Photography

Siegfried Kracauer

Translated by Thomas Y. Levin

Forced to leave fascist Germany in 1933, Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966) began a period of exile that would last the rest of his life. It was thus in Paris and then, after 1941, in New York that he would write the works for which he is known in the Anglo-American realm: a "social biography" of Jacques Offenbach (Orpheus in Paris, *1937), a study of Weimar film (* From Caligari to Hitler, *1947), an aesthetics of cinema (*Theory of Film, *1960) and a meditation on the philosophy of history (*History: The Last Things before the Last, *1969). What Kracauer abandoned in Frankfurt and Berlin was not only his native language but also a career as one of the major cultural critics of the Weimar Republic. Trained as both an architect and a sociologist, in the mid-1920s Kracauer became one of the editors of the feuilleton (arts and culture) section of the important, left-liberal* Frankfurter Zeitung, *a paper in which he eventually published nearly two thousand articles on a remarkably wide range of subjects. While many of these were more or less incidental journalistic pieces, others, such as "Photography," were sustained philosophical reflections. It was in these pages that Kracauer effectively pioneered the genre of sociological film criticism, undertook a pathbreaking series of analyses of the new "employee-class" (col-*

"Die Photographie" was first published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung,* 28 Oct. 1927. It was first reprinted in Siegfried Kracauer, *Das Ornament der Masse* (Frankfurt am Main, 1963), pp. 21–39, a collection of his essays that the author himself edited. See also Kracauer, vol. 5, pt. 2 of *Schriften,* ed. Inka Mülder-Bach (Frankfurt am Main, 1990), pp. 83–97. The present text will appear in *The Mass Ornament* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993). All footnotes are the translator's.

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lected in 1930 in a book entitled Die Angestellten*), and published major essays on Kafka, Benjamin, Weber, Scheler, the Buber-Rosenzweig translation of the Bible, the genre of biography, to name just a few. Together with his friends Adorno, Benjamin, and Bloch, whose work he published regularly in the feuilleton section, Kracauer also wrote philosophical and sociological analyses of daily-life phenomena in the tradition of his teacher Georg Simmel. In these quotidian micrologies focusing, for example, on the architecture of cinema palaces, unemployment offices and arcades, on travel and dance troupes, best-sellers and boredom, on neon-light displays and mass sports events, Kracauer developed a genre motivated by the following programmatic insight: "One must rid oneself of the delusion that it is the major events which have the most decisive influence on people. They are much more deeply and continuously influenced by the tiny catastrophes which make up daily life."*[1] *The publication in translation of a collection of these essays from the Weimar period entitled* The Mass Ornament *will finally make available this important and until recently largely unknown facet of Kracauer's work.*

—Thomas Y. Levin

> In the days of cock-a-doodle I went and saw Rome and the Lateran hanging from a silk thread. I saw a man without feet outrunning a swift horse and a sharp, sharp sword cutting a bridge in two.
>
> —Brothers Grimm, "The Tale of a Cock-a-Doodle"

1

This is what the *film diva* looks like. She is twenty-four years old, featured on the cover of an illustrated magazine, standing in front of the Hotel Excelsior on the Lido. The date is September. If one were to look through a magnifying glass one could make out the grain, the millions of little dots that constitute the diva, the waves and the hotel. The picture, however, does not refer to the dot matrix but to the living diva on the Lido. Time: the present. The caption calls her demonic: our demonic diva. Still, she does not lack a certain look. The bangs, the seductive position of the head, and the twelve lashes right and left—all these details, dili-

1. Siegfried Kracauer, *Die Angestellten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1971), p. 252.

Thomas Y. Levin is assistant professor in the department of Germanic languages and literatures at Princeton University. He has edited *Siegfried Kracauer: Eine Bibliographie seiner Schriften, Siegfried Kracauer: Neue Interpretationen* (with Michael Kessler) and has translated and edited Kracauer's essay collection *The Mass Ornament* (forthcoming).

gently recorded by the camera, are in their proper place, a flawless appearance. Everyone recognizes her with delight since everyone has already seen the original on the screen. It is such a good likeness that she cannot be confused with anyone else, even if she is perhaps only one twelfth of a dozen Tiller girls.[2] Dreamily she stands in front of the Hotel Excelsior, which basks in her fame, a being of flesh and blood, our demonic diva, twenty-four years old, on the Lido. The date is September.

