Miroslav Petříček

Philosophy en noir

Rethinking Philosophy after the Holocaust

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www.karolinum.cz
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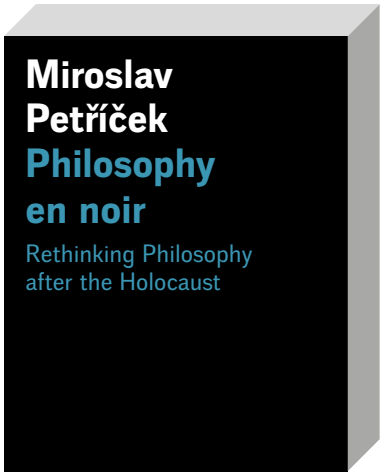

KAROLINUM PRESS

To Aunt Hermanová
and Ms. Doris

CONTENTS

PART ONE
CRISIS

1

Between that which is departing and that which is only now arriving, sleepwalking spirits are materialising. Fantômas, Eduard Raban, von Passenov. Perhaps the key to these ciphers might be that which we call the *event horizon*.

2

Every reader remembers the sentence beneath the illustration of a particularly dastardly deed in an old penny dreadful: "He rang up the Yard about an hour ago and said his chambers had been invaded by Chinamen." Reading on we learn that the burglary had been reported using Bell's "electrical speech machine" by no less than the inventor of the aero-torpedo, plans to which had been seized by the Chinese. A century on and the aficionado of lowbrow literature will already have realised that the book in question is *The Insidious Doctor Fu Manchu* by the English author Sax Rohmer. The book was published in 1913 and was the first in a series spread over more than thirty years, with the last published in 1959 (leaving aside various posthumous continuations). The main character is the eponymous oriental villain who heads a secret organisation of Asians. Fu Manchu's nemesis, Nayland Smith, a colonial police commissioner with extraordinary powers of access and arrest, offers us a description of just how fiendish is Fu Manchu right at the start of the series, when he tells Dr. Petrie, his loyal companion:

> "This man, whether a fanatic or a duly appointed agent, is, unquestionably, the most malign and formidable personality existing in the known world today. He is a linguist who speaks with almost equal facility in any of the civilized languages, and in most of the barbaric. He is an adept in all the arts and sciences which a great university could teach him. He also is an adept in certain obscure arts and sciences which no university of to-day can teach. He has the brains of any three men of genius. Petrie, he is a mental giant."
>
> "But, Smith, this is almost incredible! What perverted genius controls this awful secret movement?"
>
> "Imagine a person, tall, lean and feline, high-shouldered, with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan, a close-shaven skull, and long, magnetic eyes of the cat-green. Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire

> Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources of science past and present, with all the resources, if you will, of a wealthy government – which, however, already has denied all knowledge of his existence. Imagine that awful being, and you have a mental picture of Dr. Fu Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate in one man."[1]

So why do I feel the need to return to what is a pretty bizarre book? In fact I was reminded of the novel, which sketches out the radical threat faced by the whole of European (Western) civilisation, while reading the last published work by Edmund Husserl entitled *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, based on the lectures he gave in Prague and Vienna entitled "Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity". In other words, I was put in mind of a classic of pulp fiction while reading a work that takes the state of emergency as its central theme. Though the crisis Husserl speaks of is manifest on the surface in the blind objectivism of science, on a deeper level it involves a forgetting of the original meaning that Western rationality was born both with and into. Interestingly, this period also saw the emergence of a new literary genre generally deemed lowbrow or trivial, and in this literature too we find what we might call a description of *crisis*, albeit a crisis refashioned into criminal and other such storylines. In the two years either side of Husserl's lecture, two more novels were published featuring Doctor Fu Manchu: *The Trail of Fu Manchu* and *President Fu Manchu*. The thriller by Eric Ambler *The Dark Frontier* (1936) also came out, the plot of which revolves around the discovery of atomic energy being misused in order to create a weapon. The hero, who loses his memory and is only subsequently informed of the events that have taken place, is Professor Barstow, an eminent physicist and expert in atomic energy, who, under the influence of the chance discovery of a volume of pulp fiction, is mentally reincarnated as the superhero

1 Sax Rohmer, *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu,* Methuen, London 1913, ch. 2.

Conway Carruthers and decides to feign collaboration with the armament manufacturers in order to thwart their dastardly plans. But do not be confused by the farfetchedness of the plot – Ambler's book is one of the first examples of the political thriller and masterfully evokes the atmosphere of living under the threat of atomic death, as well as its cultural and political backdrop. And just as Doctor Fu Manchu, though of oriental origin, is a master of Western science, so science and its soft underbelly form the theme of Ambler's book, as is clear from the conversation Professor Barstow has with a representative of the weapon manufacturers:

> "The ideals of science are constructive, not destructive," answered the Professor stiffly. "Science in the past has been shamefully exploited. But it has learnt to protect itself."
> Simon Groom shook his head.
> "No, Professor, you are wrong. While scientists are men, science cannot protect itself. The desire for supremacy which is in the hearts of all men prevents it. Even as I talk to you now, events are proving you wrong. The first atomic bomb has been made!"[2]

