

*Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces**

by Siegfried Kracauer

The large picture houses in Berlin are palaces of distraction; to call them *movie theaters* (*Kinos*) would be disrespectful. The latter are still abundant only in Old-Berlin and in the suburbs where they serve neighborhood audiences, and even there they are declining in number. Much more than such movie houses or even the ordinary theaters, it is the picture palaces, those optical fairylands, which are shaping the face of Berlin. The *UFA palaces* — above all the one at the Zoo — the *Capitol* built by Poelzig, the *Marmorhaus* and whatever their names may be, enjoy sell-outs day after day. The newly built *Gloria-Palast* proves that the style initiated by these palaces is still developing in the same direction.¹

Elegant *surface splendor* is the hallmark of these mass theaters. Like hotel lobbies they are shrines to the cultivation of pleasure, their glamour aiming at edification. However, while the architecture does per-

* A translation of "Kult der Zerstreuung," *Frankfurter Zeitung* 70:167 (Erstes Morgenblatt: March 4, 1926), 1-2; reprinted in Siegfried Kracauer, *Das Ornament der Masse* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963), pp. 311-317; this collection is forthcoming as *The Mass Ornament*, translated and edited by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988). The essay is published here with the permission of Harvard University Press. Compare also the Italian translation "Culto del divertimento" by Maria Giovanna Amirante Pappalardo in S. Kracauer, *La Massa Come Ornamento* (Naples: Prisma Editrice, 1982), pp. 79-84.

1. Hans Poelzig (1869-1936), one of the founders of the modern movement in German architecture, designed the Grosse Schauspielhaus for Max Reinhardt in Berlin (1919) with its famous "stalactite dome," the 'Capitol' cinema in Berlin (1925), the 'Deli' cinema in Breslau (1926), and the 'Babylon' cinema in Berlin (1928-29). He also made the expressionist sets for the second version of Paul Wegener's film *The Golem* (1920).

For more material on the Berlin film palaces (including extensive photographic documentation), see Rolf-Peter Baacke, *Lichtspielhausarchitektur in Deutschland: Von der Schaubude bis zum Kinopalast* (Berlin: Frölich und Kaufmann, 1982) and Heinz Frick, *Mein Gloria Palast: Das Kino vom Kurfürstendamm* (Munich: Universitäts Verlag, 1986). For information on corresponding developments in America, cf. Douglas Gomery, "Towards a History of Film Exhibition: The Case of the Picture Palace," *Film Studies Annual* Part 2 (Pleasantville, N.Y.: Redgrave, 1977), 17-26. (Translator's note)

haps bombard the patrons in its attempt to create an atmosphere, it in no way relapses into the barbaric pomposity of Wilhelminian secular churches in the manner of the Rhine Gold, for example, which wants to give one the impression that it harbors the Wagnerian Nibelungen treasure. Rather, the architecture of the film palaces has evolved into a form that avoids stylistic excesses. Taste has presided over the dimensions and has spawned costly interior furnishings inspired by a refined artisanal fantasy. The *Gloria-Palast* presents itself as a baroque theater. The community of worshippers, numbering in the thousands, can be content, for its gathering places are a worthy abode.

The programs also display a well wrought grandiosity. Gone is the time when films were allowed to run one after another each with a corresponding musical accompaniment. The major theaters at least have adopted the American style of a self-contained show which integrates the film as part of a larger whole. Like the program sheets which have expanded into fan magazines, the shows have grown into a structured profusion of production numbers and presentations. A glittering, revue-like creature has crawled out of the movies — *the total artwork* (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) of effects.

This total artwork of effects assaults every one of the senses using every possible means. Spotlights shower their beams into the auditorium, sprinkling across festive drapes or rippling through colorful growth-like glass fixtures. The orchestra asserts itself as an independent power, its acoustic production buttressed by the responsory of the lighting. Every emotion is accorded its own acoustic expression, its color value in the spectrum — an optical and acoustic kaleidoscope which provides the setting for the physical activity on stage, pantomime and ballet. Until finally the white surface descends and the events of the three-dimensional stage imperceptibly blend into two-dimensional illusions.

