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The Anterooms of the Real

Approaching Lina Selander's
Around the Cave of the Double Tombs

One may define the area of historical reality, like that of photographic reality, as an anteroom area. Both realities are of a kind which does not lend itself to being dealt with in a definite way. The peculiar material in these areas eludes the grasp of systematic thought; nor can it be shaped in the form of a work of art. Like the statements we make about physical reality with the aid of the camera, those which result from our preoccupation with historical reality may certainly attain to a level above mere opinion; but they do not convey, or reach out for, ultimate truths, as do philosophy and proper art. They share their inherently provisional character with the material they record, explore, and penetrate.

Siegfried Kracauer: *History: The Last Things Before the Last*

Have you just been there? Lina Selander's work *Around the Cave of the Double Tombs* starts with a perplexing question: Which place is meant with *there*, who with *you*, are we even meant ourselves? *Yes*, the answer follows promptly, and is succeeded by the second question, which subsequently will also be affirmed: *Did you see?* The ensuing snippets of text and still and moving images maintain the initial enigmatic character and seem to know more than they give away. Only after some time do the work's text fragments make clear that the images refer to the West Bank, in particular Hebron. Hence, we identify an architectural model as historical Jerusalem; the massive security architecture constrained in the antique building of a mosque as frontier post; and the singular but returning moving image sequence as a walk below a horizontal wire fence in Hebron that is supposed to protect Palestinians from stones and garbage being

thrown by Israeli settlers. Accordingly, the film's references to reality and its localization are made unmistakably clear. However, this astonishes since one is confronted with images totally different from the depictions of Jerusalem, Hebron and the Gaza Strip usually shown in the media.

The movement of the images – and, as will be shown later, the movement of thoughts – in *Around the Cave of the Double Tombs* is unhasty and opposes rushed and accelerated media images. In particular, the camera movement beneath the fence unfolds an insistent imperfection without becoming immersive. This is accomplished through stumbling, halting and hesitating camera movements and through shifting verticality and horizontality by filming from an unconventional perspective. The touching, soon stumbling approach of the camera performs a visualization of the filmic movement as such and – through this insecurity and distancing of the mechanisms of watching – makes transparent the failure to apprehend the seen. The images' status and meaning remain ambiguous and difficult to grasp. Nor do the inserted text fragments allow their reader to interpret the images: text and pictures permeate each other without illustrating or commentating; through their excessive detail they approach reality from the margins. From this results an imagery as contingent as it is conscious of its contingency. The oscillation between text and image, the even rhythm and the changes made visible by blackened lens apertures let the rhythm look like a slide show; it appears even more enigmatic, since it breaks all familiar narrative or explicatory patterns – in the sense of a division between image as phenomenon and text as its explanation or, respectively, as foundation for a hypothesis' proof – and equally lacks the voice-over, which also distinguishes it from a documentary or essayistic film. This form of speaking works without voice and precisely through this generates the abstract and anti-subjective attitude of *Around the Cave of the Double Tombs*. It is not a person speaking but the images becoming engaged in an independent dialogue. The images start to think. Referring to Kracauer, one can understand photographic media as possibilities through which we can “think through things”¹ – “through” both in the sense of “with them/their help”, but also in the sense of deciphering, permeating:

“I have pointed out in *Theory of Film* that the photographic media help us overcome our abstractness by familiarizing us, for the first time as it were, with ‘this Earth which is our habitat’ (Gabriel Marcel); they help us to think *through* things, not above them. Otherwise expressed, the photographic media make it much easier for us to incorporate the transient phenomena of the outer world, thereby redeeming them from oblivion.”²

Here, Kracauer proceeds from the assumption – as he also does in his film theory (keyword “Rescuing the physical reality”)– that the images produced by the camera directly reproduce the (objective) reality, an assumption which ultimately refers back to the often cited, and even more often criticized, model of the indexicality of photographic media. Despite this conventional approach – and precisely in accounting for the critique of the indexical status of the photographic image – Kracauer's approach allows us to view images not exclusively as representations of reality but as instruments of thinking and knowledge.

