

COLLISION. New Media, Old Theory, and Critical Self-Encounter on the Internet

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Abstract

Frankfurt School thinkers were among the first to reflect upon mass culture under capitalism as an aesthetic–political force, proposing that mass cultural forms may either iterate or subvert the normative perspective of an audience. In our present attempts to grasp the aesthetic–political consequences of contemporary mass culture, it seems wise not only to retrace the history of this inquiry, but also to mine it. Drawing upon Siegfried Kracauer’s 1925 essay “The Mass Ornament,” I consider the aesthetic–political force of digital graphics interchange formatting, or the GIF. I suggest GIFs are a hyperbolic expression of the phenomenon Kracauer diagnosed as the “mass ornament”: an aesthetic that both informed and exposed the connection between material reality and a way of seeing. On Kracauer’s account, the mass ornament was iterative of a normative perspective, but it also invited the possibility of critical self-encounter among its audience. Retracing his diagnosis of the mass ornament, I submit Kracauer offered a heuristic that is illuminating for us today as we theorize the aesthetic–political impact of the GIF.

Keywords

Frankfurt School, Mass Ornament, Graphics Interchange Format, Digital Culture, Capitalism

Concern about the consolidation of perspective in mass culture under capitalism is as old as analogue. In articles such as Siegfried Kracauer’s 1925 “The Mass Ornament,” Walter Benjamin’s 1935 “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” and in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s 1944 book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Frankfurt School critical theorists reflected upon mass culture as an aesthetic–political force. This force is the power of film, photography, newspaper, and radio to

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extinguish or introduce subversive perspective through collective reception. In present attempts to grasp the aesthetic–political consequences of contemporary mass culture, and in particular, the ways of seeing that digital media cultivate or discourage, it seems wise not only to retrace the history of this inquiry, but also to mine it. Film and media scholar Heidi Schlüpmann argues that strategies of thought bequeathed to us from early critical theory “regain their actuality in the encounter with digital technology,” which in turn can forge a path for aesthetic–political reflection on digital culture (2014, 4). In what follows, I explore one such path.

Drawing upon Kracauer’s critique of early-twentieth-century mass culture, I consider the kind of perspective encouraged by digital graphics interchange formatting (GIF). GIFs are standard image formats, first developed for the internet and now regularly used in communications across digital media. GIFs consist of blocks of pixels that alternate repeatedly, and the resulting appearance is like a truncated film clip infinitely reiterated. I draw a parallel between the GIF and an early feature of twentieth-century mass culture Kracauer diagnosed as the “mass ornament”: an aesthetic form that both informed, and exposed, the connection between the Weimar Republic’s material reality and a way of seeing. On Kracauer’s account, the mass ornament was iterative of a normative perspective, but it also invited the possibility of reflexive reckoning among its audience. I draw upon Kracauer’s study of the mass ornament as a heuristic for theorizing the aesthetic–political impact of the GIF.

Section One of this Collision examines Kracauer’s “The Mass Ornament” (*Das Ornament der Masse*) which originally served as a review of the Tiller Girls for the daily newspaper the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. The Tiller Girls were a famous precision dance company that performed all over the Western world, appearing in films such as *Half Shot at Sunrise* (1930); they also inspired derivative dance troupes such as the Alfred Jackson Girls and the Hoffman Girls, and later, the iconic choreography of Hollywood director Busby Berkeley.² Kracauer links precision dance to the workplace, suggesting the former mirrors the Taylorist principles that dominated Germany’s labor force during the Weimar Republic. Taylorism (often referred to as Fordism in the US context) is a formula for a production process intended to increase efficiency, and is characterized by fracturing work into nu-

2 For more on the legacy of the Tiller Girls, see Donald (2007) and Vernon (1988). For a visual sample of the Tiller Girls’ performance, see their appearance in the 1930 film *Half Shot at Sunrise*.

merous simple tasks to be completed in rapid succession.³ On Kracauer’s account, the mass ornament is the aesthetic singularity that surfaces in the analogy between the Tiller Girls’ choreography on one hand, and the Taylorist workplace on the other. Section Two develops Kracauer’s account of the mass ornament as a double-edged, political–aesthetic force. He imagined the mass ornament could performatively inform and normalize the ubiquity of Taylorist principles in the Weimar Republic. But, paradoxically, every performance also offered viewers an opportunity for critical self-encounter: an opportunity to unmask and identify that ubiquity. In light of this, Section Three advances an application of Kracauer’s theorization of the mass ornament to the GIF. Drawing a parallel between the aesthetic of the GIF and the principles of digital Taylorism, I suggest the former may be interpreted as a hyperbolic expression of Kracauer’s mass ornament.

