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## A curious tribute

### The strange case of Adorno and Kracauer

#### Abstract

*This paper deals with the role reversal between Kracauer and Adorno – a product of their wrecked homoerotic bond in the early 1920s –, which affected their life-time relationship and approach to philosophy. Although for different reasons, that failure – concealed and revealed in The Curious realist, Adorno's tribute to Kracauer – was experienced by both as an insurmountable trauma, which continued to inform their adult relation yet mutilated of its erotic aspects. Still, the reiteration of that crucial event represents also a kind of paradoxical fulfilment of the promise of happiness of youth. Indeed, in this way, those strange friends partly managed to fulfil the greatest demand of that love so helplessly impossible for them: the miracle of a forever beyond death, with the unwavering hope of being gladly united. Such union is the most powerful cipher of final conciliation, which glimmers on the horizon as a redemption of the suffering that shaped the life and work of Kracauer and Adorno.*

#### Keywords

*Dialectics, Childhood fixation, Utopia*

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## 1. *Inception*

Already from the end of 1918, when they first met thanks to Rosie Stern (a friend of the Wiesengrund family), Siegfried Kracauer (“Friedel”) and Theodor W. Adorno (“Teddie”) established “an intense contact” (Adorno 1974c: 388) despite the significant age difference between them: the former almost thirty, the latter barely fifteen. Favored at the time by this age gap, “Friedel” became the teacher and inseparable companion of the brilliant “Teddie”, who was extremely precocious, demanding and eager to learn everything his older friend could teach him. Many years later (1964), almost at the height of his fame, Adorno would not hesitate to acknowledge Kracauer – whose image had not yet become as clearly defined for the German public as it ought to be – as the mentor of his own youth, celebrating his great teachings and their remarkable influence on his own *Bildung*:

For years Kracauer read the *Critique of pure reason* with me regularly on Saturday afternoons. I am not exaggerating in the slightest when I say that I owe more to this reading than to my academic teachers. Exceptionally gifted as a pedagogue, Kracauer made Kant come alive for me. Under his guidance I experienced the work from the beginning not as mere epistemology, not as an analysis of the conditions of scientifically valid judgments, but as a kind of coded text from which the historical situation of spirit could be read, with the vague expectation that in doing so one could acquire something of truth itself. (Adorno 1974c: 388)

On this basis, in the first half of the 1920s, Kracauer built an ambiguous and all-consuming bond with Adorno, which is difficult to place within the boundaries of the ‘legitimate’ relationship between teacher and student, or simply between friends. This peculiar friendship implied, indeed, a “passion [...] truly deleterious”, which soon took on “frightening dimensions” especially for “Friedel”, who, although “madly loving ‘Teddie’” (Löwenthal, Kracauer 2003: 59 – Kracauer to Löwenthal, July 28-29, 1924), had to come to terms with losing him as a lover in order to preserve him as a friend and also for the sake of his very own mental health. The echo of the failure of their homoerotic romance<sup>1</sup> reverberates in the essay *Der wunderliche Realist* – the ‘curious’ tribute of the now famous Prof. Adorno to Dr. Kracauer, the mentor/lover, almost unknown in comparison to

<sup>1</sup> This issue has been properly dealt with by Martin Jay 1985: 217-36; Enzo Traverso 2006<sup>2</sup>: 26-9; Johannes von Moltke 2009: 683-94; Attilio Bruzzone 2020: 339-451, and 2024: 355-88.

him, of his youth. Bearing in mind the amicable/loving context of their hybrid relationship, the harsh critical references in Adorno's text – often misunderstood, trivialized or ignored by the interpreters – become fully intelligible. Adorno's contribution takes the form, in fact, of a further and definitive response to Kracauer's amorous anxiety, which erupts from their intense correspondence (Adorno, Kracauer 2008).

