

Slippages in Film Realist Discourse

European film theory was shaped by Kantian idealism, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology with its search for the 'deep structures' of experience, Brecht's theory of epic theatre, and the Frankfurt school's critique of the pervasive instrumental rationality of the culture industries.¹ The aesthetic of Kracauer, Arnheim, Balazs, Adorno and Marcuse, which aimed at promoting non-cognitive and irrationalist forms of expression as a resistance to instrumental reason, was based on a redefinition of the idea of 'distraction'. Originally a negative term, 'distraction' was given more positive connotations by the Frankfurt school, which stressed the structural analogy between the fragmentary nature of distraction and the decentered mode of perception characteristic of modernity. Kant's notion of *Naturschöne* as essentially indeterminate led Kracauer to propose that "film had affinities with such aspects of the natural world as 'unstaged reality,' 'chance,' 'the fortuitous,' 'the indeterminate', 'the flow of life' and 'endlessness.'"² Kracauer also drew upon Husserl's concept of the *Lebenswelt* which, he argued, was repressed by the objectifying instrumental discourses of modern science but which film could redeem for us through an emphasis on the concrete and the transient, the fortuitous and the indeterminate. Finally, Kracauer was also influenced by Bergson's philosophy of duration: he privileged the digressive, meandering type of narration of the 'episodic' film in which the narrative emerges from and disappears back into 'the (Bergsonian) flow of life.'

Throughout *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* Kracauer makes numerous attempts to recuperate the negative aspects of modernity by giving them a positive spin. What he calls "the basic (inherent) affinities" of the film medium—the affinity of film for the indefinite, the unstaged, the infinite, the fortuitous, the transient—are positive reinterpretations of negative aspects of mass culture such as fragmentation, distraction, groundlessness, relativism, solitude. Life in modern mass society tends toward the abstract; hence, we feel an increasing 'hunger' or 'nostalgia' for life, which film is uniquely equipped to satisfy.³ Kracauer refigures the tendency to abstraction from a negative effect of mass culture into the very condition that makes the redemption of physical reality possible. Although mass society is held responsible for the disintegration of traditional norms, beliefs and values, Kracauer stresses that it is namely "the corrosion of normative incentives [that] makes us focus on life as their matrix, their underlying substratum"⁴ i.e. that the groundlessness brought about by the rise of mass culture has the beneficial effect of clearing away the ideological superstructure that has been constraining and concealing the 'flow of life'.

Melancholy, or the nostalgia for life, is reinterpreted from a negative effect of modernity into the most appropriate state of mind in which we are able to reconnect with the 'flow of life'. The medium of film is inherently 'melancholic': it provokes in the spectator a sense of self-estrangement, a longing for presence, and an identification with the inanimate, the non-human. Freed of any practical interests, desires, and goals, the self-estranged subject becomes sensitized or re-sensitized to the material world bathed in an elegiac light that renders the most ordinary things beautiful: "Now melancholy as an

inner disposition not only makes elegiac objects seem attractive but carries still another, more important implication: it favors self-estrangement, which on its part entails identification with all kinds of objects. The dejected individual is likely to lose himself in the incidental configurations of his environment, absorbing them with a disinterested intensity no longer determined by his previous preferences.”⁵ Like the nineteenth century flâneur, the film viewer is highly susceptible to the transient real-life phenomena that crowd the screen: “According to the testimony available, it is their flux which affects him most strongly. Along with the fragmentary happenings incidental to them, these phenomena—taxi cabs, buildings, passers-by, inanimate objects, faces—presumably stimulate his senses and provide him with stuff for dreaming. Bar interiors suggest strange adventures. Improvised gatherings hold out the promise of fresh human contacts; sudden shifts of scene are pregnant with unforeseeable possibilities. Through its very concern for camera-reality, film thus permits especially the lonely spectator to fill his shrinking self...with images of life as such—glittering, allusive, infinite life.”⁶

One feels almost embarrassed by Kracauer’s desperate attempts to recast in a more flattering light the evidence for our sorry predicament: bars are no longer places where lonely strangers come and go but instead mysterious dark venues holding out the promise for “strange adventures”; people do not wander about like windowless monads, engaging in small talk with strangers, but instead form ‘improvised’ (rather than ‘random’) gatherings that hold out the promise for “fresh human contact”; the increasing pace of life and the fragmentation of time and space are no longer disorienting or alienating but instead hold out “unforeseeable possibilities.” Transient public spaces, which foster social alienation and superficial human contacts, are refigured as authentic and cinematic. Abstracted from its usual social connotations and considered from a purely disinterested (aesthetic) point of view, alienation is no longer a symptom of the disintegration of social ties; instead, it is credited with a certain liberating potential: “The [flâneur’s] kaleidoscopic sights mingle with unidentified shapes and fragmentary visual complexes and cancel each other out, thereby preventing the onlooker from following up any of the innumerable suggestions they offer. What appears to him are not so much sharp-contoured individuals engaged in this or that definable pursuit as loose throngs of sketchy, completely indeterminate figures. Each has a story, yet the story is not given. Instead, an incessant flow of possibilities and near-intangible meanings appears.”⁷ The indefinite, uncanny shapes perceived by the flâneur—and, analogously, by the film spectator—coming into focus only to dissolve back into an incoherent mix of fragments, are now seen as inspiring and beautiful precisely because of their transience. Following his typical circular kind of reasoning to its (il)logical conclusion, Kracauer argues that we can reconnect with reality not by trying to revive an impossible sense of wholeness and belonging but by fragmenting the world even further, breaking it down into unfamiliar configurations.