I.

Upon viewing the Tiller Girls’ performance, Kracauer describes the dancers as “no longer individual,” but instead, crowded assemblages of former women ([1925] 1995, 75–76). As the dancers condense into geometric figures, their movements become nothing more than the “plastic expression of erotic life” (76). Kracauer bypasses any comparative terms that might allow the Tiller Girls to maintain their integrity as subjects, choosing instead language that emphasizes the transformative power of the choreography to denature its performers. An examination of the original German text can help illustrate this point: the Tiller Girls are not like indissoluble girl clusters, they “are ... indissoluble girl clusters [*unauflösliche Mädchenkomplexe*]” ([1925] 1963, 50; my translation). Their choreography is not analogous to mathematics in its exactitude; rather, their movements “are demonstrations of mathematics [*deren Bewegungen mathematische Demonstrationen sind*]” ([1925] 1963, 50; my translation). The Tiller Girls do not resemble “sexless bodies in bathing suits”; rather, Kracauer writes, they “are composed of thousands of bodies, sexless bodies in bathing suits” ([1925] 1995, 76). And when they dance, the Tiller Girls “are mere

3 Taylorism was implemented heavily in Germany in conjunction with the Dawes Plan after the Treaty of Versailles and came to dominate the Weimar Republic’s economic operation in the postwar period. For more on Taylorism, see Nelson (1980). For more on the Dawes Plan, see Young (2008).

building blocks [*Elementen zusammengestellt*],” component parts “and nothing besides [*nichts außerdem*]” ([1925] 1963, 51; my translation). With this phrasing, Kracauer signals the Tiller Girls perform an ontological shift upon dancing. They were recognizable as human beings, now they are something different:

The Tiller Girls can no longer be reassembled into human beings after the fact. Their mass gymnastics are never performed by the fully preserved bodies, whose contortions defy rational understanding. Arms, thighs, and other segments are the smallest component parts of the composition. (Kracauer [1925] 1995, 78)

Kracauer’s description slices the dancers into stray limbs and reorganizes them in the mind’s eye as if in a kaleidoscope. His macabre assertion that this dance can, “never be performed by fully preserved bodies,” suggests the Tiller Girls are, paradoxically, constitutively dismembered. This choreography demands a mobilization of the dancers’ bodies that achieves the overall effect of an inhuman representation: they are assembled to appear disassembled.

Kracauer conjures the image of the audience who, upon watching the Tiller Girls, delight in and mirror the pattern before them:

The regularity of their [the Tiller Girls’] patterns is cheered by the masses, themselves arranged in the stands in tier upon ordered tier . . . The bearer of the ornaments is the mass and not the people . . . Only as parts of a mass, not as individuals who believe themselves to be formed from within, do people become fractions of a figure. (76)

There is a comparison between the Tiller Girls’ choreography, which reduces women to a series of generic, interchangeable body parts, and the architecture of a stadium built to funnel and corral anonymous crowds. Both dancers and audience thus share a kind of embodied reality in the moment of performance, for both enter the “mass” only as “fractions of a figure” rather than “people.” Yet, Kracauer also signals there is a more comprehensive recognition that occurs between the Tiller Girls and their audience; a deep identification that is, strangely, pleasurable. He writes, “the *aesthetic* pleasure gained from the ornamental mass movements is *legitimate*” (79, emphasis in original). For Kracauer, the audience has a positive response to the Tiller Girls precisely because the dance resonates with their own reality beyond the stadium. Kracauer outlines this resonance explicitly, declaring the Tiller Girls’ choreography is “conceived according to rational principles which the Taylor system merely pushes to their ultimate conclusion” (79). Finding Taylorist sensibility in the

Tiller Girls' dance is not a coincidence, he asserts, for the kickline is the "aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires" (79). Just as the Girls' dancing limbs strike a series of poses with well-coordinated precision, laboring hands at the conveyor belt repeat simple tasks in rapid succession: "The legs of the Tiller Girls answer [*entsprechen*] hands in the factory" ([1925] 1963, 54; my translation). Here, one "answers" the other, in the sense of fulfilling or solving; dance completes labor, labor completes the dance. Between the Tiller Girls and the production line then, time, space, and bodies are distributed with a correspondence that signals one ultimate aesthetic singularity. Kracauer writes, "the structure of the mass ornament reflects that of the entire contemporary situation . . . Like the pattern in the stadium, the organization stands above the masses, a monstrous figure whose creator withdraws it from the eyes of its bearers, and barely even observes it himself" ([1925] 1995, 78). Which is to say, the choreography of the mass ornament cyclically iterates and informs a fundamental aesthetic organization, "a monstrous figure," shared between entertainment and work in the Weimar Republic.