Is that what *Grandmother* looked like? The photograph, over sixty years old and already a photograph in the modern sense, depicts her as a young girl of twenty-four. Since photographs are likenesses, this one must have been a likeness as well. It was carefully produced in the studio of a court photographer. But were it not for the oral tradition, the image alone would not have sufficed to reconstruct the grandmother. The grandchildren know that in her later years she lived in a narrow little room with a view onto the old part of town and that, to give pleasure to the children, she would make soldiers dance on a glass plate;[3] they also know a nasty story about her life and two confirmed utterances, which change a bit from generation to generation. One has to believe the parents—who claim to have gotten it from Grandmother herself—that this photograph depicts the very same grandmother about whom one has retained these few details that may also in time be forgotten. Yet such testimonies are unreliable. It might turn out that the photograph does not depict the grandmother after all but rather a girlfriend that resembled her. None of her contemporaries are still alive—and the question of likeness? The ur-image has long since decayed. But the now-darkened appearance has so little in common with the traits still remembered that the grandchildren are amazed when urged to believe that it is the fragmentarily remembered ancestor whom they encounter in the photograph. All right, so it is Grandmother, but in reality it is any young girl in 1864. The girl smiles continuously, always the same smile, the smile is arrested yet no longer refers to the life from which it has been taken. Likeness has ceased to be any help. The smiles of plastic manikins in beauty parlors are just as rigid and perpetual. This manikin does not belong to our time; it could be standing with others of its kind in a museum, in a glass case labeled "Tradi-

2. A group of militarily trained dancing girls named after the Manchester choreographer John Tiller. Introduced in the late nineteenth century, the troupe was hired in Germany by Eric Charell, the director of Berlin's Großes Schauspielhaus theater from 1924 to 1931 whose revues and operetta productions were the forerunners of the "musicals." See Derek and Julia Parker, *The Natural History of the Chorus Girl* (London, 1975).

3. In the autobiographical novel *Georg*, which Kracauer completed in 1934 during his exile in Paris, the main character at one point recalls his childhood delight at "the glass battle fields of former times" filled with tin soldiers. "His grandmother," so we learn, "had occasionally set them up on a glass plate and then tapped on the surface from underneath with her finger, in order to bring the ranks into disorder" (Siegfried Kracauer, *Georg*, in *Schriften* [Frankfurt am Main, 1973], 7:251).

tional Costumes 1864." There the manikins are displayed solely for the historical costumes, and the grandmother in the photograph is also an archeological manikin that serves to illustrate the costumes of the period. So that's how one dressed back then: with a chignon, the waist tightly tied, in a crinoline and a Zouave jacket.[4] The grandmother dissolves into fashionably old-fashioned details before the very eyes of the grandchildren. They are amused by the traditional costume that, following the disappearance of its bearer, remains alone on the battlefield—an external decoration that has become autonomous. They are irreverent, and today young girls dress differently. They laugh and at the same time they feel a shudder. For through the ornamentation of the costume from which the grandmother has disappeared they think they glimpse a moment of time past, a time that passes without return. While time is not part of the photograph like the smile or the chignon, the photograph itself, so it seems to them, is a representation of time. If it is only the photograph that endows these details with duration, it is not at all they who outlast mere time, but, rather, it is time that makes images of itself out of them.

2

"From the early days of the friendship between Goethe and Karl August." "Karl August and the 1787 coadjutor election in Erfurt." "A visit of a Bohemian in Jena and Weimar" (1818). "Recollections of a Weimar high school student" (1825 to 1830). "A contemporary account of the Goethe celebration on November 7, 1825." "A rediscovered bust of Wieland by Ludwig Klauer." "Plan for a national monument to Goethe in Weimar." The herbarium for these and other investigations is provided by the Goethe Society yearbooks, a series that in principle can never come to an end. It would be superfluous to ridicule the Goethe philology that deposits its specimens in these volumes, all the more so since it is as ephemeral as the items it processes. The pseudolustre of the numerous monumental works on Goethe's stature, being, personality, and so on, on the other hand, has hardly begun to be questioned. The fundamental principle of Goethe philology is that of *historicist* thinking, which emerged at about the same time as did modern photographic technology. On the whole the advocates of such historicist thinking believe that they can explain any phenomenon purely in terms of its genesis.[5] That is, they believe at the very least that they can grasp historical reality by recon-

4. A fashionable woman's jacket from the 1860s, modelled after the uniform of the Zouave, a French colonial troop composed of Berber tribes and Europeans and recruited in Algiers in 1830–31.