## 2. *Limbo*

It is best to begin with the stubborn “openness” and the consequent lack of “freedom in relation to the object” that Adorno reproaches Kracauer with (Adorno 1974c: 395). In a man who was induced to project himself onto the object of investigation, rather than considering it for itself, “the expressive moment attains primacy over the material with which experience is concerned” (*ibid.*). If, however, we replace the locution “freedom in relation to the object”, conveniently disguised “in Hegelian terms” (*ibid.*), with the repressed and concealed *love object*, then Adorno's sublimation of the erotic dimension of their ancient bond comes clearly to light (see von Moltke 2019: 687). Thus, actually, what “Friedel” lacked was freedom toward his pupil “Teddie”, in whose presence he felt excited and uncomfortable for he was too much in love with him. Still, for Adorno who does not intend to reveal that awkward story, Kracauer was “lacking freedom in his relation to the object” *in general*. The subject that emerges from this first critical note is none other than the friend/lover perennially troubled by the social and personal consequences of his impossible love<sup>2</sup>. The very same character already appeared in the novel *Georg* (see Kracauer 2004: 257-516) and, above all, in the correspondence with his old lover: “Please read when *alone!*”, “destroy this letter if at all possible, and, in any case, not a word about it – it's a secret; who would be allowed to see me so closely, as I truly am [i.e., helplessly in love]?”, “You are nineteen, I am thirty-four – may it work out, after all?” (Adorno, Kracauer 2008: 9, 11 – Kracauer to Adorno, April 5, 1923).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., what Kracauer confessed to Löwenthal: “I really can't take it anymore, otherwise I'll end up dying of this passion (it's insane, isn't it? Tell me something, because I just don't know what to do). [...] No one can hear about my 'love pains', otherwise I would be banned [from society]” (Löwenthal, Kracauer 2003: 55 – Kracauer to Löwenthal, April 12, 1924).

The primary intent of Adorno is precisely to show how Kracauer was still imprisoned in a dimension of immaturity, yet without disclosing the entity and the object of his teen love. Indeed, in *The curious realist*, explicit philosophical criticism is always also implicit human criticism. But, as we shall see, the undue hypostatization of the autobiographical experience radicalized Adorno's critique to the point of partly discrediting its validity. In this regard, the equally polemic but more ambiguous thesis of Kracauer's alleged "fixation on childhood" is decisive (Adorno 1974c: 408). Remaining a child means preserving both the magic of hope not yet offended and the possibility of the best. However, after extrapolating from the intimate 'confessional' context of the letters (then unknown to the reader), Adorno 'fixates' again on his friend's despair of finding himself "as insecure as a boy" and "completely lost, like a child which has just had its umbilical cord snapped off". Hence the pathetic anguish of not being able to ever become "a mature man" and of being, therefore, "a caricature of a human being", "a gaping abyss" (Adorno, Kracauer 2008: 9-11 – Kracauer to Adorno, April 5, 1923). This clarifies the otherwise obscure assertion that "the childhood image survives in the futile and compensatory determination to be a real adult. For it is precisely the adult that is infantile" (Adorno 1974c: 408). In Adorno's eyes, Kracauer appeared in fact as a kind of 'kidult' who, being neither fully man nor fully child, was relegated to the limbo of this pitiful condition.

Hence two important consequences. On the one hand, the "almost boundless capacity for suffering" that torn and informed "a man with no skin" like the "defenseless" Kracauer (Adorno 1974c: 389). On the other hand, the "reactive [...] realism" (Adorno 1974c: 407) that drove him to express his own ontological weakness to the extent of turning philosophy into "a medium of self-assertion" (Adorno 1974c: 390). Moreover, as a fragile and helpless adult/child, placed into the ruthless world of adults/ferocious beasts, "Friedel", like Don Abbondio in *The Betrothed*, found himself "like an earthen vessel thrown amidst iron jars" (Manzoni 1840: 23). This is, however, undoubtedly true also in the case of "Teddie" himself, the one who stigmatized "the ignominious alternative, which late capitalism secretly poses to all of its members: to become just another adult or to remain a child" (Adorno 1980: 151). But, above all, he was the one who had always been irresolute in the face of this alternative, without ever wanting to really decide unequivocally and coherently for one of the two possibilities at stake. Joachim Günther recognized this indecision in the very complexion of the philosopher's face: "a childish face that nevertheless reveals itself as an adult" (Günther 1969). Jürgen Habermas was

on the same page when he emphasized Adorno's refractoriness to choose between the two equally degrading conditions – the adult's conformity, the eccentricity of remaining a child – and the resulting vulnerability (see Habermas 1984<sup>3</sup>b: 170-1).