II.

In her study of Kracauer's piece, film and media scholar Miriam Bratu Hansen notes the essay has been criticized for its reductionist analogy between precision dance and the factory. Such criticism, however, fails to acknowledge that the relationship Kracauer delineates is neither literal nor obvious, but rather heuristic and symptomatic (Hansen 2012, 50). When Kracauer reviewed the Tiller Girls in 1925, the connection between the kickline and the assembly line had more or less already become a conventional motif in German culture, notably with Fritz Giese's illustrated ode to *Girlkulture*, or "Girl Culture,"⁴ published the same year. This motif, however, remained stuck in the binary discourse of *Amerikanismus*, which either welcomed precision dance as a new "culture of training" or decried it as a manifestation of standardization and loss of individuality (Hansen 2012, 51). In contrast to either enthusiastic or pessimistic accounts, Hansen suggests Kracauer assumed a "dialectical stance toward the phenomenon, reading it as an index of an ambivalent historical development . . . from within a Marxist critique of capitalism" (51). Which is to say, Kracauer's critique of the Tiller Girls and the mass ornament is not evaluative. Rather,

4 My translation.

he reads mass cultural products as indexical, that is, as signs pointing to a larger material context.

In addition to reading mass culture from within a Marxist critique of capitalism, Kracauer's position is also developed from within a feminist critique of patriarchal gender norms under *Girllkulture*. For on Kracauer's account, representations of women's bodies as "Tiller Girls" specifically, was also symptomatic of capitalist development and the Republic's place in history. In other words, the increasing movement of women post World War One into white collar workplaces dominated by Taylorist management principles, and the cultural re-rendering of women's bodies into disassembled "girls" under *Girllkulture*, is not a coincidence for Kracauer. The Tiller Girls are not randomly chosen, empty signifiers in his essay, a point that is made more salient upon further investigation of Kracauer's oeuvre.⁵ Rather, as I have argued elsewhere,⁶ Kracauer's critical meditation on *Girllkulture* and its association with feminized, white collar labor is part and parcel of his anti-capitalist critique.

But even if Kracauer's work rests on a proto-Marxist-feminist assumption about the totality of patriarchal capitalism, his essay does not echo the model of base and superstructure. Rather, as Hansen notes, Kracauer borrows from the language of psychoanalysis, using it loosely to theorize about ideology as the aesthetic sensibility of a public unconscious. For, like a curious dream, the simultaneous omnipresence and occlusion of both capitalism and patriarchy in "the mass ornament" takes the form of a paradox to be deciphered (Hansen 2012, 51). Kracauer writes: "The production process runs its secret course in public," meaning it is both present, and completely unnoticed ([1925] 1995, 78). Indeed, Kracauer famously opens "The Mass Ornament" by claiming that "the inconspicuous surface-level expressions" of an epoch yield more substantial insights about "the position that epoch occupies in the historical process" than the "epoch's judgements about itself" (75). In other words, superficial mass culture is valuable precisely because of its thoughtless nature, which is to say it is an uninhibited expression of the material tendencies of the moment: it is the perfect mirror.

Hence, despite criticism of the mass ornament from both Marxist and feminist perspectives, Kracauer is reluctant to simply condemn it. Hansen argues that Kracauer "leaves the space of the author and ideal beholder

5 See for example, "The Little Shopgirls go to the Movies" ([1927] 1995); *The Salaried Masses* ([1930] 1998); "Working Women" ([1932] 1994); and "Girls and Crisis" ([1931] 1994).

6 See Renault-Steele (2016) and Renault-Steele (2017).

open for the empirical subjects who are present at these displays and to whom they are addressed” (Hansen 2012, 53). In other words, for Kracauer, collective reception of the mass ornament could go either way: it could simply iterate the audience’s reality, or it could trigger a re-examination of that reality in a moment of critical self-encounter. The latter may occur because mass culture (as opposed to a kind of cultural product created through the pure introspection of the artist) uniquely surfaces unexamined collective tendencies and places them right before us, creating a ripe opportunity for candid reckoning: “No matter how low one gauges the value of the mass ornament,” Kracauer writes, “its degree of reality is still higher than that of artistic productions which cultivate outdated noble sentiments in obsolete forms” ([1925] 1995, 79). Mass culture is “low brow,” but on Kracauer’s account, its capacity to speak to the larger material situation from which it emerges makes attending to it extremely important. Mass culture alone has the capacity to provoke the kind of reflection that is a precondition for making collective change in the first place. In this way, popular culture in fact bears the responsibility of all art: “When significant components of reality become invisible in our world, art must make do with what is left, for an aesthetic presentation is all the more the less it dispenses with the reality outside the aesthetic sphere” (79). In other words, art must draw upon a reality outside of itself in order to render visible, and submit to re-examination, the perspective that naturalizes that reality.

