

**Standing Out in a Crowd: The Aesthetic of Modernist Cinema**

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December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2005

American Modernism Seminar

Final Paper

Among the large objects, such as vast plains or panoramas of any kind, one deserves special attention: the masses. No doubt imperial Rome already teemed with them. But masses of people in the modern sense entered the historical scene only in the wake of the industrial revolution. Then they became a social force of first magnitude. Warring nations resorted to levies on an unheard-of scale and identifiable groups yielded to the anonymous multitude which filled the big cities in the form of amorphous crowds. Walter Benjamin observes that in the period marked by the rise of photography the daily sight of moving crowds was still a spectacle to which eyes and nerves had to get adjusted.... As might be expected, the traditional arts proved unable to encompass and render it. Where they failed, photography easily succeeded; it was technically equipped to portray crowds as the accidental agglomerations they are. Yet only film, the fulfillment of photography in a sense, was equal to the task of capturing them in motion. In this case the instrument of reproduction came into being almost simultaneously with one of its main subjects. Hence the attraction which masses exerted on still and motion picture cameras from the outset.

(Siegfried Kracauer 298)

*The Establishment of Physical Existence*

Siegfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film* elucidates the correlation between the cinematic medium and masses, or more acutely the aesthetic of the masses. As he observes, film has depicted mass crowds since its birth; Auguste and Louis Lumiere's first screened project after inventing the cinematograph recorded a crowd of workers leaving a factory. The ideological and political issues accompanying factory work influence Kracauer's premise. The industrial revolution (i.e. large-scale industrial systematization) precedes urban migration, specialized

mechanization, and the capitalist boom which operate within the Marxist conceptions of social class division. Further, the concept of early cinema as a low art for the proletariat's consumption exposes the perplexity of Kracauer's description: the only art form suitable for capturing the masses also captivates them.

Kracauer's cites artistic examples which testify to the spectacle of the masses, including Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* and Edgar Allan Poe's *Man of the Crowd*. Another of Baudelaire's works, *The Painter of Modern Life*, discusses Poe's story of a man peculiarly inspired by a crowd.

Do you remember a picture (for indeed it is a picture!) written by the most powerful pen of this age and entitled *The Man of the Crowd*? Sitting in a cafe, and looking through the shop window, a convalescent is enjoying the sight of the passing crowd, and identifying himself in thought with all the thoughts that are moving around him. He has only recently come back from the shades of death and breathes in with delight all the spores and odours of life; as he has been on the point of forgetting everything, he remembers and passionately wants to remember everything. In the end he rushes out into the crowd in search of a man unknown to him whose face, which he had caught sight of, had in a flash fascinated him. Curiosity had become a compelling, irresistible passion. (Baudelaire)

Baudelaire's essay, usually considered the manifesto on modernism, emphasizes a departure from emulation and reproduction and focuses on an artist immersed in the modern moment. Kracauer observes in *The Mass Ornament*, his seminal 1927 essay on cultural theory, that "the

position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from the epoch's judgment about itself." The emerging proletarian artistic medium must contain the basest of these 'expressions,' therefore modernist films are an appropriate point of departure for analysis. Examining *Modern Times* and *The Crowd* alongside Kracauer's writings on modernism, mass culture, and industrialized ideology exposes the alienation of the individual in modern society; of a face in the crowd. (Kracauer 298)

Charles Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), an oft-championed salute to modern humanism, follows a vagrant through a series of episodes ranging from comedy to tragedy. The tramp character passively engages in conditions, like factory work and striking, necessitated by the modern working world. King Vidor's *The Crowd* (1928) follows the life of John Sims and his attempts to make a name for himself in bustling metropolitan city. The main character from each film starts humbled and dehumanized amidst the procedure of working life. The tramp works in a mechanical factory turning bolts, a task so far removed from the finished product that he'll never know what purpose his action serves. Kracauer quips in his review of *City Lights*, Chaplin's previous film, that "it would be easy to extend the list of episodes touching upon the imbalance between the Tramp (who is a human being) and the world (frequently