5. In the first publication of the essay in the *Frankfurter Zeitung,* Kracauer here explicitly names Wilhelm Dilthey as an exemplary advocate of such historical thinking.

structing the series of events in their temporal succession without any gaps. Photography presents a spatial continuum; historicism seeks to provide the temporal continuum. According to historicism the complete mirroring of a temporal sequence simultaneously contains the meaning of all that occurred within that time. Thus, if the connecting links of the Erfurt coadjutant election or the recollections of the Weimar high school student were missing in the presentation of Goethe, for the historicist, such an account would be lacking reality. Historicism is concerned with the photography of time. The equivalent of its temporal photography would be a giant film depicting the temporally interconnected events from every vantage point.[6]

3

Memory encompasses neither the entire spatial appearance nor the entire temporal course of an event. Compared to photography memory's records are full of gaps. The fact that the grandmother was at one time involved in a nasty story that is being recounted time and again because one really doesn't like to talk about it—this doesn't mean much from the photographer's perspective. He knows the first little wrinkles on her face and has noted every date. Memory does not pay much attention to dates; it skips years or stretches temporal distance. The selection of traits that it assembles must strike the photographer as arbitrary. The selection may have been made this way rather than another because disposition and purposes required the repression, falsification, and emphasis of certain parts of the object; a virtually endless number of reasons determines the remains to be filtered. No matter which scenes a person remembers, they all mean something that is relevant to him or her without his or her necessarily knowing what they mean. Memories are retained because of their significance for that person. Thus they are organized according to a principle that is essentially different from the organizing principle of photography. Photography grasps what is given as a spatial (or temporal) continuum; memory-images retain what is given only insofar as it has significance. Since what is significant is not reducible to either merely spatial or merely temporal terms, memory-images are at odds with photographic representation. From the latter's perspective, memory-images appear to

6. Kracauer refers to this passage in his introduction to *History: The Last Things before the Last* (New York, 1969) when describing his surprising realization of the continuity between the work he had done on film and his present concern with history: "I realized in a flash the many existing parallels between history and the photographic media, historical reality and camera-reality. Lately I came across my piece on 'Photography' and was completely amazed at noticing that I had compared historicism with photography already in this article of the 'twenties" (pp. 3–4).

be fragments but only because photography does not encompass the meaning to which they refer and in relation to which they cease to be fragments. Similarly, from the perspective of memory, photography appears as a jumble that consists partly of garbage.

The meaning of memory-images is linked to their truth content. As long as they are embedded in the uncontrolled life of the drives they are inhabited by a demonic ambiguity; they are opaque like frosted glass that hardly a ray of light can penetrate. Their transparency increases to the extent that insights thin out the vegetation of the soul and limit the compulsion of nature. Truth can only be found by a liberated consciousness that assesses the demonic nature of the drives. The traits that consciousness recollects stand in a relationship to what has been perceived as true, the latter being either manifest in these traits or shut out by them. The image in which these traits are to be found is distinguished from all other memory-images, for unlike the latter it preserves not a multitude of opaque recollections but instead elements that touch upon what has been recognized as true. All memory-images are bound to be reduced to this type of image, which may rightly be called the last image, since in it alone does the unforgettable persevere. The last image of a person is that person's actual "*history*." In this history, all characteristics and determinations that do not relate in a significant sense to the truth intended by a liberated consciousness drop out. How a person represents this history does not depend purely on his or her natural constitution nor on the pseudo-coherence of his or her individuality; thus only fragments of these assets are included in his or her history. This history is like a *monogram* that condenses the name into a single graphic figure that is meaningful as an ornament. Eckart's monogram is fidelity.[7] Great historical figures survive in legends that, however naive they may be, strive to preserve their actual history. In authentic fairy tales, the imagination has intuitively deposited typical monograms. In a photograph a person's history is buried as if under a layer of snow.

4

In his description of a Rubens landscape presented to him by Goethe, Eckermann notices to his surprise that the light in the painting comes from two opposing directions, "which is quite contrary to nature."[8] Goethe responds: "This is how Rubens proves his greatness,

7. The German mythological hero, faithful protector, and counselor Eckart warns the Nibelungen at the border of the Rüdegers Mark of the threatening Hunn danger. Kracauer here plays on the association of Eckart and fidelity as manifest in Ludwig Tieck's 1799 fable "Tannenhäuser and the Faithful Eckart" and Goethe's 1811 text entitled "The Faithful Eckart."

