

Endless Deferral: Theories of Mass Culture and the Aesthetics of Affect

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Accepted for: *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, vol. 35: *The Return of the Aesthetic in American Studies*, edited Winfried Fluck, Rieke Jordan, Stephan Kuhl, and Johannes Voelz, Gunter Narr, 2019

Was the aesthetic ever gone? Where did it go? Who made it leave? Already in the 1980s, when I was a student in Berlin, there was much mention of a 'return,' so by then, it seems, it had been gone for a while—and apparently, it is still returning and not yet fully back. In American Studies, at least, the putative sendoff of the aesthetic is closely associated with the success story of mass (or: popular) culture and its concerns. As the artist came to be replaced with all sorts of agents, and as the canon was swept aside by all sorts of texts, aesthetics was discarded too. Or rather: it went underground. The disappearance act of the aesthetic, after all, was as extended as its return. Perhaps we should take recourse to less definitive terms: the blurring, the flickering, the oscillation of the aesthetic?

Ultimately, wherever (or rather: *whenever*) you look, the aesthetic is still around or not quite gone. It continuously changed its form and function, however, with the debates that tried to keep track of its status. In my contribution to this volume I would like to cast a closer look at this process of retreat or fluctuation, by zooming in on moments in time when mass culture manifested as an aesthetic configuration, and when the figures of mass entertainment and aesthetic experience were conjoined as opponents or allies or partners in an eternal love-hate plot. My point of departure will be in the 1940s, with one of the arguably most consequential takes on mass culture and its challenge to classical and bourgeois aesthetics—Theodor Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's seminal essay on the

culture industry from 1944. This text is also important to me since it pulls together mass cultural aesthetics and totalitarian control in ways that should profoundly change the discourse on both issues. Instead of tracking the text's well-researched impact and consequences (Kellner, Ross, Beaty, Fluck) one more time, however, I will then move backwards in time from the 1940s, to explore some dimensions of Adorno's and Horkheimer's text that are almost submerged in the text of 1944, but resonate with earlier considerations of the subject matter, coming into ever sharper relief the farther we move away from the 1940s.

On my journey from 1944 to 1914, I will spotlight some seminal texts of the field that aimed at a pervasive portrait of mass culture and its possibilities. I am especially interested in the writings on mass culture emanating from Weimar Germany that were published in the 1920s and 1930s and that have shaped the way in which we are thinking of modernity and mass culture today. Taking these as stepping stones, I will then proceed to ponder increasingly less systematic (and also less known) engagements with the subject matter, which disclose historical continuities that tend to get less attention in the history of the field. My anchor points will be the cultural media most frequently addressed in the texts themselves: the movies and the variety stage. It is my contention that the later—German—texts may be indispensable to come to terms with the workings of a mass cultural aesthetics, but that the earlier—American—texts, at least when read through the lens of later theorization, resonate most fruitfully with the constellations and concerns of our own days, in which mass culture (actually: 'culture' more generally) has fallen apart in a complicated assortment of scenes and sites.

When tracing this particular history of the aesthetic we need to move away from the close association of aesthetics and art. As different as the takes on mass cultural aesthetics

that I will review in the following are, they all agree that to approach mass culture as art in the classical sense is to misunderstand it, and they all aim to draw a sharp line, at the very least, between established ideas of artistic expression and mass cultural practices of production, address, and use. In doing so, all of them, although with different inflections and intensities, invoke the lexicon of gender and sexuality in order to pit the 'old' and 'new' aesthetics against each other. Seminal studies on modernity such as Andreas Huyssen's "Mass Culture as Woman" (*After the Great Divide* 44-64) or Rita Felski's *The Gender of Modernity* have identified this routine conjunction of mass culture and gender/sex before, but largely confined their inspections to review correspondences between cultural theories on the one hand and extant social hierarchies or normative exigencies on the other. My reading, in contrast, aims to approach seminal theories of mass culture as response functions in a complex grid of social identification and distinction. I contend that what Matthias Makropoulos has identified as modern mass culture's most trenchant effect—its "aestheticization of the social" (Makropoulos, "Organisierte Kreativität" 29)—impinges heavily on the figuration of social diversity and distinction. It does so not only by mapping out new social roles and personae, but more importantly by rearranging the very system of conceptualizing social diversity, as sex and gender attributions make exemplarily obvious (but enactments of race and class could also show).

Following Makropoulos, I conceive of mass culture as a potentially non-totalizing and pluralistic system of meaning-making. That is to say that mass culture thrives on a characteristically modern "sense of possibilities" (Robert Musil, quoted in Makropoulos, "Organisierte Kreativität" 36) by generating an endless array of narratives of reality rather than working on establishing one committing and overarching idea of the world (or its future) (30). The aesthetics of mass culture thus manifests on two different levels. First it

serves to prepare largely autonomous individuals to perform in a modern world that capitalizes on mobility and flexibility and that is marked by contingency. And second it allows for participatory involvement in this world, encouraging an understanding of reality in terms of its malleability in ongoing and interminable processes of fictionalization and optimization (29, see also Makropoulos, *Theorie der Massenkultur* 78-91).

Makropoulos associates this spirit of active engagement with the legacy of the artistic avantgardes of early modernism (71-5). While these movements may indeed play a certain role in this context, I hold that the creative entertainment cultures of the turn of the century are by far more important than the experimental arts and their agenda of calculated provocation for the unfolding of a mass cultural aesthetic. This aesthetic is an operational aesthetic—beholden to the spirit of technical feasibility on the one hand and fraught with the dynamics of affect on the other (Harris 59-90, Brasch 43-80). To formulate an aesthetics of mass culture, it seems, requires to calibrate the hard facts of technical and media affordances with the ephemeral substance of affective involvement. The outcome of this correlation varies greatly, however, depending on the larger socio-political contexts of the individual approaches.