We might also note that the ominous collocation "atom bomb" first appears in literature intended for "the widest readership", namely the novel by H.G. Wells *The World Set Free* (1914). This book not only predicts the discovery of atomic energy almost twenty years before it happened (1933), but also the industrial applications that saw nuclear power definitively replace steam in 1953. However, in the book the discovery of cheap, easily available energy (nuclear plants are not only safe but smaller than traditional plants and can be situated everywhere) causes the complete collapse of civilisation, growing unemployment, unrest, and eventually a devastating war and

2 Eric Ambler, *The Dark Frontier*, Fontana Books, London 21967 (1936), ch. 1.

the dropping of an atom bomb on Berlin. The soldier in the plane carrying this new weapon,

> sat with his legs spread wide over the long, coffin-shaped box which contained in its compartments the three atomic bombs, the new bombs that would continue to explode indefinitely and which no one so far had ever seen in action.[3]

During the mid-1920s, H.G. Wells still imagined that a devastating world war would be the first stage in the establishment of a new system in a world liberated from work in which man is transformed into artist. However, after the end of what was the First (bona fide) World War and in the period immediately preceding the Second, such a dream was scarcely any longer feasible.

Eight years after Husserl's lectures on crisis, Graham Greene, whose early novel *A Gun For Sale* came out in 1936, published the next of what he termed his "entertainments", the thriller *The Ministry of Fear*. The book depicts the atmosphere of a kind of general but now unquestionably genuine crisis, firstly by setting the events in a London exposed night after night to German bombing, and secondly by virtue of the fact that what had hitherto been deemed fiction is now undeniably real. In the following passage, the hero of Greene's novel has a dream in which he speaks with his deceased mother and attempts to describe the world in which he is obliged to live:

> I'm hiding underground, and up above the Germans are methodically smashing London to bits all round me. (…) It sounds like a thriller, doesn't it, but the thrillers are like life – more like life than you are, this lawn, your sandwiches, that pine. You used to laugh at the books Miss Savage read – about spies, and murders, and wild motor-car chases, but, dear, that's real

3 H.G. Wells, *The World Set Free. A Story of Mankind*, MacMillan, London 1914, ch. 2, sec. 3.

> life: it's what we've all made of the world since you died. I'm your little Arthur who wouldn't hurt a beetle and I'm a murderer too. The world has been remade by William Le Queux. (…) Let me lend you the *History of Contemporary Society*. It's in hundreds of volumes, but most of them are sold in cheap editions: *Death in Piccadilly*, *The Ambassador's Diamonds*, *The Theft of the Naval Papers*, *Diplomacy*, *Seven Days' Leave*, *The Four Just Men*…[4]

The books he refers to are real and identifiable. William Le Queux is the author of exciting (albeit interminable) novels in which he gives vent to his concern for British politics with a fictional description of the invasion of Britain by the German army. His *Invasion of 1910* came out in 1906. However, in *Spies of the Kaiser* (1909), *Revelations of the Secret Service* (1911), and many other semi-fictional, pseudo-documentary books he exposed the danger to Britain of German spy rings and other forms of international conspiracy. *Death in Piccadilly* is a whodunit from 1936 written by Elliot Bailey, *Seven Day's Leave* is a film (a romantic comedy) made in 1942, and *The Four Just Men* is Edgar Wallace's first novel, written in 1905. This last is especially noteworthy for its ambivalence: the four just men of the title, while murderers of noble origin and method, only liquidate those who represent a menace to society and whom the police do not have enough proof to prosecute. And finally there is Gregory Bellairs, author of detective stories written in the 1930s and 40s, who is possibly present in Greene's novel in the guise of Mrs Bellairs, one of the conspirators.

In order to ease out the links between these sensation novels and Europe's crisis, let us remain a moment with the best known of the authors referred to, Edgar Wallace, the harbinger of this style in many respects. The blurb to the Czech translation of *The Four Just Men*, though referring to detective fiction, captures very accurately the emerging subgenre of pulp fiction, when it says of the author:

4 Graham Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, Penguin, Vintage Classics, pp. 95–96.

> Edgar Wallace is an author with the mind of a genius. This novel, which displays masterly ingenuity, is a good example of his detection skills. The reader's imagination is refined and exercised by the inexhaustible combinations that pervade the complex web of intrigue. One is unable to resist the excitement of being caught up in this detective story. To turn a page of this book is to close the doors of the present and to be swept away from everyday life, to forget everything and to live with Wallace. And a moment spent in Wallace's company is simply priceless.[5]

The "four just men" are actually three (the fourth is hired). The novel is the first of a series. Six books in total feature the same protagonists, the last being *Again the Three Just Men* published in 1929. In the first, the quartet of conspirators attempts to dissuade a British MP from submitting a draft bill on the extradition of foreigners who are in danger of being executed by their political opponents upon returning to their home country. They begin by sending warning letters that mysteriously find their way directly to the table of their addressee. However, the MP is determined and so the subsequent warnings (always announced in advance) are more spectacular: a bomb planted in parliament, a secret visit to a newspaper editor, etc. All of this foments panic in the population at large. The perpetrators are invisible and elude capture: there is no saying where or when they will turn up next. State officials keeping their own private vigil over justice are apoplectic and sense a threat to the very foundations of civilisation itself:

> "It is monstrous," said the Colonial Secretary hotly; "it is inconceivable that such a state of affairs can last. Why, it strikes at the root of everything, it unbalances every adjustment of civilisation."[6]

5 Edgar Wallace, *Čtyři spravedliví* (The Four Just Men), transl. Běla Vrbová-Pavlousková, Julius Albert, Prague 1940.

6 Edgar Wallace, *The Four Just Men*, House of Stratus, Cornwall 2001, p. 72 (ch. VIII).

The inhabitants of London are horrified by the seeming ubiquity and omnipotence of these just men (not even the police can save the life of the MP, who is electrocuted by his telephone), and the atmosphere of the city on the day of reckoning is reminiscent of a state of war or emergency.