The crucial distinction between the two old friends/lovers lies in the fact that non-choice, as Adorno correctly points out, led Kracauer (actually, only and mostly in his youthful phase) to neglect the relationship with the object – society – in order to focus solely on the worshipped individual instance. But the hypostatized particular is petty and powerless in the face of the misunderstood universal that mercilessly denies it: "Kierkegaard's individual is as little the truth as Hegel's whole" (Adorno 1979b: 250; on Hegel see Adorno 1980: 55). Thus, along with the banishment of the self, comes that of the possibility of criticism toward what liquidates the idolized self: the overwhelming power of the false wholeness, which thrives thanks to the vain overvaluation of the equally false individuality. The incomparable greatness of Adorno – truly inspired, in a negative *and* positive way, by Kracauer himself – is to have always preserved the child's naivety and the adult's lucidity. Exactly in this sense, "Adorno's specific weaknesses were profoundly connected with his eminent qualities" (Habermas 1984<sup>3</sup>b: 171). In his case, as in Kracauer's, "it is true that the secret of genius is to carry the spirit of the child into old age" (Habermas 1984<sup>3</sup>a: 166).

The possible salvation of the child and the adult is encapsulated in the non-choice configured as a dialectical choice of both instances: this is, precisely, the pure magic of being able to preserve childhood into adulthood, in which Adorno and Kracauer were authentic masters. But – in their perspective – this, for its part, requires a paradoxical renunciation of any salvation directly and positively invoked. On such basis, "the only philosophy which would still be accountable in the face of despair, would be the attempt to consider all things, as they would be portrayed from the standpoint of redemption" (Adorno 1980: 283). Such consideration represents the most serious effort to realize the best virtual core of the child and the adult: the potentiality and actuality of a utopianly reconciled life, in which one can be a child without being crushed (victims), and an adult without being aligned (victims/executioners) to the mildly yet oppressive system. This is the utopia, central in Adorno as in Kracauer, of keeping the dimension of redemption open indirectly and negatively. For Adorno, as Habermas argues, "the wholly other [i.e. *Versöhnung*/reconciliation] may only be indicated by indeterminate negation, not known" (Habermas 1984<sup>3</sup>b: 176). In the bashful allusion to redemption resounds

loud and clear an echo of the Old Testament prohibition against making images of God: an echo that “Teddie” heard and made his own especially thanks to “Friedel” (see Adorno 1972<sup>2</sup>: 159; Horkheimer, Adorno 1981: 41, 95), and only later thanks to Benjamin and Horkheimer.

### 3. *Helter-skelter*

By resorting to the theme of childhood, Adorno intends to stigmatize his friend’s skeptical and mocking, but ultimately affirmative, gaze on the material world. This gaze was embodied in his ability to think “with an eye that was astonished almost to helplessness but then suddenly flashed into illumination” (Adorno 1974c: 392). This endowment – which is at the same time a flaw – goes hand in hand with an inability to think dialectically. Indeed, Adorno suddenly points out that, in Kracauer’s thinking, there was “always more intuition than thought” (*ibid.*). In some other passages of *The curious realist*, “Teddie” recalls that “Friedel”, more intuitive than reflective, with “his *parti pris* for the inexplicable residue” manifested a real “aversion to theory in the emphatic sense” (Adorno 1974c: 393). So much so that Walter “Benjamin at one point, around 1923, called him an enemy of philosophy” (Adorno 1974c: 390). By saying so, however, Benjamin meant to pay him a compliment. Adorno was well aware of this, insofar he acknowledges, in the very same passage, that “philosophy had not been Kracauer’s major at the university and the power of its great constructions, which easily degenerate into affirmation, Hegel in particular, remained alien to him” (*ibid.*). Still, as usual, the faint praise flows into overblown criticism: “His oeuvre was tinged with a kind of amateurish thinking on his feet, just as a certain slackness dampened self-criticism in favor of a playful pleasure in felicitous insights” (*ibid.*).

Genuinely “materialist” was Kracauer’s “motif” of suspicion about a thought that gets rid of “the specific existent” and forgets “what it divested itself of in order to become idea” (Adorno 1974c: 393). For his part, Adorno shares his old mentor’s distrust to the extent of formulating the utopian-polemic notion of the “non-identical” just to emphasize the gap between concept and thing. This led them both “to social criticism” (*ibid.*). But such criticism was not radical enough in Kracauer, since, in his immediate and flimsy urge to materialism, the “aversion to unrestrained thought got in the way of a consistent materialism” (*ibid.*). The problem with “Friedel” is that “proportion always carries its own penalty, moderationism” (*ibid.*). Furthermore, “in evading philosophy”, that is, the effort

of dialectical thinking, Kracauer likewise ended up turning “the existential” – the fixation on “pure individuality” – into “clowning” (*ibid.*).