1944: Adorno/Horkheimer

From his Californian exile of 1944, Theodor Adorno, together with Max Horkheimer, delineated the differences between an American culture industry and a European “bourgeois aesthetics” (122). As one central feature of distinction, the authors mark the different understandings of lack in both systems. Like the culture industry, “genuine works of

art” engage in a continuous deferral of gratification. While skeptical of the bourgeois art of the past and its aesthetic to begin with, the Marxist critics are outright disgusted with the maneuvers of an unabashedly commercial entertainment culture following on bourgeois art’s heels as its grotesquely distorted travesty. Where ‘genuine’ art mobilizes “aesthetic sublimation to present fulfillment in its brokenness” (111) the ‘false’ culture industry systematically obfuscates the negativity that inheres in the persistent denial of satisfaction and closure, duping its consumers into believing that the promise *is* the delivery:

The culture industry endlessly cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises. The promissory note of pleasure issued by plot and packaging is indefinitely prolonged: the promise, which actually comprises the entire show, disdainfully intimates that there is nothing more to come, that the diner must be satisfied with reading the menu. The desire inflamed by the glossy names and images is served up finally with the celebration of the daily round it sought to escape. (111)

What Adorno and Horkheimer put in markedly negative terms has been described more neutrally by Frank Kelleter who characterizes serial modes of production and dissemination as a fundamental property of popular culture and an integral part of the larger logic of capitalism as an economic system that “functions only under the condition that it creates belief in its continued existence in the future” (Kelleter 30). Following this logic, commercial and mass-addressed narratives that aim to reach and hold the attention of large and heterogeneous audiences over time need to produce a sense of lack and then keep it open, provoking their ‘users’ to seek more and more and more without ever quenching the want. Inscribed with the principle of seriality, these mass-cultural products generate “a sense of infinite futurity, without which capitalist market cultures would threaten to collapse

at every crisis point” (Kelleter 30). While the economic system of speculation and anticipation prides itself on its (putative) rationality and disavows any affective investment, however, mass culture’s ‘promissory notes of pleasure’ are *nothing but* affect. They are fueled by desire, not by ambition, acquisitiveness or audacity.

Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s conflation of the rhetoric of commerce and eros pinpoints this dynamic: “Works of art are ascetic and shameless; the culture industry is pornographic and prudish. It reduces love to romance” (122). Obviously, this is meant to expose mass-cultural expression as a perverse totalization of the logic of the marketplace, in which the individual and her body become an object of mass-consumption. As Juliane Rebentisch has elucidated, elsewhere Adorno invoked the logic of prostitution to denote the mass-cultural mechanism of operating with the (void) promise of instant gratification rather than engaging in the art of sublimation. Pornography and prostitution bear pointedly negative connotations for Adorno/Horkheimer, but at the same time they shift the culture industry’s arena of action from the intellectual realm to the sphere of affective and sensorial experience. This relocation signals the specific agency of the mass cultural, which takes effect as an economy of exchange and endless deferral, an alternation of desire and projection, a teasing, taunting flirtation. This may well point to an ‘aesthetic of mass culture’—a phrase that Adorno and Horkheimer by and large avoid. Jarring with a classical aesthetic of the European bourgeois tradition, the mass-cultural aesthetic is not agonal or melancholic but future-directed and progressive, driven by a “relentless rhythm” (95, “stählerner Rhythmus” 128).

It is formulations such as these that substantiate Andreas Huyssen’s assessment of the writings of the Frankfurt School on mass culture as ‘ambivalently gendered.’ In contrast to earlier stylizations of mass culture “as woman,” Huyssen contends, critics like

Adorno/Horkheimer take recourse to both masculine and feminine ascriptions in their approaches to mass culture. Huyssen argues that they aim to overcome “the 19th century mystification of mass culture as woman,” only to routinely succumb to the temptation of feminizing the mechanisms and forms of mass entertainment after all (48, see also Felski 6). But I claim that Adorno/Horkheimer’s (and others’) assessment of the aesthetic of mass culture is complicated because it signals beyond a binary social gender hierarchy, pointing, *through* its highly critical and at times phobic tone, to an agency (or ‘business’) of affective reinscription, in which categories of social distinction (such as gender and sexuality, but also class and race) are turned into negotiable entities or optionable stocks; possibilities of becoming rather than points of departure. In the course of this logic, as we shall see, mass culture is gendered, but it is not female or male; it rather is an amorphous mix of contingent attributions, sexualized and sexualizing.

1935: Benjamin

When Adorno and Horkheimer toward the end of their chapter project their observations about American mass culture onto Nazi Germany, they pull into plain sight what actually motivates their entire argument. In a similar manner, the writings of Siegfried Kracauer or Walter Benjamin from the late 1920s and 30s gesture to ‘America,’ to then time and again veer abruptly to their present-day reality in Germany, conflating the proliferating productivity of advanced capitalism with the dynamics of totalitarian integration. Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s closing remarks thus echo with the ending of Walter Benjamin’s 1935 artwork essay and Siegfried Kracauer’s “Mass Ornament” (1927)—as different as all of these

texts' lines of argument were (Buck-Morss 146-50; Hansen, *Cinema & Experience*). Benjamin deplores a perilous "aestheticization of politics" under way that is propelled and steered by mass-cultural performances and machinations, depleting politics of concrete agency and totalizing it into a spectacular performance of power. This assessment, as has often been pointed out, jars with the essay's obvious fascination with mass-cultural possibilities (Hansen, *Cinema & Experience* loc. 2370-2663), particularly the possibilities of the medium of film, which is made out as the epitome of modernity—future-oriented, optimizable, and largely uncharted: a "vast and unsuspected field of action [*Spielraum*]" ("Work of Art" 37).