8. Johann Peter Eckermann (1792–1854), Goethe's private secretary, in a discussion

and shows to the world that he stands *above* nature with a free spirit, fashioning it according to his higher purposes. The double light is indeed violent and you could even say that it is contrary to nature. But if it is contrary to nature, I still say that it is *higher* than nature; I say that it is the bold hand of the master whereby he demonstrates in a brilliant way that art is not entirely subject to natural necessity but rather has laws of its own." A *portrait painter* who submitted entirely to "natural necessity" would at best create photographs. During a particular period, which began with the Renaissance and may now be approaching its end, the "artwork" is indeed faithful to nature whose specificity reveals itself more and more during this period. But by penetrating this nature the artwork orients itself toward "higher purposes." There is cognition in the material of colors and contours, and the greater the artwork the more it approaches the transparency of the final memory-image in which the features of "history" converge. A man who had his portrait painted by Trübner asked the artist not to forget the wrinkles and folds on his face. Trübner pointed out the window and said: "Cross the way there's a photographer. If you want to have wrinkles and folds then you'd better hire him, he'll put 'em all in; me, I paint history."[9] In order for history to present itself the mere surface coherence offered by photography must be destroyed. For in the artwork the meaning of the object takes on spatial appearance, whereas in photography the spatial appearance of an object is its meaning. The two spatial appearances—the "natural" one and that of the object permeated by cognition—are not identical. By sacrificing the former for the sake of the latter the artwork also negates the *likeness* achieved by photography. This likeness refers to the look of the object, which does not immediately divulge how it reveals itself to cognition; the artwork, however, conveys nothing but the transparency of the object. In so doing it resembles a magic mirror that does not reflect those who consult it as they appear but instead as they wish to be or as they fundamentally are. The artwork too disintegrates over time, but its

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with Goethe on 18 April 1827, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* (Wiesbaden, 1955), p. 578; trans. John Oxenford, under the title *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann and Soret* (London, 1874), p. 248; trans. mod. Compare also Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe,* trans. Gisela C. O'Brien (New York, 1964).

9. Wilhelm Trübner (1851–1917), a German "naturalist" painter best known for his early, sober, Courbet-inspired "realistic" portraits. Following a period in the 1870s during which Trübner produced large historical and mythological scenes, he became a member of the Munich Secession in the 1890s and adopted an impressionist idiom in which he painted a large corpus of landscape works. For his views on photography, rendered in Bavarian dialect in the original German quotation, compare for example the sections on "Die photographische Darstellung" and "Die Grenzen zwischen productiver und reproductiver Thätigkeit" in Wilhelm Trübner, *Die Verwirrung der Kunstbegriffe* (Frankfurt am Main, 1900), pp. 44–46.

meaning arises out of its crumbled elements, whereas photography merely stockpiles the elements.

Until well into the second half of the nineteenth century the practice of photography was often in the hands of former painters. The not yet entirely depersonalized technology of this transition period corresponded to a spatial environment in which traces of meaning could still be trapped. With the increasing independence of the technology and the simultaneous evacuation of meaning from the objects, *artistic photography* loses its justification; it does not grow into an artwork but into its imitation. Images of children are Zumbusches,[10] and the godfather of photographic landscape impressions was Monet. These pictorial arrangements—which do not go beyond a skillful emulation of familiar styles—fail precisely to undertake the representation of the remnants of nature of which, to a certain extent, the advanced technology would be capable. Modern painters have composed their images out of photographic fragments in order to highlight the side-by-side existence of reified appearances as they manifest themselves in spatial relations. This artistic intention is diametrically opposed to that of artistic photography. The latter does not explore the object assigned to photographic technology but rather wants to hide the technological essence by means of style. The artistic photographer is a dilettante artist who apes an artistic manner minus its substance instead of capturing the very lack of substance. Similarly, rhythmical gymnastics wants to incorporate the soul about which it knows nothing. It shares with artistic photography the ambition to lay claim to a higher life in order to elevate an activity that is actually at its most elevated when it finds the object appropriate to its technology. The artistic photographers function like those social forces that are interested in the semblance of the spiritual because they fear the real spirit; it might explode the material base that the spiritual illusion serves to disguise. It would be well worth the effort to expose the close ties between the prevailing social order and artistic photography.