> And within an hour there was witnessed in London a scene that has no parallel in the history of the Metropolis. From every district there came a small army of policemen. They arrived by train, by tramway car, by motorbus, by every vehicle and method of traction that could be requisitioned or seized. They streamed from the stations, they poured through the thoroughfares, till London stood aghast at the realisation of the strength of her civic defences.[7]

Edgar Wallace undoubtedly created the prototype, though his was a very free model allowing for considerable variability within a genre it is difficult to put a name to. Perhaps this is why we speak of a "sensation" novel (even though the term was originally applied to Victorian authors), since the category of detective story would be too narrow. The sensation novel sometimes contains the seeds of a political thriller, and in this respect Eric Ambler's precursor was H.C. McNeile (Sapper) in books featuring Bulldog Drummond (the first of which, *Bulldog Drummond: The Adventures of a Demobilised Officer Who Found Peace Dull*, was published in 1920), in which a faint echo could be heard of J. Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, published in 1907. All of these books are about more than merely untangling a criminal plot. The sensationalism of their narratives was not driven simply by an attempt to attract the most readers, nor did it reflect the gradual commodification of literature, a phenomenon very visible in the serialised novels and booklets sold in railway station kiosks referred to by Walter Benjamin[8]. These books also act as

7 Ibid., p. 98 (ch. X).
8 Walter Benjamin, "Kriminalromane, auf Reisen", *Gesammelte Werke* 4.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann – Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vols, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1972–1989.

a mirror, however distorted, held up to that which is already here in that it is in the process of arriving. In their own way, sensation novels model an uncertain and indefinable, yet still real fear – the heart of darkness at the very core of civilisation, something akin to *crisis*.

This disquiet, this testing of the boundaries of the classical whodunit (it was during this time that authors such as Agatha Christie, S.S. Van Dine, Freeman W. Crofts, Dorothy Sayers, et al. published their first books), is perhaps best illustrated in the books of H.C. McNeile, who wrote under the pseudonym Sapper, since as a serving officer in the British Army he was not permitted to publish under his own name. His hero, Hugh Drummond, is a man of action, though it is not only his superb physical condition that distinguishes him from his companions, but also his natural intelligence. His adversary in the first books is Carl Petersen, a criminal mastermind who operates under various different guises but whose modus operandi involves contract work for plutocrats with the aid of puppet conspirators. The sole aim of these plutocrats is to subvert the existing order and benefit from the ensuing chaos. In the very first novel we encounter a Bolshevik revolutionary who has moved to England, where he is bent upon applying his skills:

> I know not what this young man has done: I care less. In Russia such trifles matter not. He has the appearance of a bourgeois, therefore he must die. Did we not kill thousands – aye, tens of thousands of his kin, before we obtained the great freedom? Are we not going to do the same in this accursed country?[9]

In his bruising struggle with the conspirators and their puppet masters, Hugh Drummond is reluctantly reminded of his wartime experiences:

9 H.C. McNeile (Sapper), *Bulldog Drummond*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1920, VII, ch. I.

> He felt singularly wide-awake, and, after a while, he gave up attempting to go to sleep. The new development which had come to light that evening was uppermost in his thoughts; and, as he lay there, covered only with a sheet, for the night was hot, the whole vile scheme unfolded itself before his imagination. The American was right in his main idea – of that he had no doubt; and in his mind's eye he saw the great crowds of idle foolish men led by a few hot-headed visionaries and paid blackguards to their so-called Utopia. Starvation, misery, ruin, utter and complete, lurked in his mental picture; spectres disguised as great ideals, but griming sardonically under their masks. And once again he seemed to hear the toc-toc of machine guns, as he had heard them night after night during the years gone by. But this time they were mounted on the pavement of the towns of England and the swish of the bullets, which had swept like swarms of cockchafers over No Man's Land, now whistled down the streets between rows of squalid houses...[10]

Anarchists continue to undermine civilisation in Sapper's next novel, *The Black Gang* (1922), in which, with the aid of corrupt politicians, they try to hammer "another nail in the coffin of Capital. And, by heaven! A big one"[11] and infect England with Bolshevism. In the third in the series (*The Third Round*, 1923), Carl Petersen muses on the workings of the world and says to his partner in crime and mistress:

> Take Drakshoff: that man controls three of the principal Governments of Europe. The general public don't know it; the Governments themselves won't admit it: but it's true for all that.[12]

10 Ibid., IX, ch. II.
11 Sapper (H.C. McNeile), *The Black Gang*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1922, ch. 5.
12 Sapper (H.C. McNeile), *The Third Round*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1923, ch. 1.