The "revolutionary opportunities" of the medium hinge closely on what Benjamin identifies as film's "highly productive use of the human being's self-alienation" (32), the fact that more than any other medium of representation, film manages to detach the individual from her image, enacting a division between the social presence and the projected performance. In contrast to the aesthetics of the classical stage, film does not aim at holistic integration and identification, splitting up its actor into a panoply of performances instead. The film actor is "exiled [...] from his own person," as Benjamin quotes Luigi Pirandello (31), to then contend: "His performance is by no means a unified whole, but is assembled from any individual performances. [...] there are elementary necessities of the machinery that split up the actor's performance into a series of episodes capable of being assembled" (32). This actor is no agent but an interface (or medium), processing an endless array of modular images, split off from his person, which derive their relevance from their very disposability and openness.

Benjamin does not resort to the gendered imagery of prostitution when he explores the dynamics of alienation in the artwork essay, resorting to the more neutral semantics of fragmentation and assemblage instead. But in other contexts, particularly Benjamin's writing

on the modern city, the prostitute as “saleswoman and wares in one” (“Paris” 157) plays a pivotal role. Assuming that ‘woman’ figures as “allegory of the modern” in Benjamin’s writing, Christine Buci-Glucksmann mapped the distinction between uncorrupted femininity and prostitution onto the divide of aura and media modernity, with prostitution “demonstrate[ing] the end of the aura and the decline (*Verfall*) of love” (99, see also Buck-Morss “The Flaneur”). In contrast to Adorno/Horkheimer, however, who conflate the culture industry with prostitution to signal the perverted character of both, Benjamin’s fascination with the mediated and de-auraticized artwork affects the motif of prostitution. Or perhaps his fascination with the prostitute as an emblematic figure of modernity affects his valuation of technical media: “Paradoxically [...], the prostituted body is not only fragment, ruin of nature, disfigurement of the ‘sublime body.’ It is also a staging in and through new imaginaries created by a thousand excitations” (102). Seen in this way, the business of prostitution also becomes emblematic for cinematic (as opposed to classical theatrical) acting, since in both cases a mix of technical exigencies and affective dispositions intersect to release an agency that surpasses the individual ‘players’ involved.

Miriam Hansen has complicated Buci-Glucksmann’s binary reading of gender by arguing that Benjamin’s auratic experience is “asymmetrically entwined rather than simply incompatible with technological reproducibility and collective reception” (Hansen, *Cinema & Experience* loc. 3134, for a critique see also Weigel). But in either logic, technical mediation affords a proliferation of subject (and object) positions that is both disconcerting (because it subjects everything to the market imperative) and exhilarating (because it opens up hitherto unimagined possibilities and correlations). This chimes with Benjamin’s reading of the modern city as energized by a transpersonal and overarching economy of affect. It operates like “the fun fair, which turned the average man into a clown, with its bumper cars and

related amusements,” keeping people from expressing themselves “through anything but reflex actions” (“The Paris of the Second Empire” 30). The mass-medial circuitry of the twentieth century, particularly the cinema, conducts this business of a transmission of affect and endless deferral of resolution much more expertly and smoothly than the nineteenth-century metropolis (not to mention the brothel), reduplicating the experience of sensorial onslaught and excitation to play out on the level of representation (in formats such as the slapstick film) *and* on the level of the apparatus. Mass culture, particularly the cinema, functions as a huge relay station powered by desire, enmeshing commercial, psychosexual, and political objectives to the point of convergence.

1927-1924: Kracauer

There is an analogy between the routine cinematic equation of actor and prop, and prostitution’s conflation of the human body and the commodity, but Walter Benjamin does not spell this out in the artwork essay. However, when in the *Arcades Project* he invokes the dance revue—this other cultural practice that should become emblematic for the theorization of modern mass culture—he explicitly couples commodification, prostitution and modernity:

In the form taken by prostitution in the big cities the woman appears not only as commodity but, in a precise sense, as mass-produced article. This is indicated by the masking of individual expression in favor of a professional appearance, such as make-up provides. The point is made still more

emphatically, later on, by the uniformed girls of the music-hall revue. (*Arcades Project* 346, see also: Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* 190-193)

Clearly this passage gestures to Siegfried Kracauer's seminal essay "The Mass Ornament" of 1927, in which Kracauer lays out his ideas on the aesthetic intersections of mass culture and modernity and their political implications. Benjamin's fragment highlights the interlinkages between Adorno/Horkheimer's, Kracauer's and his own assessment of mass culture as a business of multiplication and affective dispersal or reaggregation. Like his successors, Kracauer insists that the revue depletes the spectacle of sexiness of actual sex, producing "indissoluble girl clusters" ("Mass Ornament" 76) consisting of "sexless bodies in bathing suits" (77). Kracauer, however, is not so much concerned with the fetishistic commodification of the human body. His essay evokes the economic mobilization of sex in order to address the aesthetic reinscription of social relations.

"The Mass Ornament" uses the synchronized and serialized performances of the big dance revues such as the Tiller Girls (which was a British troupe that Kracauer—like many others—took to be American) to get a grasp on concurrent processes of industrial mass production and political mass mobilization. At first glance, the essay seems to totalize the analogies between cultural performance and politico-economic streamlining, reducing culture and aesthetics to the role of the superstructure that vulgar Marxism had reserved for it. In this reading, the dance revues are metonymic of the system at large, figuring, together with other spectacles of orchestrated physical exercising of the day, as "the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires" (79). But for Kracauer, like for Benjamin, mass culture is never only a means of placation, and "The Mass Ornament," like Benjamin's artwork essay, envisions spectacles such as the dance revue as a means of "bestowing [aesthetic] form" on the social reality of the working masses, which is

otherwise systematically invisibilized and glossed over (“Mass Ornament” 79). The mass ornament thus anticipates Benjamin’s idea of mass media like the cinema as a testing ground for modern subjectivities.