inhuman). In no way do they exist in entirely the same dimension.” The tramp’s work area consists of a section of moving belt on an assembly-line, beyond which the film shows the huge gears that churn the process without ever exposing the source or product of this perfunctory drive. Kracauer discusses repetition in *The Mass Ornament*, where “the production process runs its secret course in public. Everyone does his or her task on the conveyor belt, performing a partial function without grasping the totality.” The tramp works, as another gear in the machine, until his muscles know only that singular motion. He continues to twist well into his break time and constantly submits to the delinquent mercy of the company executive, who utilizes a series of all-seeing camera/screens to curb employee downtime. Next, the executive abuses the tramp in a mechanized feeding machine that results in chaos and pain, albeit in a sort of slapstick comedy routine, which extends the realm of the assembly line and develops the company’s control over the worker. French theorist Roland Barthes expounds the food machine in terms of social derision.

Chaplin has always seen the proletarian under the guise of the poor man: hence the broadly human force of his representations but also their political ambiguity. What he presents us with is the proletarian still blind and mystified, defined by the immediate character of his needs, and his total alienation at the hands of his masters (the employers and the police). For Chaplin, the proletarian is still the man who is hungry; the representations of hunger are always epic with him.

Ironically, the food-dispensing machine (which is part of the employer's world) delivers only fragmented and obviously flavourless nutriment. (Robinson 79)

In a final losing bout, the tramp returns to work and submits to the powerful machine, which swallows him like he failed to do with his lunch. When removed, he performs a madcap ballet, twisting his wrenches over coworkers and an attractive secretary, exposing the total interference of industry into his eating, interacting, and moving. (Kracauer 115-120)

John Sims has a similarly disconcerting relationship with employment. He arrives in Manhattan and follows a crowd wherever he turns. The film introduces his occupation through a marvelous recreation of modern architecture, a vast skyscraper ascends and transitions through a window and continues tracking through the hundreds of symmetrical workstations, finding John in the middle. Kracauer expresses the mass ornament as a modern architectural style that "resembles aerial photographs of landscapes and cities in that it does not emerge out of the interior of the given conditions, but rather appears above them. Actors likewise never grasp the stage setting in its totality, yet they consciously take part in its construction." The corporate milieu dwarfs the dozens of levels, each one presumably just as cavernous. John creates advertisement slogans, and while not as bleak as the tramp's profession, he still bears no closeness to irreplaceable professional value. (Dirks)

Kracauer imagines an analog for the aesthetic of bodies that the two main characters experience.

The process began with the Tiller Girls. These products of American distraction factories are no longer individual girls, but indissoluble girl clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics.... One need only glance at the screen to learn that the ornaments are composed of thousands of bodies, sexless bodies in bathing suits. The regularity of their patterns is cheered by the masses, themselves arranged by the stands in tier upon ordered tier. (Kracauer)

The aesthetic of visual uniformity represents a social and cultural like-mindedness. In fact, the original working title for *Modern Times* was “The Masses,” which suggests that Chaplin intended for the mass ornament to represent his modern vision. Both films heavily concern the identification of a recognizable face in an indivisible crowd. For example, the hand-washing scene, when John Sims is greeted identically by four men that look exactly alike, constructs the concept of a homogeneous proletariat. The following scene in an elevator, in which John is asked to turn around and face the same way as the other passengers, shows the workers discouraging individuality. The pleasing appearance of standardization contrasts the crowd’s chaos, and Kracauer notes that many people tend to sacrifice themselves to that spectacle “because they are too lazy to rebel; many tears are shed and they only flow because to cry is sometimes easier than to think.... Clandestinely, the little shopgirls wipe their eyes.” His references to the machinated Tiller girls and the

unthinking shopgirls may reflect the antiquated notion that women relegate themselves to the thrills of mass culture, while the bourgeois men reserve high culture for themselves. This seems unlikely, however, considering that the men generally occupy the same social stratum as their respective female characters. (Kracauer 291-304) (Huysen 47-49)

John's experience with women carries interesting connotations amidst the Friday night engagements that seem to have no qualifications other than gender. After agreeing to accompany Burt and two ladies, the ornament synchronizes with industrial efficiency. The exit doors of the men's and women's office buildings transform into a commercial-district match game, vigorously pairing the proletariat. By the grace of timing he meets Mary and engages in what may be the most efficient courting period in all of cinema. Their trip from handshake to honeymoon spans four distinctive scenes, and John's interest in social advancement is redoubled.