Adorno is again right. Nonetheless it is necessary to relativize the scope of validity of his severe statements, which are fitting only in reference to the writings of “Friedel”’s early youth, while are unacceptable if extended indiscriminately to his later works. Kracauer’s maiming flattening on his youthful phase represents, in fact, the greatest limitation of Adorno’s otherwise brilliant interpretation. He has to admit, not quite surprisingly, that “there were sufficient reasons for Kracauer’s suspicions about theory as the arrogance of a reason that has forgotten its own quasi-natural quality” (Adorno 1974c: 394-5). After all, Adorno is the first knowing that “theory in its purity becomes a means of domination” (Adorno 1974c: 395). The idea, however, that responds to this problem “by evading theoretical consistency”, as in Kracauer’s case, “not only becomes impotent within reality”, but “sacrifices power and evidence internally as well” (*ibid.*). “Friedel” was a victim of powerlessness and moderationism because of his inability to think dialectically, which was likewise at the origin of his affirmative gaze on reality. Unable to resolve the dialectical “conflict between experience and theory” (*ibid.*), Kracauer merely eliminated the pole he deplored. He thus deluded himself that the hypostatization of the material element, or its artificial rescue from the clutches of spiritual abstraction, was sufficient to guarantee its actual redemption. Therefore “Teddie” can rightly challenge him that the conflict between experience and theory cannot be conclusively decided in favor of one side or the other, but “is truly an antinomy and must be played out in such a way that the contrary elements interpenetrate one another” (*ibid.*).

Adorno’s insistence on Kracauer’s “materialist” – amateurish and childlike – aversion to any abstract, theoretical, way of thinking is both apologetic and (above all) polemic. On the one hand, “Teddie” praises “Friedel”’s distrust, significantly shared by Benjamin, for any kind of systematic thought: this “spared [him] the fate of professional philosophy, the doom of being established as a department, a specialized discipline beyond the other specialized disciplines” (Adorno 1974c: 391). Indeed, Kracauer was never intimidated by the line of demarcation among different disciplines as philosophy and sociology. Furthermore, “being an autodidact” gave him freedom, an aptitude for versality and a healthy “independence from routinized method” (*ibid.*). Once again, Adorno is profoundly in tune with Kracauer’s denunciation of the ‘totalitarian’ violence of the all-encompassing system and the compartmentalization of knowledge (already attacked by Lukács in *History and class consciousness*). The

anti-systematic aspect, inextricably linked to the enthusiasm for mutual contamination among various disciplinary sectors (which Kracauer, for his part, had borrowed from Georg Simmel), would assume a permanently central place in “Teddie”’s philosophy.

But, on the other hand, Adorno challenges Kracauer, over and over again, for his inability to think dialectically: “Dialectical thought never suited his temperament”; “he hardly felt a need for strict mediation within the thing itself, the need to demonstrate the essential within the innermost core of particularity”; “in this he held, conservatively, to presumptive logic [*Umfangslogik*]” (Adorno 1974c: 394). Failing to think dialectically means, for Adorno, ineptitude in understanding and dealing with reality, keeping active its constitutive tension/relation between subject and object, the particular and the universal. Precisely this incompetence was the theoretically decisive hallmark of the infantilism of “Friedel”, a frivolous ‘adultescent’ in search of the “playful pleasure” for itself (Adorno 1974c: 390). This led him to overvalue and hypostatize the individual instance, the scattered fragments, dissolving them from their effective connection with the false totality of the existing cruel world. Which is, thus, left free to perpetuate itself by the one who, like a child, came before it unprepared and unarmed. Although Kracauer was “aware of the nonidentity of the thing and its concept”, he “renounced the task of extrapolating the idea from something refractory to it, extrapolating the general from the extreme of particularity”, in order to content himself “with the precise specification of the particular for use as an example of general matters” (Adorno 1974c: 394). Kracauer’s will to pursue “intellectual experience as something individual” fostered also a firm “tendency toward content [*Tendenz zur Verinhaltlichung*] in his thought” (Adorno 1974c: 391), which was nothing other than the glaring aspect of his stubborn hostility towards *any* process of abstraction.

The fallout of the primacy of the individual and of the hatred for speculation was the loss of Kracauer’s adialectical thought in the unrelated, therefore abstract, particular. Hence the impossibility of a negation, even theoretical, of the bad universal, endorsed because believed and treated as unchangeable: “Under the aegis of its impenetrability, his thought let reality, which it evoked and which it ought to penetrate, stand as it is” in the name of “its vindication as something inalterable” (Adorno 1974c: 394). In Adorno’s portrait, Kracauer as philosopher and man always remained “Friedel”, the helpless adult/child at the mercy – and accomplice (see Adorno 1974c: 408) – of reification, which he unintentionally legitimized with his philosophically/existential inappropriate behavior.