But by and large, “The Mass Ornament” harnesses the phenomenon of the dance revue to the purposes of a larger “historico-philosophical allegory” (Hansen, *Cinema & Experience* loc. 1588), and by doing so, the essay downplays a fascination that is still discernible in the text and was openly addressed in his earlier engagement with the subject matter. In 1925, two years before “The Mass Ornament,” Kracauer had expressed “exuberant” praise (Hansen loc. 1588) about a performance of the Tiller Girls in Frankfurt:

What they accomplish is an unprecedented labor of precision, a delightful Taylorism, of the arms and legs, mechanized charm. They shake the tambourine, they drill to the rhythms of jazz, they come on as the boys in blue: all at once, pure duodeci-unity [*Zwölfeinigkeit*]. Technology whose grace is seductive, grace that is genderless because it rests on joy of precision. A representation of American virtues, a flirt by the stopwatch. (Qu. in Hansen loc. 1450-1472).

Here, what will be eventually disambiguated is presented in oxymoronic confusion: “delightful Taylorism,” “mechanized charm.” The later insistence on the revue girls’ “sexless” (*ohne Geschlecht*) *functionality* (“The Mass Ornament” 76) echoes with the current attribution of a “genderless” (*geschlechtslos*) *grace*, but what appears as a lack in the 1927 essay is made out as an interesting appeal in the earlier text, appearing in close conjunction with fantasies of “gender mobility and androgyny (girls dressed as sailors)” that are projected upon the United States as a space of futurity (Hansen loc. 1472). The performative reinscription of the dancers’ bodies, this indicates, need not only be seen in terms of

reification, it may also yield aesthetic pleasure by figuring an exciting rearrangement of established ideas of subject/object relations, as Benjamin, too, would evoke them later on, and its concurrent reimagination of social gender roles. Unlike his later peers of the Frankfurt School, Kracauer does not draw an explicit connection between the spectacle of commodified and exposed female bodies at display and the profession of prostitution, although “the association between actresses and prostitutes lingered well into the twentieth century, and certainly tinted the mainstream public perception of chorus girls” (Cantu 46, cf. Rodger 174-76). While Kracauer’s insistence on the ‘desexualization’ of dancers’ bodies chimes, thus, with a larger contemporary discourse on prostitution as reification (Smith 18-36), in the earlier text it also signals a notion of ‘desexing,’ an ambiguation of sex and gender identities, which is enveloped in the affects of desire and thrill. The dance revue accentuates the polysemic dynamic of the social reality it emanates from—turning the routines of Taylorism into delight, technology into charm, girls into boys, and transforming the streamlining forces of automation through the investment of affect.

1925: Giese

Kracauer’s reflections on the ‘mass ornament’ are often short-circuited with Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935) or Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936) to signal the dark collusion of automation, mass movement, and totalitarian streamlining (see exemplarily Meurer). Yet even though fascism’s ideological aestheticization of the masses may be already intuited in this text, it is not at its core. Instead, the text responds critically to the uneven economic prosperity of the Weimar period and the period’s fashionable ‘body

culture' in its display of organizational prowess and psychosocial fitness (Burt 72-85). But still, if one reads Kracauer's essay side by side with Fritz Giese's *Girllkultur*, a text that appeared two years earlier and that served as Kracauer's sounding board, "The Mass Ornament's" prescience of the compatibility of Weimar's amalgamation of gymnastics and aesthetics and the later reactionary purposes of a totalitarian regime stands out. Fritz Giese's prognostic skills on the other hand seem to be pitifully poor. Significantly, Giese dismisses the 1925 movement of the so-called "'Swastika-bearers' (*Hakenkreuzler*)" as "politically not very impressive" (62, my translation, here and throughout) and wagers that in contrast to the United States, Germany would not stand much of a risk of being torn apart by the 'race question': "After all, who can make claims to race purity in Germany?" (63).

To complicate matters further, Giese's concern with possibilities of optimizing social processes, labor routines and the human being, and his enthusiasm about eugenics resonate with core elements of the Nazi ideology. And indeed, the school of psychotechnics, of which Giese was a major representative, came to be appropriated by the fascist state apparatus in Germany in the late 1930s. If one reads *Girllkultur* with the immediate future in mind, consequently, the text clearly falls behind Kracauer's. But at the same time, Giese's text reveals a sense of mass culture's broad horizon of possibilities that differs interestingly from all previously discussed texts, precisely because it is less concerned with (and aware of) the impending danger of fascist cooptation and thus explores mass culture's aesthetics of automation and serialization with far less reservations. This text thus serves as my gateway to an equally untrammelled American discourse on the subject matter that both differs strikingly from and resonates interestingly with the larger Weimar approaches.

Giese's work needs to be seen in close conjunction with other liberal advocates of a 'modern' psychology such as Hugo Münsterberg in the USA or Robert Musil in Austria, who

all were interested in exploring methods of organization and management that responded to the processes of proliferation, distraction, and dispersal characterizing modernity (Rieger 156-192, Fleig 63-78, Schrage). They thus constitute a backdrop to Walter Benjamin's assumption that the media of modernity such as, most prominently, film impact directly on the human sensory apparatus (Pethes). Giese's *Girllkultur* aims to expand the psychotechnical considerations "also and especially to the aesthetic realm" (Rieger 92, my translation), and to couch the phenomenon of the American 'Girls'—these "cleverly commercialized little machines" (Giese 17)—in globally comparative terms as an index of modernity (Rieger 126-28).

Unlike the critics of the Frankfurt School, Giese does not measure the aesthetics of mass culture against a classical bourgeois aesthetics with its shortcomings and strengths, but exclusively in terms of its resonance with the contingencies of modern societies, as a practical exercise to accommodate the individual to the capitalist agenda of efficiency and acceleration. Giese is convinced that there is no way around industrial modernization. The future, he holds, will be shaped by a regime of normalization, serialization, standardization, and typification: "The training of the serial man to serial labor: this may at first glance be upsetting, but it is an ineluctable imperative" (86). The question, consequently, is not how to prevent the inevitable, but how to shape the forces of the future in ways that meliorate their totalitarian impulses, allowing for diversity and specificity.