Before discussing Kracauer's term “anteroom thinking” in more depth and attempting to bring it in line with Selander's *Around the Cave of the Double Tombs*, a misunderstanding and anachronism in view of Kracauer has to be clarified. As can be seen from the opening quote, Kracauer explicitly delimits photographic media from art, which for him produces “last truths”, hence aiming at establishing autonomy; in analogy to this, a similar argument differentiates history and philosophy. Art as much as philosophy concentrates on “last things”, while historiography and photographic media refer to “the last things before the last”. From the present perspective, if not already at the time of the book's first publication in 1969 one has to argue with Kracauer *against* Kracauer and consider that it is precisely photographic media's indexicality that is also witness

1 Hereby “things” are always – also in Kracauer's sense – to be understood as visually-materially mediated objects.

2 Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before the Last* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 192.

to its “last truth”. Photography, just as much as film, serves as an ideological instrument *par excellence*.³ It appears almost unnecessary to point out that photography’s characteristic of the “that is how it was” as a “last” fixation – one only has to consider the connection between death and photography – is firmly rooted in Kracauer’s thinking. It is precisely the artistic application of photographic media that – to paraphrase Kracauer – does not consist of mediating its material, nor does it proclaim its result as final truth, but rather initiates a preliminary process of incorporating, investigating and permeating. Accordingly, it is destined to not generate finality, but openness. Film’s potential lies beyond mere depiction without being separated from it.

What does Kracauer find to be the common features of the “anteroom” in media photography/film and history? Neither history nor film should be understood as an objective form of representation, since even when they enter a mimetic relation to their object, this is not one of identity, but one of similarity, correspondence or affinity. Reality is thereby not randomly shapeable, since in both cases a particular form precedes. Accordingly, “anteroom” media are understood rather as categories of investigation and knowledge, respectively of narration: thereby, photography does not become science nor does historiography become literature. Kracauer characterizes the photographic as much as the historical thinking through its ambiguity, its resistance against a movement of closure as much as its fleetingness. At first this appears paradoxical, considering that both are defined as witnesses of the “this is how it was”, a definite fixation. This contradiction can be overcome through an orientation in view of Husserl’s term “Lebenswelt” with which Kracauer

3 This false conclusion is particularly striking when considering that already his friend and colleague Walter Benjamin pointed to this problem – or rather chance in his case – in his artwork essay roughly 25 years earlier. Kracauer himself developed a contradictory position in his paper on photography in the 1920s, though he refers to this paper directly both in his history book as in his film theory. Cf. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 219–253. Siegfried Kracauer, “Photography,” in *The Mass Ornament*, ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 47–63. Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before the Last* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

emphasizes in particular the contingency of human acts as much as the non-homogenous structure and discontinuity of history. The (mimetic) relation between “Lebenswelt” and history/photography is not one of unmediated strength of expression; instead history/photography permeate the “Lebenswelt” and make it comprehensible through their structural correspondence. In this argument, too, one has to understand a suspension of conceptual abstraction in favour of an orientation towards the concrete. “The last things” tend towards a dogmatization – they are too blind to recognize the everyday reality and will always fail when attempting to understand the antinomic character of time and the non-homogenous structure of reality. The comprehension and articulation of these remains reserved to “anteroom thinking” – hence to the photographic, respectively historical thinking – on grounds of its positioning “before the last things” and its correspondence to everyday reality. The “anteroom thinking” defines a utopian moment “in which the compromise knowledges of history and photography constitute a possible freedom that escapes the oblivion of lived experience without freezing into the damnation of systematic thought and universal truth.”⁴

The “anteroom thinking”, thinking through things “can be described as mimetic thinking that lets itself be affected by the sensuous quality of appearances, yet, without concretely coming undone in these things nor elevating abstractly above them.”⁵ It is a thinking of singularities knowing that the general cannot grasp segments, parts and residues of the “actuality of life” (*Lebenswirklichkeit*) in their abstractness. The infinity of the anteroom thus demands a perspectivation that leaves aside the claim for a higher significance. Selander’s enigmatic images become created due to such a perspectivation, insofar they think “bottom to top” and not “top to bottom”⁶. On the one side, this perspective is materialized through the film camera, which attempts to permeate the situation from the position of Rilke’s

4 D.N. Rodowick, “The Last Things Before the Last: Kracauer and History,” *New German Critique* 41 (1987): p. 139.

5 Frank Grunert and Dorothee Kimmich, “Introduction,” in *Denken durch die Dinge: Siegfried Kracauer im Kontext* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2009), p. 8. Translated from the German original.