III.

Kracauer’s early work is rooted in the culture of Weimar-era Germany, which means it is also necessarily about analogue cultural forms. Nevertheless, elements of his work are still useful for contemporary scholarship on digital culture. In his 2012 essay “In Kracauer’s Shadow: Physical Reality and the Digital Afterlife of the Photographic Image,” Lutz Koepnick argues for the underappreciated material continuity between analogue and digital photography. In light of this continuity, he argues Kracauer’s analysis of the former ought to be extended to the latter. Apart from the technical details of the comparison between analogue and digital photography—which Koepnick does demonstrate in full—he emphasizes that the importance of his comparison lies with a slightly different series of questions about the nature of digital materiality and its implications. This approach is inspired by Kracauer’s own studies:

The decisive question instead is how the digital in photography causes us to readdress the very notion of medium specificity, and how we should think about the relation between the . . . material makeup of a medium and its representational registers, its vernacular uses, and its artistic possibilities . . . Kracauer's work offers critical answers to these questions: answers that not only complicate our notion of a medium's materiality but also help realize critical continuities between analogue and digital forms of photographic practice. (Koepnick 2012, 114–16)

Koepnick argues that studying Kracauer's approach to the analogue photograph enables one to ask complex questions about the materiality of digital photography in the first place. This in turn, allows for the possibility of an illuminating comparison between the two allegedly distinct forms.

Ostensibly, Koepnick's insight about Kracauer's work applies when considering other forms of digital culture as well, including the GIF. Yet, there is still more about Kracauer's unique brand of materialism that makes his work of specific use here. This is what Hansen calls Kracauer's "*modernist materialism*," an influence she attributes to Marxian theory but also Jewish Gnosticism (Hansen 2012, 36–45; emphasis in original). For Hansen, Kracauer's modernist materialism is evident in three distinct yet related motifs in his writing, the first of which—his focus on the quotidian as a site of cultural critique—is most relevant here. Kracauer's penchant for the commonplace, the "detritus of history," she writes,

led Benjamin to characterize him as a (Baudelairean) chiffonnier, a "rag-picker." But he could have just as well have compared him to contemporary artists who deliberately chose ordinary, worthless, or devalued materials for their collages (such as Hannah Höch, Marianne Brandt, or Kurt Schwitters) or to the Dadaists readymades and the happenings that polemically exposed the contradictions of aesthetic hierarchies of value. (43)

Kracauer's modernist materialism is thus characterized by attention to superficial mass cultural products and a rejection of bourgeois, idealist cultural forms. Indeed, Kracauer introduces the Tiller Girls as products of American "distraction factories" ([1925] 1995, 75), which Hansen notes is a pejorative term in the "dictionary of the educated bourgeoisie" (2012, 44). The Tiller Girls represented glitzy, tawdry entertainment for the growing white-collar class, which meant they were an ideal subject for Kracauer's critique. This ethos makes Kracauer a natural ally in the attempt to understand digital materiality in the case of the GIF.

For instance, there are at present 35,200,000 results on Google for GIFs of the 1990s British pop group Spice Girls.⁷ A number of top GIFs are cut from the 1996 music video of their hit song “Wannabe.” In one of these GIFs, the five singers stand together on a staircase, bouncing their right legs, hands on hips, nodding in unison. In another, all five point at the camera and swish their hips, first to the left, then the to the right. In yet another, the singers kick their right feet, stomping the ground all at once while each throws her hands down by her side. Immediately striking is the similarity between the choreography of the Tiller Girls described by Kracauer in “The Mass Ornament,” and the abrupt cycle that constitutes the GIF. Recall that the Tiller Girls’ choreography elaborated upon the form of the kickline, using tightly coordinated, repeated movements among individuals to render large group configurations. Kracauer described the dancers as no longer individuals, but instead as “crowded assemblages of former women.” He slices them into stray limbs, refers to them as “plastic,” and sees a mathematical precision behind their dance. Similarly, these GIFs have an inhuman, mechanical quality. The robotic aesthetic may indeed have been a quality of the original choreography for “Wannabe,” but regardless, the appearance is amplified by the rapidly alternating pixels characteristic of the GIF itself. The singers’ gestures appear accelerated, producing a rhythm that—because it is digital—exceeds the aesthetic of the Tiller Girls’ kick line with hyperbolic speed and precision.

