collective, must necessarily take place

within the spectacle. Whereas every action, including the political, is «an action aimed at a *mise-en-scene*» (Böhme [2010]: 182), the phantasmagorical spectacle that envelops the everyday, as well as virtual reality, distance us from experience and yet (or perhaps precisely because of this) themselves constitute real forms of experience – furthermore, totalizing and immersive – that cannot be overlooked or underestimated.

The *authentic* aesthetic experience as such can thus constitute a *shock*, an interruption and disruption of everyday perception which is conditioned by a ratio that keeps it trapped in the phantasmagorical sphere of illusion and unreality, under the sign of a collective adhesion to a *Luna Park ecstasy* – as a contemporary and parodic *fuga mundi*. Kracauer's and Benjamin's considerations, in this respect, also develop in the wake of the so-called Warburg tradition: the concepts of *Denkraum* (*space of thought*) and *Zwischenraum* (*interstitial space*), introduced by Aby Warburg in the introduction of his famous *Mnemosyne Atlas* (*Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, 1924-1929), would become central categories in Kracauer's and Benjamin's thought. In fact, the concept of *Zwischenraum* has its roots in the Latin *intervallum*, which can take on both spatial and temporal meanings, such as *arrest* or *suspension*: it indicates, at one and the same time, the *space* opened by an interruption (the Kracauerian *In-Between*) and the *interruption* itself (the Benjaminian *dialectical standstill*).

Unlearning Orpheus' lesson thus means pulling «the emergency brake» (Benjamin [1940]: 402), to borrow Benjamin's words again, in order to stop and look back; acknowledging the path taken and hopefully correcting its trajectory; waking up from the narcotic, phantasmagorical sleep of unreality, and *dynamitizing the dreamworld*. As taught by Kracauer and Benjamin, the estrangement, the specific *epoché* that results from the lightning-like irruption of an image or a space of thought (*Denkbild*; *Denkraum*), can rise to a true form of knowledge, insofar as it allows us to cast our gaze on the reality that lurks right beneath our eyes. This means that it is possible «through the medium of aesthetics to unveil the mystery of the de-realised society and of its puppets devoid of substance», and such an operation is also capable of transforming «incomprehensible life into a translatable reversed image of authentic reality» (Kracauer [1971]: 113). The assumption of a transfiguring gaze capable of grasping the ripples and gaps on the phenomenal surface of the given world, illuminating its paradoxes and antinomies and allegorically retranslating its meanings, still thus constitutes the indispensable premise of every critique, every transformation and every utopia:

The mimetic function of the utopian object is a «deforming mirror», a caricature of the given world, in which the here and now is rendered with an upside-down image that shows the narrowness of the present situation, the need to transcend the given present through an anticipatory image that hides in the folds of the ever-present. (Cuozzo [2015]: 195)

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