panther – to refer to a metaphor appearing at the end of the work – by filming from below the fence.⁷ The camera here does not try to take up an explanatory nor “over”-viewing position, from which the circumstances are depicted as clearly as possible, but limits itself to a particular extract, which evokes a certain disorientation and can only slowly be identified. On the other hand, the movement “bottom to top” can be found in the way that *Around the Cave of the Double Tombs* works off “objects that constitute the physical world”⁸, hence establishing a thinking that proceeds from things and not from a superior truth. The concentration rests on precisely those apparently insignificant fragments, extracts and details, which through their enigmatic character resist instrumentalization and can generally only be defined and determined with difficulty. The racks for prayer books in a mosque, the two donkeys’ tails tied together on a wall painting or the model of a house fabricated through razor boxes are, in contrast to many of the other objects, quite obviously discernable. But they are not situated for their own sake, and withdraw above all from a meaning and function within the film’s (narrative) structure. Referring to Barthes’ considerations of an *effet du réel*⁹, which famously aims at an interpretation of realist narrating, one can argue that “the *having-been-there* of things is a sufficient principle of speech.”¹⁰

6 Kracauer following Panofsky: “The processes of all the earlier representational arts conform, in a higher or lesser degree, to an idealistic conception of the world. These arts operate from top to bottom, so to speak, and not from bottom to top; they start with an idea to be projected into shapeless matter and not with the objects that constitute the physical world. [...] It is the movies, and only the movies, that do justice to that materialistic interpretation of the universe which, whether we like it or not, pervades contemporary civilization.” Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 309; Erwin Panofsky, “Style and Medium in the Motion Picture,” *Transition* 26 (1937), p. 127.

7 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Poems by Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. Robert Bly (Harper Perennial: New York, 1981).

8 Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 309.

9 Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” in *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 141–148.

10 Ibid., p. 147.

Starting from Flaubert’s *Un Coeur Simple* and Michelet’s *Histoire de France*, Barthes asks for the significance of details and their alleged needlessness as much as the insignificance resulting therefrom: “Is everything in narrative significant, and if not, if insignificant stretches subsist in the narrative syntagm, what is ultimately, so to speak, the significance of this insignificance?”¹¹ In his text Barthes develops a characterization of description which he defines through the fact “...that it is justified by no finality of action or of communication”¹² and works through the appearance of unnecessary inscriptions to the “disintegration of the sign”.¹³

“Semiotically, the “concrete detail” is constituted by the *direct* collusion of a referent and a signifier; the signified is expelled from the sign, and with it, of course, the possibility of developing a *form of the signified*, i.e., narrative structure itself (realistic literature is narrative, of course, but that is because its realism is only fragmentary, erratic, confined of “details”, and because the most realistic narrative imaginable develops along unrealistic lines.) [...] Eliminated from the realist speech-act as a signified of denotation, the “real” returns to it as a signified of connotation; for just when these details are reputed to *denotate* the real directly, all they do is *signify* it; [the details] say nothing but this: *we are the real.*”¹⁴

The excessive detailedness must not be understood as a medium to capture the wholeness of the world, but as a signification of the “Real” as a category and not as something depicted within it (on the content level). Admittedly, though, the three-part nature of the sign in photographic media acts – very roughly speaking – differently on a phenomenological level than in a text. However, Barthes’

11 Ibid., p. 143.

12 Ibid., p. 143.

13 Ibid., p. 148.

14 Ibid., p. 147 f.

observation can be transferred to the narrative property of film respectively photography, that – if one wanted to exaggerate – continues the program of the novel with other means. We have to look at Selander’s works in this light as a visualization of the real, as a detonation of the real, which exceeds functionalization and instrumentalization. The enigmatic character of the images, the insignificance of the shown materializes especially through the alienation of the images as an opposition to the apparently significant, known images of this place/conflict (refugee camp, border fences, destroyed places and so on). “The very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone”¹⁵ acts in Selander’s work, too, as a signified of realism.¹⁶ The mere “*having-been-there* of things”¹⁷ does not denote the real but connotes it. Through these processes *Around the Cave of the Double Tombs* develops an aesthetics, which rejects the politics of representation and appears much more as its challenge. A challenge as a thinking in the anteroom of the real that does not offer any last truths and instead attempts to permeate concrete reality.

15 Ibid., p. 148.

16 Here a discussion about the state of realism in film would be interesting, as discussed recently by Volker Pantenburg in view of Pedro Costa’s films. Besides the usual categories of indexical realism and stylistic realism in film, Pantenburg develops a series of five categories, which refer to realism in film on different levels. Cf. Volker Pantenburg, “Realism, not Reality: Pedro Costa’s Digital Testimonies,” *Afterall* 24 (2010): pp. 55 – 70.

17 Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” in *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), p. 147.