3

"Only from its extremes can reality be revealed," wrote Siegfried Kracauer in 1929 at the start of his study *The Salaried Masses*.[13] However, the same could be said of the relationship between the high and the low, the dominant and the marginalised, and, as the philosophical treatise *The Detective Novel*[14] by the same author shows, the relationship between the sensation novel and serious reflections upon the phenomenon of crisis. Philosophers have displayed but a sporadic interest in lowbrow literature. However, along with Walter Benjamin, who alludes to the novels of Gaston Leroux, Frank Heller and Sven Elvestad (highly popular in his day, though whose detective Asbjörn Krag is rather too similar to the master of disguise Nick Carter[15]) and others, Siegfried Kracauer is one of the exceptions. He wrote a study of the detective novel in 1922–25, though only the chapter "Hotel Hall" was published during his lifetime as part of the collection *The Mass Ornament* (1963).

In its own way Kracauer's treatise also aims to diagnose and describe the concept of crisis, and his reading of detective stories provided him with the appropriate language, since the detective traditionally embodies the modern form of rationality. However, Kracauer's diagnosis is also facilitated by his Kierkegaard-inspired ontological differentiation of a higher and lower realm that corresponds approximately to nature and transcendence. Man is the

13 Siegfried Kracauer, *Die Angestellten*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M., 1971 (first published in 1929 in *Frankfurter Zeitung*).

14 Siegfried Kracauer, *Der Detektiv-Roman. Ein philosophischer Traktat*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1979. There is useful material to be found on Siegfried Kracauer in Gertrud Koch, *Kracauer. Zur Einführung*. Junius Verlag, Hamburg 1996; Frank Grunert, Dorothee Kimmlich (eds.), *Denken durch die Dinge. Siegfried Kracauer im Kontext.* Wilhelm Fink Verlag, Paderborn 2009; Nia Perivolaropoulou, Philippe Despoix (eds.), *Culture de masse et modernité. Siegfried Kracauer sociologue, critique, écrivain.* Ed. de la Maison des Sciences de l'homme, Paris 2001.

15 I am also acquainted with Elvestad's work from Czech translations, e.g. *Ples dobrodruhů*, Nakladatelství Vendelina Steinhausera in Pilsen 1921, or *Stíny dvou mužů*, Obelisk, Prague 1925. *Motrose* was translated into Czech by Milena Jesenská (Borový, Prague 1928).

interbeing (*Zwischenwesen*), because humanity is determined both naturally and by its relationship to annunciation and redemption. The locus of the detective novel is (human) reality, a reality that is in crisis because it has lost its relationship to the higher realm, even though it is only this relationship that grants the real any meaning: without this relationship, reality is de-realised. We are afforded a glimpse of this situation by lowbrow literature, which acts as a surface upon which phenomena are recorded (like a photographic negative) without being interpreted and without that which is recorded being deprived of its specificity. In this way, lowbrow literature makes phenomena accessible to diagnostic tools, which are capable, as Benjamin says, of returning the world of the dream to the world of wakefulness, transforming the detective story into *Denkbild* or thought image. This is a crucial concept for Kracauer, by which he defines himself in opposition to the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement and the popularity of reportage that describes reality instead of searching for traces of its design flaws. An illustrative example of this is Kracauer's harsh criticism of the famous "film symphony" *Berlin* by Ruttmann. Kracauer observes that the film aims to encapsulate the metropolis by presenting a series of microscopic individual traits. However, instead of interrogating these traits

> in a way that would betray a true understanding of its social, economic and political structure (...) it leaves the thousands of details unconnected, one next to the other. There is nothing to see in this symphony, because it has not exposed a single meaningful relationship.[16]

The film fails to reveal the connections offered to our gaze by the *Denkbild*, the image of a thought (a thought in the form of an image, a thought-image).

16 Siegfried Kracauer,"Film 1928", in: *Ornament der Masse*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1977. *The Mass Ornament,* transl. T. Y. Levin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2005.

> The *Denkbild* is illustrative reflection and reflected illustration in one. It combines (...) both methods of cognition. Shaping (*Gestaltung*) is permeated by theory, theory is absorbed by shaping. Cognition and experience, reflection and opinion, content and form, or however else this antinomy is referred to, permeate each other. And as they reach their limits, material reality is suddenly transformed into significant image.[17]

The origin of this new instrument of thinking is to be found in the "Erkenntniskritische Vorrede" (Epistemo-Critical Prologue) preceding Benjamin's essay on tragic drama and in his theory of ideas as constellations (ideas are to phenomena as constellations are to stars). The constellation is the tissue of an idea, which is objective in the sense that its parts are determined by concrete phenomena and its organisation expresses the internal logic implied in and distilled from reality. The concept was adopted in the 1930s by Theodor W. Adorno, who formulated more generally the meaning and objective of thinking, which now aims to grasp reality by means of the construction of thought-images instead of concepts. Adorno's interpretation is perhaps the more comprehensible, albeit at the expense of simplifying somewhat the original version propounded by Benjamin. For instance, in "The Actuality of Philosophy" he writes:

> Philosophy distinguishes itself from science not by a higher level of generality, as the banal view still today assumes, nor through the abstraction of its categories nor through the nature of its materials. The central difference lies far more in that the separate sciences (*Einzelwissenschaften*) accept their findings (*Befunde*), at least their final and deepest findings, as indestructible and static, whereas philosophy perceives the first findings which it

17 Helmut Stalder, "Das anschmiegende Denken", in: Grunert –Kimmlich (eds.), Denken durch die Dinge, p. 70; trans. here by Phil Jones. Regarding the term "Denkbild" see Gerhard Richter, *Thought-Images: Frankfurt School Writers' Reflections from Damaged Life*, Stanford UP, Stanford 2007.

alights upon as a sign that needs unriddling. Plainly put: the idea of science is research; that of philosophy is interpretation (*Deutung*).

In this remains the great, perhaps the everlasting paradox: philosophy persistently and with the claim of truth, must proceed interpretively without ever possessing a sure key to interpretation; nothing more is given to it than fleeting, disappearing traces within the riddle figures of that which exists and their astonishing entwinings. The history of philosophy is nothing other than the history of such entwinings. Thus it reaches so few "results". It must always begin anew and therefore cannot do without the least thread which earlier times have spun, and through which the lineature is perhaps completed which could transform the ciphers into a text.

(...)

…the function of riddle-solving is to light up the riddle-*Gestalt* like lightning and to negate it, not to persist behind the riddle and imitate it. Authentic philosophic interpretation does not meet up with a fixed meaning which already lies behind the question, but lights it up suddenly and momentarily, and consumes it at the same time. Just as riddle-solving is constituted, in that the singular and dispersed elements of the question are brought into various groupings long enough for them to close together in a figure out of which the solution springs forth, while the question disappears – so philosophy has to bring its elements, which it receives from the sciences, into changing constellations, or, to say it with less astrological and scientifically more current expression, into changing trial combinations, until they fall into a figure which can be read as an answer, while at the same time the question disappears. The task of philosophy is not to search for concealed and manifest intentions of reality, but to interpret unintentional reality, in that, by the power of constructing figures, or images, out of the isolated elements of reality, it negates questions, the exact articulation of which is the task of science.[18]

18 Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1986, here *GS* I, pp. 334–345. English translation from "The Actuality of Philosophy", *Telos*, vol. 31, 1977, pp. 126–127.

To simplify somewhat: what appears at first sight to be a continuous and straightforward social reality ("existing relations" in Adorno's words) must be deconstructed by means of the isolation of its elements (including those seemingly not worthy of attention) and the rearrangement thereof in order to discover in them something like an "image" rendering visible the contingency of a seemingly unshakeable reality – to expose its crisis. In adopting this cognitive tool, Adorno especially was motivated by Marx (the relationship between the forces and relations of production must be decoded in the form of goods), as explicitly evinced by aphorism 124 of *Minima Moralia*. The same aphorism also makes it clear that he was inspired by the "picture-puzzle" (*Vexierbild*), which was the privileged form of Benjamin's *One-Way Street* (1928). Analysing Antonín Dvořák's *Humoresque* in the essay *Quasi una fantasia*, Adorno writes:

> At one time there used to be a craze for a certain type of puzzle in the entertainment and theatre section of the daily newspapers. They were called picture-puzzles. A caption might read: Can you find the burglar? The picture showed an empty street without any people. A long ladder is leaning against a house, but it too has no one on it. Dark spots of rain are shown falling on the white houses. There is no sign of a burglar. The trick was to turn the page this way and that, sideways or upside down, until you discovered that the lines signifying rain, when taken with a bulky chimney, formed a grimacing gaze which could be arrested.[19]

However, Siegfried Kracauer had already carried out similar operations involving these thought images (*Denkbilder*) in *The Detective Novel*. The detective brings to light deracinated reason, the policeman the ineffectually functioning machine of legality, blindly obeying the law and detached from any relationship with justice. Nevertheless, the figure of the detective is remarkable. It is a cipher of

19 Adorno, *GS* 16, p. 28.

modern society inasmuch as it elucidates that liminal state that is human destiny and which now takes on a very special form. Like the priest before him, the detective is an intermediary. Like the priest, he too relates to the mysterious and secret, he mediates between the covert and the communal. However, while the priest invoked faith (i.e. mediated the relationship to that "higher" realm), the detective relies solely on the *ratio* appropriate to this world and in this way represents modern rationality, reason, which is no longer aware of its limitations and therefore also lacks a sense of morality. In the picture puzzle of the detective novel we can see that rationally fabricated reality, though at first sight cohesive and compact, is in actually fact incomplete and truncated.

Around the same time, Walter Benjamin in his early texts (e.g. "On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy" of 1918 et al.) ponders the possibility of expanding Kant's concept of experience and arrives at the concept of *speculative experience*. For Kant there is no room in experience for the idea of reason. Benjamin wants to show that in the final experience (subordinate to space-time, hence final) the absolute may also be manifest, but – since this is the experience of a finite being – only *indirectly*, *distortedly*, *in a kind of broken way*. Accordingly, this experience must be deciphered.