5

The photograph does not preserve the transparent aspects of an object but instead captures it as a spatial continuum from any one of a number of positions. The last memory-image outlasts time because it is unforgettable; the photograph, which neither refers to nor encompasses such a memory-image, must be essentially associated with the moment in time at which it came into existence. Referring to the average film whose subject matter is the normal photographable environment, E. A. Dupont

10. Ludwig von Zumbusch (1861–1927) was a German painter of naive canvases, portraits, and pastel landscapes.

remarked in his book on film that "the essence of film is, to a certain extent, the essence of time."[11] If photography is a *function of the flow of time,* then its substantive meaning will change depending upon whether it belongs to the domain of the present or to some phase of the past.

Current event photography, which portrays phenomena familiar to *contemporary* consciousness, provides access, of a limited sort, to the life of the original. In each case it registers an exterior that, at the time of its reign, is a means of expression as generally intelligible as language. The contemporaneous beholder believes that he or she sees the film diva herself in the photograph, not only her bangs or the pose of her head. Naturally, he or she cannot imagine her on the basis of the photograph alone. But luckily the diva numbers among the living, and the cover of the illustrated magazine functions as a reminder of her corporeal reality. This means that present-day photography performs a mediating function; it is an optical sign for the diva who is meant to be recognized. One may have one's doubts in the end as to whether her decisive trait is really the demonic. But even the demonic is less something conveyed by the photograph than it is the impression of the cinemagoers who experience the original on the screen. They recognize it as the representation of the demonic—so be it. The image denounces the demonic not because of but rather *despite* its resemblance. For the time being the demonic belongs to the still-vacillating memory-image of the diva to which the photographic resemblance does not refer. However, the memory-image drawn from the viewing of our celebrated diva breaks through the wall of resemblance into the photograph and thereby lends the latter a modicum of transparency.

Once a photograph ages, the immediate reference to the original is no longer possible. The body of a deceased person appears smaller than the living figure. An *old* photograph also presents itself as the reduction of a contemporaneous one. The old photograph has been emptied of the life whose physical presence overlay its merely spatial configuration. In inverse proportion to photographs, memory-images enlarge themselves into monograms of the remembered life. The photograph is the sediment that has settled from the monogram, and from year to year its semiotic value decreases. The truth content of the original is left behind in its history; the photograph captures only the residuum that history has discharged.

If one can no longer encounter the grandmother in the photograph, the image taken from the family album necessarily disintegrates into its particulars. In the case of the diva, one's gaze may wander from her bangs

11. Ewald André Dupont, *Wie ein Film geschrieben wird und wie man ihn verwertet* (Berlin, 1919); quoted in Rudolf Harms, *Philosophie des Films: Seine ästhetischen und metaphysischen Grundlagen* (1926; Zurich, 1970), p. 142. Shortly after its publication Kracauer reviewed Harms's study. See *Frankfurter Zeitung,* 10 July 1927, p. 5.

to her demonic quality; from the nothingness of the grandmother the gaze is thrown back onto the chignon: it is the fashion details that hold it tight. Photography is bound to time in precisely the same way as *fashion.* Since the latter has no significance other than as current human garb, it is translucent when modern and abandoned when old. The tightly corsetted dress in the photograph protrudes into our time like a mansion from earlier days that has been marked for destruction because the city center has been moved to another part of town. Usually members of the lower class settle in such buildings. It is only the very old traditional dress, a dress that has lost all contact with the present, that can attain the beauty of a ruin. The effect of an outfit that was still worn only recently is *comical.* The grandchildren are amused by the grandmotherly crinoline of 1864, which provokes the thought that it might hide the legs of a modern girl. The recent past that claims to be alive is more outdated than that which existed long ago and whose meaning has changed. The comic quality of the crinoline is due to the powerlessness of its claim. In the photograph, the grandmother's costume is recognized as a cast-off remnant that wants to continue to hold its ground. It is reduced to the sum of its details like a corpse yet stands tall as if full of life. Even the landscape and all other concrete objects become costumes in an old photograph. For what is retained in the image are not the features envisaged by a liberated consciousness. The representation captures contexts from which such consciousness has departed, that is, it encompasses orders of existence that have shriveled without wanting to admit it. The more consciousness withdraws from natural bonds, the more nature diminishes. In old etchings whose fidelity is photographic the hills of the Rhine look like mountains. Due to technological development they have in the meantime been reduced to tiny slopes and the grandiosity of those aged views seems a bit ridiculous.