The leading woman in Chaplin's film, a street urchin, meets the tramp after they both have a run-in with the police. The girl's attempts to scrounge food for her family are interrupted when she finds that her father has been shot in an unemployment riot. The grim, unpredictable horde is concomitant with the mob mentality of the mass ornament.

The bearer of the ornaments is the mass and not the people, for whenever the people form figures, the latter do not hover in midair but arise out of a



community.... Although the masses gave rise to the ornament, they are not involved in thinking it through.  
(Kracauer)

The ornament attracts individuals without asking them to think about what they are a part of or to grasp the situation's totality. John Sims copes with two deaths, both of which involve the crowd. The knowledge of his father's death forms with a group of people outside his house, when the crowd flocks towards the stimuli. Urban culture distorts the formalized community into a gang. Even after his daughter's attack, John's rampant pleading can't alter the communal course, which ceaselessly travels in the same inflexible direction. He later realizes the impossibility of trying to externally modify their course: "We do not know how big the crowd is, and what opposition it is until we get out of step with it." (Dirks)

Kracauer describes the ornament's power and intensity, which contributes to the ideology of the urban crowd. "It is the rational and empty form of the cult, devoid of any explicit meaning, that appears in the mass ornament. As such, it proves to be a relapse into mythology of an order so great that one can hardly imagine its being exceeded." Both main characters despise and reject the uniformity required of them to be in step with the crowd before they realize the difficulty of swimming against the stream. The unpleasant reality, to fend without the rationalized movements of the crowd, is difficult in adverse social

conditions and the economic downturn. John's opportunities decrease in quality, and his hope of supporting his family relies on fighting for jobs through the crowd. He eventually accepts a job under the barest preconditions, and arrives where the tramp began. He must juggle on the street, contort himself in a repetitive movement, while wearing an advertisement sign. He has, although under his own terms, finally arrived at the aspiration of the modern ornament: to elevate the body's connotation and maintain the crowd's pace. He gains individuality by accepting humility and becoming the ad that he once designed. Kracauer explains the relationship between the surrendered entity and the ornament.

Enterprises that ignore our historical context and attempt to reconstruct a form of state, a community, a mode of artistic creation that depends upon a type of man who has already been impugned by contemporary thinking—a type of man by who all rights no longer exists—such enterprises do not transcend the mass ornament's empty and superficial shallowness but flee from its reality. (Kracauer)

When John re-enters the crowd, he establishes the pointlessness of the modern ornament. By consciously deciding to belong to the crowd, he supersedes the thoughtless mechanisms of the Tiller Girls.

Correspondingly, the tramp shatters the ornament's model when he succeeds as the restaurant amusement. He sings and voluntarily engages the crowd, in contrast to the prior moments when the crowd sweeps him into their employment. (Kracauer)

Kracauer concludes *The Mass Ornament* by explaining that it will end in the modern period “and human life itself will adopt the traits of that ornament into which it develops, through its confrontation of truth, in fairy tales.” Likewise, Baudelaire elevates modern characters in the crowd.

The crowd is his domain, just as the air is the bird's, and water that of the fish. His passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd. Thus the lover of universal life moves into the crowd as though into an enormous reservoir of electricity. He, the lover of life, may also be compared to a mirror as vast as this crowd: to a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness, which with every one of its movements presents a pattern of life, in all its multiplicity, and the flowing grace of all the elements that go to compose life. (Baudelaire)

In this form, the protagonists' stories are the means through which the mass ornament develops and fades as an narrative device. The awareness and experience of mass culture reconciles the characters and informs the audience that individuality and mass citizenship are not contradictory.

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