Alongside the legitimate revues, such shows are the leading attraction in Berlin today. They raise distraction to the level of culture; they are aimed at the *masses*.

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Masses also gather in the *provinces* but there they are subjected to a pressure which does not allow them the spiritual and cultural (*geistig*) fulfillment appropriate to their number and real social significance. In the industrial centers where they appear in great numbers, they are so overburdened as workers that they are unable to realize their own way of life. They are handed down the rubbish and outdated enter-

tainment of the upper class which, despite its repeated claims to social superiority, has only limited cultural ambitions. In the larger provincial towns not dominated primarily by industry, on the other hand, the traditional forces are so powerful that the masses are unable to shape the cultural and spiritual (*geistig*) structure on their own. The bourgeois middle classes remain segregated from them as if the growth of this human reservoir meant nothing, and thus maintain the illusory claim that they are still the guardians of culture and education. Their arrogance, which creates sham oases for itself, keeps the masses down and denigrates their amusement.

It cannot be overlooked that there are *four million people* in Berlin. The sheer necessity of their circulation transforms the life of the street into the ineluctable street of life, giving rise to configurations which invade even domestic space. The more people perceive themselves as a mass, however, the sooner the masses will also develop productive powers in the spiritual and cultural domain which are worth financing. The masses are no longer left to their own devices; rather, they prevail in their very abandonment. Refusing to be thrown scraps they demand instead to be served at set tables. There is little room left for the so-called educated classes who must either join in the dining or maintain their snobbish aloofness. Their provincial isolation is, in any case, at an end. They are being absorbed by the masses and this gives rise to the *homogeneous cosmopolitan audience* in which everyone has the same responses, from the bank director to the sales clerk, from the diva to the stenographer. Self-pitying complaints about this turn towards mass taste are belated; the cultural heritage which the masses refuse to accept has become to some extent a merely historical property since the economic and social reality to which it corresponded has changed.

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One chides the Berliners for being *addicted to distraction*, but this is a petit-bourgeois reproach. While the addiction to distraction is certainly greater in Berlin than in the provinces, the tension to which the working masses are subjected is also greater and more tangible — an essentially formal tension which fills their day fully without making it fulfilling. Such a lack demands to be compensated, but this need can only be articulated in terms of the same surface sphere which imposed the lack in the first place. The form of entertainment necessarily corresponds to that of enterprise.²

2. Kracauer here plays with the ambiguity of the word *Betrieb*, which can mean both enterprise (business) and entertainment. (Translator's Note)

A correct instinct will see to it that the need for entertainment is satisfied. The interior design of the movie theaters serves one sole purpose: to rivet the audience's attention to the peripheral so that they will not sink into the abyss. The stimulations of the senses succeed each other with such rapidity that there is no room left for even the slightest contemplation to squeeze in between them. Like *life-buoys*, the refractions of the spotlights and the musical accompaniment keep the spectator above water. The penchant for distraction demands and finds an answer in the display of pure externality; hence the irrefutable tendency, particularly in Berlin, to turn all forms of entertainment into revues and, parallel with this tendency, the increasing amount of illustrations in the daily press and in periodical publications.

This emphasis on the external has the advantage of being *sincere*. It is not externality that poses a threat to truth. Truth is threatened only by the naive affirmation of cultural values that have become unreal and by the careless misuse of concepts such as personality, inwardness, tragedy and so on, terms which in themselves certainly refer to lofty ideas but which have lost much of their scope along with their supporting foundations due to social changes. Furthermore, many of these concepts have acquired a bad aftertaste today because they unjustifiably deflect an inordinate amount of attention away from the external damages of society onto the private individual. Instances of such repression are common enough in the fields of literature, drama and music. They claim the status of high art while actually rehearsing anachronistic forms which evade the pressing needs of our time — a fact which is indirectly confirmed by the artistically derivative quality of the respective productions. In a profound sense, Berlin audiences act truthfully when increasingly they shun these art events (which, for good reason, remain caught in mere pretension), preferring instead the surface glamor of the stars, films, revues and production values. Here, in pure externality, the audience encounters itself; its own reality is revealed in the fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions. were this reality to remain hidden from the audience, they could neither attack nor change it; its disclosure in distraction is therefore of *moral* significance.