Ghosts are simultaneously comic and terrifying. Laughter is not the only response provoked by antiquated photography. It represents what is utterly past and yet this refuse was once the present. Grandmother was once a person and to this person belonged the chignon and the corset as well as the High Renaissance chair with its turned pillars, a ballast that did not weigh her down but was just carried along as a matter of fact. Now the image wanders ghostlike through the present like the lady of the haunted castle. Spooky apparitions occur only in places where a terrible deed has been committed. The photograph becomes a ghost because the costumed manikin was once alive. The image proves that the alien trappings were incorporated into life as accessories. These trappings, whose lack of transparency one experiences in the old photograph, were formerly inseparably meshed with the transparent aspects. This bad association that persists in the photograph provokes a shudder. Such a shudder is provoked in drastic fashion by the pre–World War I films screened in the avant-garde cinema Studio des Ursulines in Paris—film images that show how the features stored in the memory-image are

embedded in a reality that has long since disappeared. Like the photographic image, the playing of an old hit song or the reading of letters written long ago also conjures up anew a disintegrated unity. This ghostlike reality is *unredeemed.* It consists of elements in space whose configuration is so far from necessary that one could just as well imagine a different organization of these elements. Those things once clung to us like our skin, and this is how our property still clings to us today. We are contained in nothing and photography assembles fragments around a nothing. When Grandmother stood in front of the lens she was present for one second in the spatial continuum that presented itself to the lens. But it was this aspect and not the grandmother that was eternalized. A shudder runs through the beholder/viewer of old photographs. For they do not make visible the knowledge of the original but rather the spatial configuration of a moment; it is not the person who appears in his or her photograph, but the sum of what can be deducted from him or her. It annihilates the person by portraying him or her, and were person and portrayal to converge, the person would cease to exist. An illustrated newspaper recently put together photographs of famous personalities as children and as grown-ups and published them under the heading, "The Faces of Famous People: This Is How They Once Were—And This Is How They Are Today!" Marx as a youth and Marx as leader of the Center party, Hindenburg as a lieutenant and our Hindenburg. The photographs are aligned beside each other like statistical reports, and one can neither guess the later image from the earlier one nor reconstruct the earlier image from the later. One has to take it on faith that the optical inventories belong together. The features of human beings are retained only in their "history."

6

The daily papers are illustrating their texts more and more, and what would a magazine be without pictures? The striking proof of photography's extraordinary validity today is provided above all by the increase in the number of *illustrated newspapers.* In them one finds assembled everything from the film diva to anything within reach of the camera and the audience. Infants are of interest to mothers and young gentlemen are captivated by the legs of beautiful girls. Beautiful girls like to behold sports and stage celebrities standing on gangways of ocean liners when embarking on voyages to distant lands. In distant lands there are battles of conflicting interests. But the focus of interest is not on them but on the cities, the natural catastrophes, the cultural heroes, and the politicians. In Geneva the League of Nations is meeting; it serves as a pretext for showing Mr. Stresemann and Mr. Briand in conversation in front of the

entrance of the hotel.[12] The new fashions also must be disseminated or else in the summer the beautiful girls will not know who they are. Fashion beauties attend high-society events accompanied by young gentlemen, earthquakes take place in distant lands, Mr. Stresemann is seated on a terrace with potted palms, and for the mothers we have the little tots.