To this end, *Girllkultur* does not only pursue those elements of a contemporary 'body culture' that chime well with what is seen as the inevitable agenda of the future. The study also—if much more tentatively—attends to resistant, or rather: recalcitrant dimensions in this larger sphere of cultural expression, associating these stoppages in the system with a "typically Anglo-American" aesthetics of eccentricity (94). While the 'American' revue girls,

for Giese like for Kracauer, signal the business spirit of a smooth and efficient execution of a given protocol, at the same time:

it can very well happen with the girls that elements of grotesque bizarreness come to the fore. One example: There are images of Gilda Gray in a man's jacket, without pants, only with little silk stockings half rolled down. And above this one sees instead of the male chest a shimmering female bosom; and the maid herself is smoking angularly-daringly (*schiefwinkling-frech*) the cigarette: a mix of mischievous perversity and harmless seeming cant. Such strange, typically unartistic attitudes can be found more frequently over there than here. The inclination to the grotesque is big, stronger than here, because the general intelligence is more alert. (95)

In this acknowledgment of the 'queer' dimension of an American entertainment culture and its gender performances, Giese strikes a markedly different tone than Kracauer in the "Mass Ornament," corresponding, instead, to Kracauer's earlier observation of an androgynous versatility in the revue girls. Giese just touches upon this dimension, which he sees as latent, at best, in the German 'Girlkultur,' and he does not reflect upon the affective dimensions of the 'eccentricities' he maps at all. But we shall see that in the American reflections on mass culture it is precisely gender performances—and here particularly inversions, fusions, and hybridizations of normative constellations and coordinates—that are called up time and again to articulate the specific aesthetic potential of the mass cultural.

1924: Seldes/Wilson

The subtitle of Fritz Giese's 1925 study *Girlkultur —Comparisons between American and European Rhythm and Life Feeling*—could, in many respects, serve as a motto to many other writings of the time. The German intellectuals of the Weimar era and the following decades looked at the mass culture of the United States as a semaphore of things to come. At the same time, their American peers tend to address the same subject matter under the insignia of nostalgia and loss. The coterie of bohemian New York critics and artists who frequented vaudeville halls, movie palaces, and burlesque theaters in the 1920s, and who prided themselves on their unbiased attitude, tended to agree that the grand days of entertainment culture were over or about to disappear. The major concern of this scene was not the commercialization of art, but rather the gentrification of the popular (Gorman 54). Gilbert Seldes, writing about the Keystone slapstick films in his seminal *The Seven Lively Arts*, the book that inaugurated "'popular culture' as a critical category" (North 140, Kammen 83-120), exemplarily expresses a concern that he shared with others who were sympathetic to popular entertainment:

the tradition of gentility, the hope of being 'refined,' has touched the grotesque comedy; its directors have heard abuse and sly remarks about custard pies so long that they have begun to believe in them, and the madness which is a monstrous sanity in the movie comedy is likely to die out.

(20)

In what follows, Seldes pits an older 'straightforward' aesthetic of *action*, which he sees exhibited in vaudeville revues and the film serial, against the emerging 'artificial' aesthetic of *acting*. 'Action' signals fastness, immediacy, and precision, and brings about formats of entertainment that "hadn't heard of psychology, and drama, and art" (279). Seldes' 'action' thus anticipates Benjamin's concept of 'acting' as modulated by the movie

camera rather than the individual actor (and it is of interest, in this context, that Benjamin's few concrete references to films in his artwork essay all seem to point at the pre-classical cinema of the 1900s or 1910s [Hansen, *Cinema & Experience* loc. 2447]). For Seldes this simultaneously raw and machinic quality is what early film genres such as the action adventure serials or slapstick films have in common with the polished performances of the Ziegfeld Follies—all of them are spot-on.

While like all nostalgic reminiscences this one conjures up an ideal that has more to do with the perceived shortcomings of the present than with the perfections of the past (Kammen 117-19), it is significant that what Seldes celebrates about the good old days of unapologetic entertainment in the very first place is its efficiency: it was good because it *worked well*. In doing so, he singles out for praise the very characteristic of mass culture that disconcerted the Frankfurt school critics so much: its operational aesthetics. About the performance of the Ziegfeld Follies Seldes enthuses: "it aspires to be precise and definite, it corresponds to those *de luxe* railway trains which are always exactly on time" (133, cf. Glenn 161).

Seldes initiates his remarks on the aesthetic of the Ziegfeld revues by citing his friend Edmund Wilson, with whom he shared a fascination for the variety scene, although they favored different venues. Wilson, who preferred the downtown burlesque theaters, such as the Music Box Revue or the National Winter Garden, to the fancy Ziegfeld venues (Green 193, see also Tapper 69-100), echoes Kracauer's verdict about the Tiller Girls: "the Follies are frigid—the girls are all straight, the ballet becomes a drill, the very laughs are organized and mechanical" (quoted in Seldes 136-7, cf. Glenn 174). Seldes agrees, but holds that Wilson misses the point. Of course the dance shows are "mechanical," he argues, this is exactly what constitutes both their fascination and their function for the society at large:

I recognize that Ziegfeld [...] is in the main current of our development— that we tend to be a mechanically perfect society in which we will either master the machine or be enslaved by it. And the only way to master it—since we cannot escape it—will be by understanding it in every detail. (137)

This resonates with Kracauer's idea of the ornament as an emblematic figure to map modern reality and with both Kracauer's and Benjamin's conceptualization of distraction as a modern key competence. But with far less reservations than either of these successors, Seldes moves on to subtly reconsider what an "understanding" of modernity would really mean, by presenting mass-cultural entertainment as more than just a tool to master the challenges of modern industrial culture:

The good revue pleases the eye, the ear, and the pulse; the very good revue does this *so well that it pleases the mind*. It operates in that equivocal zone where a thing does not have to be funny—it need only sound funny; nor be beautiful if it can for a fleeting moment appear beautiful. It does not have to send them away laughing or even whistling; all it needs to do is to keep the perceptions of the audience fully engaged all the time, and the evaporations of its pleasures will bring the audience back again and again. (134)

The effect of the dance revue registers here as a truly aesthetic experience in the sense that it does not have a larger purpose, and that it brings about an intense and absorbing affective involvement. At the same time, it is rigorously uncoupled from the parameters of concentration and distanced appreciation, and associated with the open-ended quality of the culture industry that Adorno/Horkheimer would later cast in terms of the "indefinitely prolonged" "promissory note of pleasure." In Seldes' rendition, however,

the contract between audience and performers is not fraudulent, but delivers precisely by keeping its 'promise' open-ended.

Seldes and Wilson may have had different preferences regarding the establishments they frequented, but when it came to the affordances of the dance revue, they seem to have seen eye to eye. This is how Wilson describes a burlesque revue of 1927 at the downtown variety theater Music Box. Given his critique of the Ziegfeld productions as 'frigid' one would expect him to celebrate the cheaper theaters as wild and sensuous. But not so:

What strikes you at first [...] when you are new to this more primitive form of burlesque, is the outward indifference of the spectators. They sit in silence and quite without smiling and with no overt sign of admiration toward the glittering and thick-lashed seductresses who stand on a level with their shoulders and who address them with so personal a heartiness. The audience do not even applaud when the girls have gone back to the stage; and you think that the act has flopped. But as soon as the girls have disappeared behind the scenes and the comedians come on for the next skit, the men begin to clap, on an accent which represents less a tribute of enthusiasm than a diffident conventional summons for the girls to appear again. This is repeated from four to six times for every number in the show. The audience never betray their satisfaction so long as the girls are there; it is only when the performance is finished that they signify their desire to renew it. They have come to the theater, you realize, in order to have their dreams made objective, and they sit there each alone with his dream. They call the girls back again and again, and the number goes on forever. When the leading performer begins to strip, they watch the process in silence, recalling her with

timid applause when she vanishes behind the wings. Finally, she shows them her breasts, but her smile is never returned; nor is there any vibration of excitement when she has finally got down to her G-string—merely the same automatic summons, to which this time she does not respond. (280)

Although this setting is very different from the one evoked by Seldes, Wilson, too, describes a routine, not an uninhibited revelry or wild extravaganza. Neither is this the perverse comingling of sex and commerce that disgusted Adorno and Horkheimer. In Wilson's rendition, the striptease act is characterized by both intensity *and* mechanical habituation. Once more, the scene suggests a contractual agreement reminiscent of the 'business' of prostitution. But here, the men's passive endurance, "each alone with his dream," calls to mind the long history of depictions of female audiences to whom "the dark of the cinema grants a refuge," as Horkheimer/Adorno write (111). Wilson's sketch enacts the space of the theater as an inverted *mise-en-abîme* of the larger order, with the female performers in command, while the male audience appears cowed and remote-controlled: addicts rather than fans. This is not a site of anarchic exuberance and Wilson's depiction is fraught with uneasiness *vis-à-vis* the gender hierarchies at work. But it is not a scenario of streamlined rationalization either, indicating instead that the theatrical space tampers with the order at large, perverting, rendering strange and grotesque the normal and established relations.

1917: Frank

In *Miniature Metropolis*, Andreas Huyssen marks the “miniature” as “a paradigmatic modern form” (*Miniature Metropolis* 2). He counts Kracauer, Benjamin, and Adorno among the major practitioners of this form of expression and emphasizes the fact that these critics’ writings were published in the “feuilleton of major European newspapers or in little magazines” (138). While this publication format does not apply to all of the texts discussed previously, all of them are inconceivable without the sphere of intellectual debate opened up by European and American periodicals. Gilbert Seldes and Edmund Wilson, too, relied heavily on this print market, and here particularly the little modernist magazines, to promulgate their ideas (Golding, Kammen 83-120, Gorman 53-82). In the United States, especially two little magazines made room for reflections on mass culture: *The Dial* (1880-1929), for which Seldes acted as the managing editor and theater critic in the 1920s, and the short-lived *The Seven Arts* (edited by James Oppenheim, Waldo Frank and Van Wyck Brooks, 1916-1917), which provided Seldes and other critics of the 1920s with “a vocational compass” with regard to the coverage of American culture (Kammen 39). It was in the context of the latter magazine that critical reflections on the masses and ‘their’ culture came to be framed “as a problem intrinsic to American rather than European culture,” with the consequence that “the European disdain for the popular [found] its truest elaboration in the culture of the United States” (Beatty 57, cf. Gorman 55-65; Blake 268-76; Hegeman 126-157).

A mission statement drafted by Waldo Frank and quoted by James Oppenheim in *The Seven Arts*’s first issue in 1916 proclaimed this ambition to formulate a particularly *American* aesthetics: “an expression of our American arts which shall be fundamentally an expression of our American life” (52-53). Time and again, the journal’s contributors, and here prominently Waldo Frank and Van Wyck Brooks, expressed their skepticism regarding a cultural scene that seemed more and more sensation-driven and conceptually undirected. In

the July 1917 issue, Frank uses a theatrical review article to venture forth an assessment of the contemporary scene of the performative arts that quickly goes off topic—swerving from a critique of current theatrical plays on Broadway to the “movies.” Frank voices his discomfort with what he sees as a pervasive turn to contrived and artificial articulation (Blake 266-95). But even though the piece is infused with an almost phobic tone vis-à-vis the impositions of mass culture on American aesthetics, its critique is different from later critical assessments, such as Adorno/Horkheimer’s, to which Frank has been compared (Blake 272). His review in all its negativity manages to capture the potential of mass culture precisely because he sees how fundamentally it is going to change the very idea of aesthetics and artistic expression in the United States. Although he differs from Seldes and Wilson in many respects, like them Frank sees mass culture not primarily as a culture of streamlining but as a site of continuous inversion and hybridization. More than any other critic addressed before, Frank is disturbed by mass culture because it is queer.