It is likely that Siegfried Kracauer had this in mind when he writes in *The Detective Novel*: "clouded sense becomes lost in the labyrinth of distorted events whose distortion it no longer perceives."[20] The labyrinth in which modern man loses himself is reality de-realised by rationality, which means that this is not only the realm of finality (because finality in itself is related to a higher realm, for instance to a transcendental idea of justice), but the realm of finality shattered by mechanical rationality. The policeman mechanically obeys the law without relating to the meaning to which it refers. The *ratio* is unmasked as a mere substitute: it is not capable of guaranteeing

20 Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, p. 173.

the meaning of that which it investigates, the events that it reveals, the reality that it explains.

It would be no exaggeration to claim that Kracauer, too, in his own way diagnoses crisis: a crisis of meaning, but also the meaning of crisis and meaning as crisis. However, this can only be corroborated more convincingly if we examine in more detail his *Denkbilder*. That "hotel lobby", for instance. And possibly it will become clearer why Kracauer focused on so-called "trivial" literature, something he hints at near the start of the chapter on the detective novel, when he writes:

> Just as the detective discovers the secret that people have concealed, the detective novel discloses in the aesthetic medium the secret of a society bereft of reality, as well as the secret of its insubstantial marionettes. The composition of the detective novel transforms an ungraspable life into a translatable analogue of actual reality.[21]

The hotel lobby, which is a venue that puts in frequent appearances in the classical detective novel, can be read as the "mirror image of God's house". Man visits here as a guest, but unlike the house of God, which is dedicated to the service of the one whom people wish to encounter, the "hotel lobby accommodates all who go there to meet no one". People are scattered around the lobby and receive their hosts incognito and without question; this is why the hotel lobby does not unite but simply emphasises their dispersal: the community in the hotel lobby is without meaning. Though it is not a quotidian space (man is not at home, he is a guest), in the hotel lobby man finds himself – albeit outside the everyday – *vis à vis rien*: the hotel lobby creates a gratuitous distance from the everyday.

21 Kracauer, *Der Detektiv-Roman*, p. 51.

> In tasteful lounge chairs a civilisation intent on rationalisation comes to an end, whereas the decorations of the church pews are born from the tension that accords them a revelatory meaning.[22]

If, in the pure realm of Man as understood to include that which transcends it, equality is given by the relationship of the last things before the last (I am paraphrasing the title of Kracauer's last, unfinished book *Geschichte – Vor den letzten Dingen*, which was first published in English in 1969 as *History – The Last Things Before the Last* and in German translation as late as in 1971), in the hotel lobby equality is based on the "relation to nothingness", i.e. an equality that means emptying out within the framework of rational socialisation.

> Here, the visitors suspend the undetermined special being, which, in the house of God, gives way to that invisible equality of beings standing before God (out of which it both renews and determines itself) by devolving into tuxedos.[23]

Tranquillity reigns in the hotel lobby, a solemn stillness holds court "that is the pride of all large hotels", as Thomas Mann wrote in his *Death in Venice*. However, the "contentless solemnity" of this quiet in the hotel lobby is a

> silence that abstracts from the differentiating word and compels one downward into the equality of the encounter with the nothing, an equality that a voice resounding through space would disturb. (…) Remnants of individuals slip into the nirvana of relaxation, faces disappear behind newspapers, and the artificial continuous light illuminates nothing but mannequins.[24]

22 Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, p. 178.
23 Ibid., p. 181.
24 Ibid., p. 183.

The hotel lobby is a cipher, the key to which is the house of God, but a hotel lobby of the kind that appears in detective novels. The ciphers are not to be found in the depth of (high) art, but take shape on the surface, in trivial, i.e. superficial literature. Kracauer discovered *Oberfläche* (the surface) as text, and it is for this reason that his best known essay "The Mass Ornament" explains wherein resides the importance of the surface in a modern age permeated by rationalism. At the start of the essay there are dancers produced by the entertainment industry, then dance revues, and finally mass gymnastics in stadiums reported on by weekly film magazines: on the screen we can see "ornaments (…) 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."[25]

It is these patterns, these ornaments and monograms, that could be termed a "cipher" or *Denkbild*, carried by the very "mass" that participated in the creation of these ornaments as material, because people are merely the building blocks of ornament, fragments of some image. The ornament does not grow from within them or within the community, but "appears despite them". In this sense it *creates* something that can be made legible. "Creates" – in many senses of the word. The cipher can be read: the ornament is rational, it consists of the geometrical degrees and circles of Euclidian geometry, of the waves and spirals of physics, it is laid out in accordance with the rational principles of the organisation of labour, it is the aesthetic reflex of the rationality of production. But it is a cipher, which is why Kracauer writes:

> No matter how low one gauges the value of the mass ornament, its degree of reality is still higher than that of artistic productions which cultivate out-

25 Ibid., p. 76.

dated noble sentiments in obsolete forms – even if it means nothing more than that.[26]

The ornament qua cipher is ambiguous: by virtue of its abstractness it makes reference to rationality (whose abstractness sets it apart from empiricism). However, that which is beyond the reach of the empirical, which is lost in abstraction, is nothing concrete in the vulgar sense of the word, for we can say that abstraction is simply a distorted form of universality that belongs to transcendence – without abstraction it would be impossible to relate not to the law, but to the idea of justice. However, just to be clear, I would add that Kracauer's topology in *The Detective Novel* is somewhat more complex:

> If an existential tension is to be manifested, the law cannot be the last frontier. Instead, joint being within the sphere of sanctioned forms must retain its connection with the mystery over fixed forms. Since most people remain in a space surrounded by the law, from a sociological point of view attempting this connection is a matter for the individual. This connection takes place in a zone in which the power of the law does not apply without breakage, in the zone of that which contradicts the law and is above it, a zone that conceals mystery and danger within itself. Inasmuch as the law determines the true centre, it must turn away that which contradicts the law in the same way as it itself is impeded by what is above the law. Upper and lower powers outside the law are connected in such a way that the thread runs through the law. The human intermediate therefore demands that the whole life of existential community is played out in two spaces: in the space in which the law exerts control, and in the space in which the law is recognised as conditional.[27]

26 Ibid. p. 79.
27 Kracauer, *Der Detektiv-Roman*, p. 15 (trans. here by Phil Jones).

According to Kracauer, meaning resides precisely in the traces of the non-contingent present in the contingent. As soon as one is torn from the other, reality is meaningless.

Returning to the diagnostics of crisis, we observe certain similarities with Husserl. Here and there its source is rationality that has either forgotten its relationship with the founding idea (Husserl) or with the realm of the non-contingent (Kracauer). However, Kracauer, more expressively than Husserl, considers "objectivism" an important symptom of crisis, especially if it is manifest in a mechanisation pervading not only science but the level of the lived world. Several chapters are devoted to this idea of Kracauer's extensive study on the hitherto unexplored "tribe" of employees,[28] in which he examines the Taylorization of administration in large corporations.

More important (and this applies to both Kracauer and Husserl) is the relationship of "meaning" and history, even if in Kracauer's case this relationship is gradually developed, especially in his last, incomplete work on history from his exile in America.[29] While for Husserl the crisis is situated on the boundary between forgetting and recollecting (it is this irresolution that is the impulse for *Besinnung* in the sense of the clarification of meaning that is somehow here but obscured by scientific achievements), Kracauer, especially in his essay on photography devoted to the mechanism of memory and recollection, speaks of crisis as a "*go-for-broke game of history*".[30] However, unlike Husserl he does not look for a clear therapy (which for Husserl is phenomenology), but rather for an approach appropriate to the situation that appears as crisis. He formulates this approach (present in the title itself) in the essay *Die Wartenden* of 1922.[31]

28 Kracauer, *Die Angestellten*.

29 Siegfried Kracauer, *Geschichte – Vor den letzten Dingen*. In: *Siegfried Kracauer Werke* 4, ed. Ingrid Belke, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 2009. Original ed.: Siegfried Kracauer, *The Last Things Before the Last*. Completed after the death of the Author by Paul Oskar Kristeller. Marcus Wiener Publishers, Princeton 1995 (1. ed. Oxford University Press 1966).

30 Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, p. 61.

31 Kracauer, "Those Who Wait", in: *The Mass Ornament*.

Crisis is defined here as "metaphysical suffering from a lack of some higher meaning in the world" and as residing in an empty space, which is perceived as exile and isolation. This can then lead to extreme relativism (there exists no binding horizon of values or ideas), or even to *horror vacui*. However, this unfortunate state of affairs has a positive aspect: *waiting*. Waiting is "hesitant openness", *zögerndes Geöffnetsein*. This does not entail focusing on the last things, but a receptiveness to what cannot be predicted and what is unenforceable. In this respect the last sentences of the essay are crucial:

> Must it be added that getting oneself ready is only a preparation for that which cannot be obtained by force, a preparation for transformation and for giving oneself over to it? Exactly when this transformation will come to pass and whether or not it will happen at all is not at issue here, and at any rate should not worry those who are exerting themselves.[32]

Kracauer returns from the opposite pole, in a polemic with the spectre of universal history, to the restrained openness displayed by those who wait from the other side in his last book devoted to "the last things before the last". He rejects the idea of the chronological, homogenous, linear time accepted without question by historiography, and on the contrary seeks to understand it as a tissue of various shapes or forms in a synchronous cross-section, i.e. he foregrounds the discovery (inspired by Kubler, the theoretician of ancient art) that contemporary events are in fact mostly asynchronous if they belong to different time series or sequences whose character is always specific (a claim he again corroborates with the example of human memory). From this perspective space-time is the meeting place where unexpected encounters take place between different series of events – he uses the image of a railway station waiting room (not a million miles from a hotel lobby). But for this very reason

32 Ibid., p. 120. Cited in Gertrued Koch, *Siegried Kracauer: An Introduction*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey 2000, p. 117.