However, this is the case only if distraction is not an end in itself. Indeed the very fact that the shows which aim at distraction are composed of the same mixture of externalities as the world of the urban masses; the fact that these shows lack any authentic and materially motivated coherence, except possibly the glue of sentimentality which covers up this lack but only in order to make it all the more visible; the fact that these shows convey in a precise and undisguised manner to

thousands of eyes and ears the *disorder* of society — this is precisely what enables such shows to evoke and maintain that tension which must precede the inevitable and radical change. In the streets of Berlin one is not seldom struck by the momentary insight that one day all this will suddenly burst apart. The entertainment to which the general public throngs ought to produce the same effect.

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Most of the time it does not, as is demonstrated in exemplary fashion by the programs of the large movie theaters. For even as they summon to distraction they immediately rob distraction of its meaning by amalgamating the multiplicity of effects — which by their nature demand to be isolated from each other — into an 'artistic' unity. These shows strive to coerce the motley sequence of externalities into an organic whole. To begin with, the architectural setting tends to emphasize a dignity which used to inhabit the institutions of high culture. It favors the lofty and the *sacral* as if designed to accommodate works of eternal significance — just one step short of burning votive candles. The show itself aspires to the same exalted level, claiming to be a finely-tuned organism, an aesthetic totality as only an artwork can be. The film alone would be too paltry an offering, not primarily because one would want to increase the sheer quantity of distractions, but rather due to pretensions of artistic form. The cinema has secured a standing independent of the theatrical stage and yet the leading movie theaters are once again longing to return to that stage.

This thespian objective of the movie theaters — which may be considered symptomatic of Berlin social life as well — manifests *reactionary* tendencies. The laws and forms of the idealist culture that haunts us today as a mere specter may have lost their legitimacy with the advent of the motion picture; nonetheless, out of the very elements of externality into which they had happily advanced, they are attempting to create a new idealist culture. Distraction — which is meaningful only as improvisation, as a reflection of the uncontrolled anarchy of our world — is festooned with drapes and forced back into a unity that no longer exists. Rather than acknowledging the actual state of disintegration which such shows ought to represent, they glue the pieces back together after the fact and present them as organic creations.

This practice takes its revenge in purely artistic terms: the integration of film into a self-contained program deprives it of any effect it might have had. It no longer stands on its own but rather as the crowning event of a type of revue which does not take into account its partic-

ular conditions of existence. The *two-dimensionality* of film produces the illusion of the physical world without any need for supplementation. However, if scenes of real physicality are nevertheless displayed alongside the movie, the latter recedes into the flat surface and the deception is exposed. The proximity of action which has spatial depth destroys the spatiality of what is shown on the screen. By its very existence film demands that the world it reflects be the only one; it should be wrested from every three-dimensional surrounding lest it fail as an illusion. A painting too loses its power when it appears alongside living images; not to mention that the artistic ambitions which result in the incorporation of the film into the pseudo-totality of a program are inappropriate and hence remain unsuccessful. The result is at best applied art (*Kunstgewerbe*).

But the movie theaters are faced with more urgent tasks than refining applied art. They will not fulfill their vocation — which is an aesthetic vocation only to the extent that it is in tune with its social vocation — until they cease to flirt with the theater, anxious to restore a by-gone culture. Rather, they should free their offerings of all trappings that deprive film of its rights and must aim radically towards a kind of distraction which exposes disintegration instead of masking it. It could be done in Berlin, home of the masses who so easily allow themselves to be stupefied only because they are so close to the truth.

Translated by Thomas Y. Levin