Implicitly and on an exquisitely personal level unknown to readers at the time, Adorno reproaches the kidult Kracauer for not being able to grow nor let go of his love object, to which he was a slave. In this way, Kracauer's obsession with the late adolescent Adorno ended up coinciding, in the latter's eyes, with a "fixation on childhood" *tout court*. It is precisely in childhood that is enshrined "the benignness of things" (Adorno 1974c: 408), inexorably perverted by the cruelty and disenchantment of damaged adult life. But, on the other hand, in childhood as a limbo-prison, that benignness is not even realized, since it could only be realized, if at all, in the adult life that faces the negative in order to overcome it. Childhood is nothing but the illusory refuge in which "Friedel" locked himself up because of his impossible love for the young "Teddie", insofar as he deluded himself of thus being able to preserve it as possible.

#### 4. *Utopia*

All those stinging critical remarks are obviously linked to the first polemic note on the absence, in Kracauer, of "freedom in relation to the object" (Adorno 1974c: 395). As always, Adorno's criticism automatically strikes also the man Kracauer, who is rebuked with a double powerlessness mirroring the philosophical one: the inability to distance himself from his love object and to meet it not through the immature bond of a teenage romance, but with the greater freedom offered by the grown-up friendship between two married men (see Von Moltke 2009: 688). The naive and "tricky individualist" (Adorno 1974c: 402) thus lost himself in the object without ever really finding it: stuck at an infantile stage, "Friedel" was incapable of establishing mature and healthy (i.e. dialectical) relationships (even though he was happily married to Lili Ehrenreich for some thirty-six years). Similarly, his puerile individualism – which is, philosophically, nothing but the well-known impossibility of thinking dialectically – did not make him realize that "however much it feels itself to be in opposition to society, the *principium individuationis* is society's own principle", and that "the individual's spontaneous reaction is not an ultimate, nor, therefore, does it guarantee binding knowledge" (Adorno 1974c: 394).

Yet, at the same time, Adorno admits that Kracauer did not "preach the individual as a norm or telos", since "his responses were too social for that" (Adorno 1974c: 395-6). Hence his remarkable acumen and lucidity: "Using spirit to protect spirit from its own self-idolization was probably Kracauer's primary compulsion, a compulsion produced by the suffering

of someone who had had it etched into his awareness early on that there is little spirit can do in the face of the brutality of mere existence" (Adorno 1974c: 407). Thus, on the one hand, "Teddie"'s old mentor surrendered to reification, favoring it with his individualism, and, on the other hand, he was aware of the powerlessness of spirit in the face of the omnipotence of evil reality. Beyond the studiously researched ambivalence (close to a short-circuit), the philosophical-biographical nature of Adorno's oxymoronic *apologetic critique* is absolutely evident. As we have seen, the attack on "Friedel"'s failed dialectic and the scolding of his infantilism always go hand in hand. As usual, indeed, the Kracauer criticized by Adorno is above all his former desperate lover.

In "Teddie"'s piercing eyes, "Kracauer's adaptive strategy" (Adorno 1974c: 403) was a conditioned reflection of the ontological – human and philosophical – weakness of someone who had remained a dogged yet hopeless individualist – or, in essence, a child. According to "Teddie", "Friedel" started to adjust "even before the Berlin years" (1930-33) at the main editorial office of the "Frankfurter Zeitung" (Adorno 1974c: 402). Adjustment then became his second nature during the hard times of emigration, notably in America, where "the burden of conformity [...] was especially harsh" (Adorno 1974c: 405). Therefore, in order to survive and be happy, the weak adultescent "who had no skin grew himself a coat of mail" (Adorno 1974c: 402) and stake everything on this new stronger self. But, still helpless and vulnerable, he was also forced to come to terms with the overpowering and unchangeable world. The very same world in which he never did "quite fit in" (Adorno 1974c: 407). Making a virtue of necessity, the ontological outsider voluntarily bowed to the imperative of a "successful adjustment" in order to obtain, in the cruel *hic et nunc* (which "is, for its part, this way and no other"), the coveted recognition (Adorno 1974c: 403). *Anerkennung durch Anpassung*.