The aim of the illustrated newspapers is the complete reproduction of the world accessible to the photographic apparatus; they record the spatial outlines of people, conditions, and events from every possible perspective. Their method corresponds to that of the weekly newsreel, which is nothing but a collection of photographs, whereas an authentic film employs photography merely as a means. Never before has an age been so informed about itself, if being informed means having an image of objects that resembles them in a photographic sense. Most of the images in the illustrated magazines are topical photographs that, as such, refer to existing objects. The reproductions are thus basically signs that may remind one of the original object that was supposed to be understood. The demonic diva. In reality, however, the weekly photographic ration does not intend at all to refer to these objects or ur-images. If it were offering itself as an aid to memory, then memory would have to determine the selection. But the flood of photos sweeps away the dams of memory. The assault of this mass of images is so powerful that it threatens to destroy the potentially existing awareness of crucial traits. Artworks suffer this fate through their reproductions. The phrase "lie together, die together" applies to the multiply reproduced original; rather than coming into view through the reproductions, it tends to disappear in its multiplicity and to live on as art photography. In the illustrated magazines people see the very world that the illustrated magazines prevent them from perceiving. The spatial continuum from the camera's perspective predominates the spatial appearance of the perceived object; the likeness that the image bears to it effaces the contours of the object's "history." Never before has a period known so little about itself. In the hands of the ruling society, the invention of illustrated magazines is one of the most powerful means of organizing a strike against understanding. Even the colorful arrangement of the images provides a not insignificant means to successfully implement such a strike. The *contiguity* of these images systematically excludes their contextual framework available to consciousness. The "image-idea" drives away the idea; the blizzard of photographs betrays an indifference toward what the things mean. It would not have to be this way; but, in any case, the American illustrated magazines—which the publications of other countries emulate to a large degree—equate the world with the quintessence of the photographs. This equation is not made without good reason. For

12. Aristide Briand, foreign minister of France (1925–1932), and Gustav Stresemann, foreign minister of Germany (1923–1929), shared the 1926 Nobel Peace Prize and were instrumental in gaining acceptance of the Kellogg-Briand Pact.

the world itself has taken on a "photographic face"; it can be photographed because it strives to be completely reducible to the spatial continuum that yields to snapshots. It can sometimes depend on that fraction of a second required for the exposure of an object whether or not a sportsman will become so famous that photographers are commissioned by illustrated magazines to give him exposure. The camera can also capture the figures of the beautiful girls and young gentlemen. That the world devours them is a sign of the *fear of death.* What the photographs by their sheer accumulation attempt to banish is the recollection of death, which is part and parcel of every memory-image. In the illustrated magazines the world has become a photographable present, and the photographed present has been entirely eternalized. Seemingly ripped from the clutch of death, in reality it has succumbed to it all the more.

7

The series of pictorial representations of which photography is the last historical stage begins with the *symbol.* The symbol, in turn, arises out of the "natural community" in which man's consciousness was still entirely embedded in nature.

> Just as the history of individual words always begins with the sensuous, natural meaning and only progresses to abstract, figurative uses in the later stages of its development, one can observe the same progression from substance and matter to the spiritual and the intellectual in religion, in the development of the human individual and of mankind in general. Likewise the symbols in which the earliest mankind customarily deposited its views of the nature of their surrounding world have a fundamental meaning which is purely physical and material. Symbolism, like language, sat in nature's lap.

This statement is taken from *Bachofen's* study of the rope-twisting Ocnus in which he shows that the spinning and weaving depicted in the image originally referred to the activity of the creative power of nature.[13] As consciousness becomes more and more aware of itself and in the process the originary "identity of nature and man" dissolves, the meaning of the image becomes increasingly abstract and immaterial.[14] But even if, as Bachofen puts it, the image progresses to the point of designating "the

13. Johann Jakob Bachofen, "Oknos der Seilflechter," *Versuch über die Gräbersymbolik der Alten,* vol 4. of *Gesammelte Werke* (1923; Basel, 1954), p. 359; trans. Ralph Manheim, under the title "Ocnus the Rope Plaiter," *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right: Selected Writings of J. J. Bachofen* (Princeton, N. J., 1967), pp. 54–55; trans. mod.

14. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology,* ed. C. J. Arthur (New York, 1970), p. 51.