Writing about stage productions of the day, Frank identifies the abnegation of a “straightforward love-motif” as a fundamental problem. His following examples illustrate that ‘straightforward’ could very well read ‘straight’ here, since he explicitly deplores that “[u]gly and unnatural unions, the exchange of the traditional attributes of each sex to the other and the use of clown brutality with clear erotic sources” invade and infect Broadway theater (357). This is a trend that he also sees at work in the newly evolving format of the screen melodrama, which brews a “set of acidulous and denatured substitutes [...] in place of the no-longer filling love-theme” (360). Where Horkheimer/Adorno would deplore the movies’ putative proclivity to “reduce[.] love to romance” (111) and substitute complex feelings with trite signals, Frank is worried by what he sees as the contemporary performative arts’ dangerous proliferation of affective triggers. While the ‘old’ stage

melodrama may have been over the top and vacuous in its often heavy-handed effort to force together effects and actions, he argues, the new and filmic melodrama is much worse because it does no longer bother to correlate emotions and actions into meaningful assemblages:

They are indeed joined together by no power more subtle or more true than the camera itself. [...] The two-dimensional scene [on the screen] runs one into the next with far greater fluency, far less resistance than was possible with the three-dimensional structure of the stage. All of the tricks of the “movies” encourage the false dramatic logic which we have considered. Its freedom of shifting scenes and character-perspectives: its power of imposing one independent picture upon the other: its license of time and place and its illusory triumphs over nature, play their part. (362)

Frank goes on to explain that this trend is not unique to the movies, but hinges on larger cultural re- (or de-)formations. But the “moving-picture” figures as modernity’s “most satisfying, most gripping, and most expressive art” because it is uniquely suited to the demands of the day—it replicates the “disintegration” at large in its very technique: breaking down larger sequences and coherence into segments, images, shots, that can then be randomly rejoined. The camera interlinks things that do not belong together but “run into each other with [...] fluency” and thus dangerously short-circuits affective dispositions, bypassing reflection.

With this, the camera replicates the contingency of everyday life, and it abandons the ambition to implement a larger order or signal an overarching meaning. Instead it plays tricks that suggest false continuities and correlations. This anticipates, in a negative cast, Walter Benjamin’s insight that the cinema manages to shatter established parameters of

meaning-making and perception, and figures forth new images that are modular, provisory, reworkable, and arbitrary. Both authors attribute mass media with a tenacious and subversive power of their own, the potential to tear loose from representation, looping into an autonomous cycle of ever more intricate (self)-references. But Frank associates the self-referential dynamics of the performative arts, and in particular of the movies, with their sexual politics in ways that go far beyond Benjamin's allegorical conjunction of femininity and modernity.

"Unhealthy" clowns (358) like Charlie Chaplin, Frank notes, turn the force of their humor not against the usual subjects of the powerful, the corrupted and the criminal, but against everybody, especially "the lover, the man and the woman" (359). At the same time, the "musical and 'movie' farces" feature an array of "puny cavaliers, [...] fool-ministers, [...] astringent heroines and [...] raping duennas" who pull the most basic of all certainties, the binary of sexuality and gender, into doubt, and thus contribute to the suppression of the age-old "love-theme," until it "breaks its barrier in perverted forms; and the neurotic, auto-erotic 'show' is the result" (362).

In Waldo Frank's complaint about the omnipresent "huge and aggressive women-clowns" on the stage and screen of his days rings a note of true gender trouble: "Some acute vagary of popular demand is supplying a bumper crop of women with the physical appeal of boys, and of men who act like women. On all sides, the theme of love emerges as if from some impalpable barrier whose repressive power twists it into abnormal guises" (358). The threat of these 'new women' (Frank may have had Marie Dressler in mind) does not consist in the infectious quality of sentimentality and trivialization that Huyssen saw as instrumental for the gendering of the cultural divide, but in the subversion of reliable categories of differentiation and identification. What is epitomized in the camera's random interlinkage of

incompatible 'things' can thus be discerned all over the cultural scene, where it fosters problematical lifestyles and social practices.

1914: Caffin

Mass culture is not a woman, but mass culture seems to be intricately tied up with gendered and sexualized ascriptions. Routinely conjoining what does not belong together, as Waldo Frank observed, mass cultural media display a cultural logic that caters to a sense of possibilities rather than closures, and that enlists social and sexual distinctions not primarily in order to create or challenge hierarchies or normality (although indubitably this also happens), but in order to envision variations and alternatives. The underlying precept is a purely formal one, endowed by the logic of optimization and transgression, and is infused with a sense of contingency. Everything could always also be different.

Even though the simple equation of mass culture as "woman" that Andreas Huyssen drew in 1987 did not stand the test of time, gendered and sexualized imageries (including projections of female sexuality) indubitably play a central role in the conceptualization of mass culture, as we have seen. We have also seen that mass cultural criticism is a male business. Women may have been involved in the production of mass culture, but when it came to its theoretical reflection, they were largely silent. But I will end with a glance at a woman's take on the subject matter, and one that resonates interestingly with the preceding motifs and themes. It is the earliest and most obscure of all the texts under investigation here, and it neither celebrates nor condemns mass culture, but aims to describe.

Of Caroline Caffin not much more is known than that she was born in England, worked as an actor and journalist before getting married to Charles H. Caffin, a journalist and art critic involved, among other things, in Alfred Stieglitz' little magazine *Camera Work*. Caffin was part of the feminist Heterodoxy Club in Greenwich Village and engaged in feminist theater projects (Glenn 137). In 1914, she published *Vaudeville*, a slim study in which she probed the workings of this entertainment scene, mainly by looking at prominent acts and artists and their interactions with audiences.