Here Adorno is targeting (two of) the most important works of Kracauer's Parisian and American exile<sup>3</sup>: the "social biography" of the German-Jewish composer Jacques Offenbach (Kracauer 2005), mercilessly crushed in a needlessly malicious review (Adorno 1984: 363-5)<sup>4</sup>, and

<sup>3</sup> Significantly, Adorno hardly mentioned at all Kracauer's other major work of the time, the renowned *From Caligari to Hitler. A psychological history of the German film* (1947).

<sup>4</sup> By reading this review – which, moreover, appeared during the most difficult period of Kracauer's life – one gets the impression that Adorno was annoyed by his friend's 'intrusion' into the musical sphere that was essentially alien to him and the exclusive domain of expert musicologists like the harsh critic himself.

the grand book on film theory (Kracauer 1960), so alien to the purist canons of the relentless critic of “the culture industry” (Horkheimer, Adorno 1981: 141-91). However, the real target of Adorno’s attack is always the young Kracauer, the old master desperately in love with his own brilliant pupil. In “Teddie”’s criticism, the mature phase of “Friedel”’s life and intellectual activity is invariably flattened out on his youthful period, which becomes the personification of Kracauer *tout court*. It is no coincidence that Adorno unjustly reproaches his friend first for having turned a blind eye to reification, according to a “constant and deliberate head-in-the-sand policy” (Adorno 1974c: 403), then for having introjected the evil object with which he could not establish a dialectical (i.e. adult) relationship, and lastly for having adjusted to the executioner world. Emblematic evidence of this supposed conformist acceptance of the existing, which flirted with an equally presumed “positivity” in order to digest the weight of the swallowed negativity, would be Kracauer’s “regrettable” choice to write in English (Adorno 1974c: 402). But then, more benevolently, Adorno also recognizes that “Friedel”, despite *and* thanks to his merely intellectual overwhelming of the “refined and powerful” negativity, astutely detached “himself from it even while he compulsively identified with it” (Adorno 1974c: 403). The recognition of Kracauer’s “cunning” (*ibid.*), so similar to the proverbial ‘peasant cunning’, is by no means marginal, since Adorno did not attribute such virtue to Benjamin, whom he equally accused of being a victim of the mechanism of “identification with the aggressor” (Adorno 1974c: 405; see also Adorno 1977: 238-53; Adorno 1974a: 567-82; Adorno 1974d: 583-90; the concept of “identification with the aggressor” stands in Ferenczi 1933: 5-15, and Freud 1936: 125-9).

Almost at the end of the essay Adorno discloses, with his usual polemic-apologetic ambivalence, Kracauer’s complicated relationship with utopia:

Even where Kracauer agitates against utopia like a defeatist, he is actually attacking something that animated him, as though out of fear. The utopian trait, afraid of its own name and concept, sneaks into the figure of the man who does not quite fit in [precisely the ontological outsider]. [...] The image of Kracauer is that of someone who just barely escaped the most fearful thing of all, and just as the hope of humankind is encapsulated in the chance that it will avoid catastrophe, so the reflection of this hope falls on the individual who anticipates, so to speak, this event. [...] For Kracauer, individuality enclosing itself within itself to the point of inaccessibility, an individuality impervious to hope, becomes the mask [*Deckbild*] of hope. It evinces this eccentric man’s yearning [*Sehnsucht*] to be able to be

as unconventional, without fear, as he had been made to be by fear. (Adorno 1974c: 407)

Undoubtedly, in Kracauer, “individuality” was “the mask of hope”: the hope of being able to live out one’s diversity peacefully, claiming an ec-centricity with respect to the prevailing system. This is, however, in a sheer contradiction with the previous allegation of aiming at adjustment. Such contradiction may be easily defused, if we bear in mind that, for Adorno, there was both a ‘bad’ Kracauer who was stuck to reality and wanted to adjust to society in order to gain its recognition, and a ‘good’ Kracauer who utopianly attempted to escape forced homologation for no longer having to fear the dire consequences of his own act of hubris. Paradoxically, the ‘good’ Kracauer was precisely the old master in love (“Friedel”), bashed throughout the essay, while the ‘bad’ Kracauer was the adult, albeit infantile, who bent to the world as it has always been, thus betraying the promise of joy of the ancient aborted love. But eventually these characters were the very same person, nothing but the *Doppelgänger* of Adorno himself. Being “impervious to hope” (in a way that will be Adorno’s distinctive mark), the concealing image is just devoted to preserve the possibility of hope via an indirect reference. This *Old Testament* aspect, as we already know, is also shared by Adorno who states that “the right of the image is rescued in the faithful observance of its prohibition” (Horkheimer, Adorno 1981: 40). Therefore, it is equally correct to observe – with a remarkable critical insight – that utopia animated Kracauer even when he, acting as “a defeatist”, fought against it. Indeed, it is precisely here that “Friedel”’s utopian impulse emerges by contrast: with his “reactive [...] realism”, he “could not be content with the notion of disillusionment” (Adorno 1974c: 407). This was, definitely, Kracauer’s “secret utopia” (Kracauer 2011: 631-3; Cunico 2001: 95), and that, more manifested, of the very same Adorno.