spiritual and the intellectual," the meaning is nevertheless so much a part of the image that it cannot be separated from it. For long stretches of history imagistic representations remain symbols. As long as human beings need them they remain dependent in practice on natural conditions, a dependence that determines the visible and corporeal expression of consciousness. It is only with the increasing domination of nature that the image loses its symbolic power. Consciousness, which disengages itself from nature and stands over against it, is no longer naively enveloped in its mythological shell; it thinks in concepts that, of course, can still be used in an altogether mythological way. In certain epochs the image retains its power; the symbolic presentation becomes allegory. "The latter signifies merely a general concept or an idea which is distinct from it; the former is the sensuous form, the incorporation of the idea itself"—this is how old Creuzer defines the difference between the two types of images.[15] At the level of the symbol what is thought is contained in the image; at the level of allegory thought maintains and employs the image as if consciousness were hesitating to throw off its shell. This schematization is crude. Yet it suffices to illustrate the transformation of representations that is the sign of the departure of consciousness from its natural contingency. The more decisively consciousness frees itself from this contingency in the course of the historical process, the more purely does its natural foundation present itself to consciousness. What is meant no longer appears to consciousness in images; rather, this meaning goes toward and through nature. To an ever-increasing degree, European painting during the last few centuries has represented nature stripped of symbolic and allegorical meanings. This certainly does not imply that the human features it depicts are therefore bereft of meaning. Even at the time of the old daguerreotypes consciousness is so imbricated in nature that the faces bring to mind meanings that cannot be separated from natural life. Since nature changes in exact correspondence with the respective state of consciousness of a period, the foundation of nature devoid of meaning arises with modern photography. No different from earlier modes of representation, photography too is assigned to a particular developmental stage of practical and material life. It is a secretion of the capitalist mode of production. The same mere nature that appears in photography flourishes in the reality of the society produced by this capitalist mode of production. One can well imagine a society that has succumbed to mute nature that has no meaning no matter how abstract its silence. The contours of such a society emerge in the illustrated journals. Were it to last, the consequence of the emancipation of consciousness would be its own eradication; nature that consciousness failed to penetrate would sit down at the very table that consciousness had abandoned. Were this society not to prevail, however, then liberated

15. Georg Friedrich Creuzer, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen,* 4 vols. (Leipzig, 1836–42).

consciousness would be given an incomparable opportunity. Less enmeshed in the natural bonds than ever before, it can prove its power in dealing with them. The turn to photography is the *go-for-broke game* of history.

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Even if the grandmother has disappeared, the crinoline has nonetheless remained. The totality of all photographs must be understood as the *general inventory* of a nature that cannot be further reduced, as the comprehensive catalogue of all manifestations that present themselves in space to the extent that they are not constructed out of the monogram of the object but from a natural perspective that the monogram does not capture. Corresponding to this spatial inventory is historicism's temporal inventory. Instead of preserving the "history" that consciousness reads out of the temporal succession of events, historicism records the temporal succession of events whose linkage does not contain the transparency of history. The barren self-presentation of spatial and temporal elements belongs to a social order that regulates itself according to economic laws of nature.

A consciousness still caught up in nature is unable to see its own material base. It is the task of photography to disclose this previously unexamined *foundation of nature.* For the first time in history, photography brings to the fore the entire natural shell; or the first time the inert world presents itself in its independence from human beings. Photography shows cities in aerial shots, brings crockets and figures down from the Gothic cathedrals; all spatial configurations are incorporated into the central archive in unusual combinations that distance them from human proximity. Once the grandmother's costume has lost its relationship to the present it will no longer be funny, but peculiar like a submarine octopus. One day the diva will lose her demonic quality and her bangs will go the same way as the chignon. This is how the elements crumble since they are not held together. The photographic archive assembles in effigy the last elements of a nature alienated from meaning.

This warehousing of nature promotes the confrontation of consciousness with nature. Just as consciousness finds itself confronting the unabashedly displayed mechanics of industrial society, it also faces, thanks to photographic technology, the reflection of the reality that has slipped away from it. To have provoked the decisive confrontation in every field —this is precisely the go-for-broke game of the historical process. The images of the stock of nature disintegrated into its elements are offered up to consciousness to deal with as it pleases. Their original order is lost; they no longer cling to the spatial context that linked them with an original out of which the memory-image was selected. However, if the remnants of

nature are not oriented toward the memory-image, then the order they assume through the image is necessarily provisional. It is therefore incumbent on consciousness to establish the *provisional status* of all given configurations and, perhaps, even to awaken an inkling of the right order of the inventory of nature. In the works of Franz Kafka, a liberated consciousness absolves itself of this responsibility by destroying natural reality and jumbling the fragments against each other. The disorder of the detritus reflected in photography cannot be elucidated more clearly than through the suspension of every habitual relationship between the elements of nature. The capacity to stir up the elements of nature is one of the possibilities of film. This possibility is realized whenever film combines parts and segments to create strange constructs. If the disarray of the illustrated newspapers is simply confusion, the game that film plays with the pieces of disjointed nature is reminiscent of *dreams* in which the fragments of daily life become jumbled. This game indicates that the valid organization of things is not known, an organization that would designate how the remains of the grandmother and the diva stored in the general inventory will some day have to appear.