Justus Nieland, who discusses Caffin's book in his investigation of modernism's politics of affect and the dynamics of 'feeling modern,' accentuates that Caffin operates with an "idiom ill-suited to the Taylorized vaudeville stage" (33), when she approaches vaudeville not as a carefully crafted machinery or industry of entertainment, but as a generator of affect in the close coupling of audience and actors: "[I]t is ever the aim of the Vaudeville performer to seek the chord which shall evoke an answering vibration in his audience and to attune his offering in a key which, in spite of modulations and varying harmonies, shall strike constantly on that string" (Caffin 9). Nieland invokes Teresa Brennan's concept of a "transmission of affect" to capture Caffin's aesthetics as interactive, spontaneous and situational. The actors need to be well attuned to the mood of their audience and play them as they go along. This is what Caffin identifies as the secret of the extraordinary success of Eva Tanguay, the 'Queen of Vaudeville' whose career spanned the entirety of the contemporary mass-cultural landscape—from the burlesque stage to the Ziegfeld revue to the screen. Tanguay, writes Caffin, "does not dance, cannot sing, is not beautiful, witty or graceful, but [...] dominates her audience [...] entirely" through her "almost breathless intensity" (36) and "alive, nervous, vital" performance (37): "It seems as if the exuberance of

her intense vitality radiates through its raffish aureola, setting the surrounding atmosphere agog with vivacity” (37).

Tanguay’s “electric vigor” (37) is not explained in terms of control—as in Wilson’s description of the burlesque theater, in which the strip dancer plays the male audience at will—but attributed to the artist’s particular ‘feel’ for the performative situation, in which, as Justus Nieland writes, a “plasticity of identity” (45) comes to the fore that allows the vaudeville star to ingeniously “melt” from one “soft, diaphanous personality” into another (Caffin 138). In the case of Tanguay, Caffin identifies this pliability of personality explicitly with the imperatives of commodification. Tanguay, she contends, is a perfect projection surface, the “foundation [...] on which to raise a perfect sky-scraper of illusion,” an incarnation of the “cult of self—Advertisement!” (40).

But Caffin does not stop short at this interlinkage of the economic principles of acting and business, identifying, eventually, gender identity itself as one of the most prominent currencies in the theatrical economy—and in the cultural exchange system at large. In the 1910s, female to male cross-dressing was still a routine practice on the vaudeville stage and film screen (Rodger 9-11; Horak). This routine was not associated with non-normative sexualities at the time, but it was affected by a pervasive critique vis-à-vis gender-performances on stage. A vaudeville star like Vesta Tilley, who “must have spent nearly half of her life dressed in masculine garments” (Caffin 157), thus needed to regularly reconfirm her (feminine) off-stage ‘persona’ in contrast to her (masculine) on-stage act (Rodger 179) and did so by vociferously distancing herself from “mannish women” (Rodger 177).

Caffin, apparently, felt that this distancing act worked well when she attributed Tilley’s success to “the femininity of her personality. She is not mannish, and her point of view is not that of a man, though she has an understanding of it” (161). This ‘understanding’

resonates with the 'understanding' of revue audiences that Gilbert Seldes lauded later on—it does not work by way of rational penetration, but rather enacts an intuitive and affective approximation that is characteristic of and dependent on the confined space of the theater stage. Younger cross-dressers like Kathleen Clifford or Kitty Donner, who are mentioned cursorily in Caffin's book, would play with this sense of exceptionality by combining the teases of cross-dressing and striptease, one performative convention canceling out the provocation of the other: "Both of these acts would be seen as respectable because the performance context justified their disrobing and because that part of their act also served to reinforce their femininity and reassure their audiences" (Rodger 176). Here, the quick succession of an ambiguation and hyperbolic reassertion of gender identities turns gender into a performative 'act' not so much in order to accentuate the category's constructedness, but in order to keep the game of substitution afloat, figuring forth social roles as momentary configurations and fleeting effects. In this context, obviously incompatible realities are displayed not with the aim of overthrowing the dominant system of meaning-making but to point at some of its more exciting niches and corners. As sexological ideas of gender and sexuality as 'identities' would gain ground in the United States in the 1910s and 20s, these playful stagings of diversity changed their significance (Horak 93-117), and mass-cultural performances of gender and sexuality shifted gears. But we need to bear these early performance practices and their theoretical resonances in mind to understand what mass cultural aesthetics *also* was, and maybe what entertainment culture is becoming again today.

Coda

In 2006, Henry Jenkins contended that “YouTube represents for the early 21st century what Vaudeville represented in the early 20th century,” detailing striking analogies in the performance cultures of the turns of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Jenkins emphasized the subversive potential of the popular practices then and now, while I am interested in their social functions and aesthetic repercussions, which may, at times, be subversive of extant hierarchies and conventions, but more often aim to chart and test the larger structures of meaning-making and organization rather than undermining them. Particularly the second part of this project—the testing out of possibilities—is something that drew much critical attention but was nuanced and evaluated very differently depending on who approached the subject matter against what backdrop. The history that I tried to sketch here, could have been told in a more conventional—chronological—fashion, and would then have probably evinced the gradual formation of an awareness that mass culture is tied up with politics and capitalism in ways that makes it inevitably complicit. But telling the story backwards discloses another trajectory, in which what ended up obscure and submerged is becoming increasingly more conspicuous. In this reading, mass culture does not figure as a bold counter-force to industrial streamlining, but rather sounds an aesthetic counterpoint by opening up, time and again, if spuriously so, options and visions that rearrange and revisit what tends to be taken for granted. By looking back at the period between the 1940s and 1910s, we thus may witness a disappearance act in reverse. A return.

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