Adorno is again the first to know and fully understand the tenor of that utopia, which he reveals at the close of the tribute to his friend:

In him the fixation on childhood [...] takes the form of a fixation on the benignness of things. [...] To a consciousness that suspects it has been abandoned by human beings, things [*Dinge*] are superior. In them thought makes reparations for what human beings have done to the living. The state of innocence would be the condition of needy things, shabby, despised things alienated from their purposes. For Kracauer they alone embody something that would be other than the universal functional complex, and his idea of philosophy would be to lure their indiscernible life from them. (Adorno 1974c: 408)

Humanly and philosophically, Kracauer and Adorno met indeed on the terrain of an irreducible utopia and the heartbreaking cry of the child who embodies it. Both aimed at the salvific “state of innocence” of those “needy things, shabby, despised things alienated from their purposes”. The material, transient and vulnerable element to be redeemed was conceived by both as a potential reservoir of humanity. Their goal was the salvation of what, disfigured, was heading towards complete ruin, which, precisely because it was desperate, was the last image of hope for good in the heart of evil. It is no coincidence that the dizzying *Negative dialectics* ended with the redemptive image of solidarity with what perishes: “There is solidarity between such thinking and metaphysics at the time of its fall” (Adorno 1973: 400). But already in the outstanding epilogue of his youthful essay on Schubert, the twenty-five-year-old Adorno meticulously traced the images of disintegration present, like never-healed wounds, in the music of the great Austrian composer. In the frosty sadness of a music that takes one’s breath away, “the ciphers of an eventual conciliation” ardently glimmer (Adorno 1982: 33): they keep the promise of happiness – which is heralded by weeping – in the current unhappiness. Finally, the tears fall impetuously “from the eyes without first asking the soul” (Adorno 1982: 33). Only an upset eye flooded with tears can be no longer indifferent to pain and complicit in evil. It is the sole chance and the truest reflection of utopia (see Adorno 1979a: 179, 187, 200).

## 5. *Into forever*

The role reversal between Kracauer and Adorno – a product of their wrecked homoerotic bond in the early 1920s – affected their entire relationship until it became the “scar of an unresolved problem” (Adorno 2016: 287), destined to reopen incessantly. Although for different reasons, the failure of that (impossible) love was experienced by both of them – especially by Kracauer, the rejected lover – as an insurmountable trauma. Neither of them ever managed to completely neutralize the spell of this intractable grief. Evidently friendship alone, always at risk of shipwreck, could not heal the wounds to their aborted romance, which, like an inescapable fate, continued to inform their adult relationship now mutilated of its erotic aspects.

In the ordeal of their youthful liaison, the youngster “Teddie” proved to be stronger and more mature than his mentor “Friedel”, who was forced to play the pathetic role of the weak and paranoid boy in front of

his pupil who, from an anagraphical viewpoint, was little more than that. The greater strength of character, which Adorno showed in that ‘fatal’ circumstance, translated into a greater philosophical *vis*. This led him to gradually become independent of his old master, to the extent of becoming a brilliant autonomous thinker, capable of overshadowing and outclassing the one who had trained him. On the other hand, by a mocking twist of fate, the celebrity and recognition that Adorno deservedly enjoyed were directly proportional to the obscurity and misrecognition that Kracauer undeservedly suffered. Hence the almost inevitable crescendo of estrangement and tension in their troubled relationship (see Jay 1985: 220), which reached its peak with the appearance of the “curious” essay-tribute *Der wunderliche Realist* for Kracauer’s seventy-fifth birthday.