Is it thus plausible that the GIF is an accelerated expression of the Taylorist aesthetic Kracauer saw at work so clearly in the Tiller Girls’ performance? This would imply the digital technology with which the GIF is created allows for an even more perfect expression of the Taylorist aesthetic than the one Kracauer saw accomplished through choreography. However, the claim that the tempo of a GIF replicates and even exacerbates the Taylorist aesthetic appears at first glance to be amiss, inasmuch as Taylorism is a principle of scientific management developed for the age of industrial mass production, not digital mass production. That is, Taylorism was originally developed for a kind of labor shared between industrial machinery and humans working together in factories, not computers and humans working in offices. Nevertheless, Kracauer was well aware that scientific management was used as a tool for organizing multiple kinds of workplaces and labor forces, observing its implementation in

7 123,056 of these particular GIFs can be found on the website *Giphy*. Accessed November 1, 2020 (<https://giphy.com/explore/spice-girls>).

both factories as well as office spaces.⁸ I contend that Kracauer’s recognition of the portability of Taylorism allows us to extend his hermeneutic to the kind of labor associated at present with digital production.

Contemporary labor theorists have coined the term “digital Taylorism” to account for the application of scientific management principles to digital mass production shared between computers and humans.⁹ *The Economist*, for instance, offers numerous examples of digital Taylorism in its 2015 Schumpeter column, including the common practice of slicing clerical work into minute tasks in order to outsource them to freelancers across the globe. The article also observes that digital technology allows for the enhanced micromonitoring of employees’ movement and efficiency. For example, firms now make use of peer-review software that turns performance assessments from an annual ritual into a perpetual trial. Researchers at MIT, the article goes on to note, have invented a “sociometric” badge, worn around the neck, “that measures such things as [one’s] tone of voice, gestures and propensity to talk or listen”; and construction companies use drones to monitor progress remotely on their sites, and if drones are not possible, Motorola makes terminals that strap to workers’ arms to monitor progress. Hence, it appears that digital production in fact allows for an even more intensified implementation of the principles of scientific management than mechanical production did. With digital technology, tasks can be subdivided into even smaller portions and outsourced across an even larger army of employees who are the most tightly regulated workforce in history. One of the most disturbing examples of this was exposed in Scott Simon and Emma Bowman’s 2019 article for *The Verge* (subsequently reported on by National Public Radio) on Facebook’s content moderators. Facebook contracts 15,000 moderators from around the world to manage flagged content on the platform. Despite the tremendously disturbing nature of the content, moderators are offered paltry time to process or heal. In fact, moderators’ time is managed down to the second, they must click a browser extension every time they leave their desk. In addition to two fifteen-minute breaks to use the bathroom and a thirty-minute break for lunch, moderators are given nine minutes of “wellness time” per day, reserved for when they encounter particularly traumatizing content. *Nine minutes* to recover from witnessing the most violent content, and then, moderators must return to their desks to re-

8 Kracauer performs a lengthy study of this in his monograph *The Salaried Masses* ([1930] 1998).

9 For more on this, see Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2010).

view yet more flagged content, or risk termination. Unsurprisingly, some moderators develop post-traumatic stress disorder.

Hence, it is not implausible that digital technology allows for an accelerated expression of twentieth-century scientific management principles in the workplace. We are living in a time when digital technology means that the possibilities for outsourcing labor are unprecedented, contributing, for many, to a permanent precarity in the workplace. Moreover, because of digital technology we are more tightly surveilled than ever before, and therefore, we are even more tightly regulated than laborers were in post-World War I factories or offices. Given this, if we are to read the GIF now in the way Kracauer read the dance of the Tiller Girls in 1925, we may begin to understand the political-aesthetic force of the GIF. The GIF iterates a perspective that is fractured and fitful, a way of seeing only made possible through digital means. The GIF is also symptomatic of the often frenetic, harmful, and dehumanizing way digital technology can shape working life. Viewing the GIF through the prism of Kracauer's mass ornament, we may either naturalize and iterate its aesthetic and the material reality it represents, or we may use it as an opportunity for critical self-encounter. As Hansen notes, whether or not this happens is part of the "undetermined game of history" (2012, 53), wherein the mass ornament may either iterate, or subvert, the normative perspective of the audience.

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