historical reality is like that which has no end, something like *Vorraum*, a lobby or waiting room. And this calls for a different way of thinking (*Vorraum-Denken und -Verhalten*) – to remain on this earth and think through concrete things. If the subject of philosophy is to be the "ultimate truths" formulated in complete generality and with a claim to objectivity, and if it is so incontestable that, as such, philosophy has nothing to say of relevance about things pertaining to the lifeworld (Kracauer deliberately uses Husserl's term *Lebenswelt*), then the solution to this dispute can only be the "complementarity principle", i.e. not restricting ourselves to top down thinking, but thinking simultaneously in the opposite direction. Only this corresponds to that human "position in the middle" referred to in the book on the detective novel and which Kracauer now brings into convergence with the lifeworld of phenomenology in which, as he says, man does not deal with the last things but instead with the penultimate things as though they were the last (an idea captured more faithfully in the English rather than the German title of the book on history and historiography). If history is without end, it is deprived even of the aesthetic rescue of the past, the project attempted by Marcel Proust. And so history, like the present, must be viewed through the eyes of the exile, the extreme form of which in Kracauer's last book is Ahasver, the Wandering Jew. But then one thing is related to the other: he who waits is he who accepts his extra-territoriality as the basic human condition.

The immense importance of this shift in accent is not always obvious. In *The Detective Novel* the last reference point is atonement in the theological sense as mediated by the Judaic tradition of Messianism, something Kracauer studied in depth when in 1920–22 he, along with Leo Löwenthal and Erich Fromm, visited the Frankfurt *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus*[33], while in the essay on those who wait and in his last book the relationship to the last thing is character-

33 In this respect see Enzo Traverso, "Sous le signe de l'exteritorialité. Kracauer et la modernité juive". In: Perivolaropoulou – Despoix (eds.), *Culture de masse et modernité.*

ised as "hesitant openness". However, as Kracauer himself writes in a letter, we must turn our back on theology in the interests of theology itself. The emphasis is now on the insuperability of the boundary separating man from the absolute (which excludes any teleological speculation). Those who maintain permanent vigil awaiting the arrival of the Messiah or even want to expedite matters (such as Buber and Rosenzweig through the example of their Bible) are, according to Kracauer, *Kurzschluss-Menschen* or short-circuit people. In brief, history has no end, and yet it has (can have) meaning now as long as the unattainable, since absolute, "idea" is measured at every instant. This is a concept the final seal of which is surely the last sentence of the final aphorism of Adorno's *Minima Moralia* written immediately after the end of World War II:

> The more passionately thought denies its conditionality for the sake of the unconditional, the more unconsciously, and so calamitously, it is delivered up to the world. Even its own impossibility it must at last comprehened for the sake of the possible. But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.[34]

Kracauer's exposure of monograms, that is to say significant patterns, and his reading of the ciphers on the surface of the quotidian in his book *Ornament der Masse* and elsewhere, clearly follows in the tradition of Simmelesque sociology. However, for this very reason it is easier to place his microanalyses within the wider context of "crisis", to a more precise understanding of which Georg Simmel contributed a range of important parameters aiding orientation. For example, it is impossible that Kracauer's theme and position of exile or extra-territoriality, which is closely connected with his *Vorraum-Denken*, was not influenced by Simmel's *Essay About the*

34 *Minima Moralia. Reflections from the Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, Verso, London and New York 2005, p. 247. I shall leave to one side the complex question of who inspired whom in the case of W. Benjamin, S. Kracauer and T. W. Adorno.

Stranger of 1908, and possibly by one of the first descriptions of the characteristic features of modernity contained in Simmel's essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life* of 1903.

Simmel's stranger is neither pilgrim nor traveller, neither outsider nor wanderer. He does not arrive today and leave tomorrow. On the contrary, the stranger is he who arrives today and remains tomorrow. He is still potentially a pilgrim or traveller (*der Wandernde*), since although he did not leave, he retains his freedom to come and go. He does not completely belong where he is, but lives within distance, with the consequence that for him that which is close is distant and that which is alien is close. However, this distance provides a specific objectivity to his perspective made possible both by his detachment and his participation, a perspective that "alienates" the given, tradition, and "habituality".[35]

Simmel, however, reveals the other side of this position in respect of the relationship the stranger has with the community in which he remains and of which he is a part, as is the indigent or, as Simmel states explicitly, the "enemy within".[36] If the community suffers internal division, unrest or revolt, whatever the cause, the party at threat will designate the stranger as an agitator or fifth columnist in order that it be possible to present the crisis as something originating from without.

His whole life Kracauer was fascinated by photography because it offered a picture of an epoch extracted from linear time. This is an eloquent example of that exterritoriality that he sought as a critical observer of his time. Like Benjamin's flâneur or Hannah Arendt's pariah,[37] he wanted to move "in the near-vacuum of exterritoriality", as he wrote in his book on history.

35 Georg Simmel, "Versuch über den Fremden", in: *Individualismus der modernen Zeit*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 2008, p. 269.

36 Ibid., p. 267.

37 During the 1930s, Hannah Arendt studied the tradition of the Jews as pariahs. She wrote a book on Rahel Levin-Varnhagen and came across the work of Bernard Lazar. See Enzo Traverso, *L'histoire déchirée,* Ed. du Cerf, Paris 1997.

However, exile was soon to become his very real fate. In 1933, the year the Weimar Republic came to an end, he was forced to leave Germany. While staying in Paris in 1934–37 he wrote a book on Jacques Offenbach, an Austrian emigrant in France and his kindred spirit. Eventually he left for the United States. His mother perished in Terezín.