Indeed, Adorno’s most important critical remarks denote a tendentious bias, despite being correct and witty. The paradox is only apparent, since, as we know, Adorno’s negative assessment almost always – and above all – concerned the young Kracauer. The latter is unduly made the yardstick for the mature Kracauer, who thus ended up nailed to his youthful phase and misunderstood in his multifaceted wholeness. To be crushed (and yet honored) in *The curious realist* was, therefore, predominantly the suffering “Friedel”, hopelessly in love with the evanescent “Teddie”. This was, after all, the Kracauer that Adorno knew best. His fault, sourly hold against him by the very person offended<sup>5</sup>, was to have passed off “Friedel” as Siegfried Kracauer, offering a highly reductive portrait of him. The capital vice of Adorno’s essay was, precisely, the excessive adherence to the context of autobiographical experience, which has been hypostatized in contempt of the correct methodological principle of dialectically intertwining biography and work, life and philosophy.

Just as “Friedel” failed to break the vicious circle of an impossible love, so “Teddie” was unable to pull himself out of the whirlpool of that bewitching yet appalling experience. Petrified in their youthful roles (frustrated lover/elusive beloved), now sedimented in their respective *formae mentis*, “Friedel” and “Teddie” were inextricably united in the setback of “the power of powerlessness” (Adorno 1979b: 258): such is their radical inability to break free from the iron cage of the ‘original sin’ of their an-

<sup>5</sup> See Adorno, Kracauer 2008: 669-71 (October 15, 1964), 676-9 (November 3, 1964), 684-7 (November 21, 1964), 691-3 (March 3, 1965). In these letters, Kracauer challenges Adorno all the errors and distortions of his tribute. “Teddie”’s replies to “Friedel”’s complaints can be found *ibid.*: 672-5 (October 28, 1964), 680-3 (November 13, 1964), 687-90 (February 5, 1965).

cient romance. By raising this homoerotic relationship to the condition of possibility (a sort of 'transcendental') of their lifelong bond – for as such they experienced and conceived it –, Kracauer and Adorno condemned/blessed themselves to remain “Friedel” and “Teddie” *forever*. Both were right, both were wrong, no one lost, no one won. At the same time, however, the eternalization (perhaps a form of desperate protest against the fact/fate of having to die as anybody else) of the dynamics of that primordial relationship, never entirely overcome, meant that their friendship withstood contrasts of all kinds, remote and recent, emerging enriched but even more torn. In this way, it was preserved as an uninterrupted protean repetition of the amicable love of youth, from which it was born and for which it was perpetuated despite everything.

The reiteration of that crucial event represents the fulfilment of the promise of happiness of youth, messianically arrested in Benjamin's “dialectics at a standstill”, as an exorcism against the overwhelming power of death: “This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image, therefore, dream image” (Benjamin 1991<sup>2</sup>: 55). Just *a single happy moment*, in which we said yes to life and it smiled with loving approval, is sufficient to redeem *an entire eternity of suffering* (see Nietzsche 1988<sup>2</sup>: 307-8). In the yearning for love and the salvation of the instant of joy, forever fixed in the “dialectics at a standstill”, as well as in the acceptance of the “Dionysian chaos” of existence, Benjamin and Nietzsche meet and illuminate – in the light of utopia – the amicable/love/intellectual relationship between Kracauer and Adorno.

Like in Telephus' myth (see Starobinski 1989: 165-208) as a paradigm of dialectics, what, eventually, undermined the “curious” friendship between “Friedel” and “Teddie” was exactly what salvaged it: the anchorage to the tormented love explosion of youth, frozen in the “standstill” and yet equally harbinger of ever-increasing hope and despair. In the “dialectical image” of their failed love relationship, dream and nightmare continuously alternate until they pass into each other. But the flashes of the fleeting happiness of frustrated love shine in the darkness – tearing it apart – of “the eternity of destruction” (Adorno 1973: 354) as an invitation to affirm life, in order to revoke that destruction with a perennial “ode to joy” in open rebellion against the universal context of affliction. Thus, at least in part, Kracauer and Adorno fulfilled the greatest demand of life and of that love so helplessly impossible for them: the miracle of a *forever* beyond death, with the unwavering hope of being able to be united and glad. Such union is one of the most powerful “ciphers of a final conciliation” (Adorno 1982: 33), almost identical to the mirage of the

interpenetration of sky and sea in the line of the sunset. This no man's land is the inviolable refuge of all the enthusiastic expectations of youth, while the radiance of its "dream image" – a purely "negative happiness" (Adorno 1974b: 33) – glimmers on the horizon as a redemption of the suffering that shaped the life and work of Kracauer and Adorno, but also as a memento of their geniality.

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