In a similar way, he refigures another negative aspect of modernity—groundlessness or the relativization of beliefs and norms—as democratizing. The relativization of value is recuperated so that it is precisely the insignificance of events, the relativity of their value/meaning, that is declared most cinematic. The indeterminacy produced by the ‘democratization’ of value should not, however, be simply equated with ambiguity. Indeterminacy, in the sense that Kracauer attributes to it and as it is embodied in episodic narratives, no longer carries the connotation of ‘richness’ associated with

‘ambiguity.’ Once events are fragmented into episodes or incidents, they become self-sufficient, neutral, valueless and thus equally insignificant or equally significant, for at this point the very notion of significance eclipses itself.

I would like to examine some contemporary representative instances of the associational discourse privileged by Kracauer, to see whether they agree with, or deviate from, the ‘basic affinities’ of film as Kracauer defines them, and to suggest that Kracauer’s theory already contains the seeds for the subtle transformations contemporary realist film discourse has undergone. John Orr has begun to sketch out some of these transformations, proposing to divide them into four categories: neo-Bazinian realism (neo-Neorealism), traductive realism, hyperrealism, and the hyper modern avant-garde. Neo-Bazinian realist films (e.g. films by Ken Loach and Mike Leigh) keep some of the features of Bazinian realism—location-based, low budget, non-professional actors—but explore the usual themes of exclusion, poverty, and violence in the new context of consumerism rather than in the context of deprivation (the original context for neo-realism). Traductive realism, often represented by “the cinema of abjection” (e.g. *Nil by Mouth*, *Live Flesh*) exhibits a stronger anti-style aesthetics, positioning itself in-between Bazinian realism and self-conscious avant garde cinema. Hyperrealism (e.g. the cinema of Julio Bardem and Bigas Luna) is distinguished by the presence of the fantastic and the surreal within the natural. The hypermodern avant-garde, unlike the historical avant gardes which have usually developed around a revolutionary politics, is represented by the members of the stylistically innovative, though politically disengaged, film collective Dogme 5.⁸

I would like to supplement this list by tracing a few subtle shifts or slippages in realist film discourse, starting with Kracauer’s notion of film’s affinity for the ‘flow of life.’ European cinema, in particular, has always prided itself on being governed by ‘truth’ rather than ‘logic’, structured according to the ‘rhythm’ of life rather than according to dramatic conventions. With their associational rather than dramatic narrative structure European films seem to illustrate Kracauer’s idea of film’s inherent affinity for “chance meetings, strange overlappings, and fabulous coincidences” which, however, should not be “forced into an ‘obvious compositional pattern’.”⁹ Films with an episodic structure built around multiple intersecting stories and involving some kind of spatial displacement are cinematic, argues Kracauer, because they draw attention to “the solidarity of the universe”¹⁰ revealed, for example, in the representation of things and events co-existing in different spaces. However, Kracauer makes a distinction between truly cinematic simultaneity—which suggests “the dense fabric into which various sections of space are woven”¹¹—and a decorative simultaneity, which emerges from too obvious thematic or compositional relations between the different spaces.

However, many contemporary films exhibit the decorative rather than the truly cinematic type of simultaneity and indeterminacy. They operate within a more stylized, hyper-associational discourse, which refigures the supposedly inherent affinities of film for the unstaged, the indeterminate and the fortuitous as a new subject matter i.e., they treat these affinities as Ideas or Concepts. An example of this hyper-associational discourse is ‘the new metaphysic of parallel worlds’ (films exhibiting an obsession with fate, destiny, chance, coincidence: e.g. Tom Tykwer, Krzysztof Kieslowski, Michael Haneke), which is arguably the most important thematic innovation in contemporary European cinema:

The exploration of parallel worlds, especially of the ironies of chance encounters or chance disconnection, is a key metaphysic of immanence in the new cinema...This contemplation of chance is neither mystical nor transcendental, but a metaphysic of the here and now...a filmic reworking of age-old contemplation, the relationship of free will and design in the nature of the human condition.¹²

Second, and related to the first point above, this hyper-associational discourse betrays a deep-seated anxiety about meaning, or rather about the lack of it, as evidenced by the desperate attempts of contemporary art films to bring together disparate storylines and unrelated characters, to draw connections between phenomena and events that initially seem disconnected and meaningless and, often, to disguise the dearth of meaning with an excess of pure whimsy. Films like Delphine Gleize's *Carnage*, Jacques Rivette's *Va Savoir*, or Agnès Jaoui's *The Taste of Others* distract us from the concealed eclipse of the meaningful by emphasizing the extraordinary, the whimsical, the absurd, that which becomes meaningful, in fact more meaningful, precisely through its meaninglessness. The oxymoron "meaningful meaninglessness" expresses the constant oscillation in such films between an awareness of the absurdity and arbitrariness of events and, on the other hand, an almost hysterical belief in the interconnectedness of everything, a belief that all accidents are, at bottom, not accidental at all but, on the contrary, overflowing with significance.

In sum, indeterminacy seems to betray some of the pessimistic connotations Kracauer sought to suppress, specifically an anxiety over meaning, an awareness that the tendency toward fragmentation and abstraction characteristic of contemporary life can be interpreted not only as liberating and enlightening but also as confirming the depressing impossibility of making connections, of making sense (drawing connections between things and ideas) or of making human connections. Apart from the associational discourse of art films like the ones cited above, which almost automatically invites the theme of human bonding, that theme has been treated from a philosophical (metaphysical and ethical) perspective (in the films of Kieslowski and Tykwer) as well as from a transnational perspective (in contemporary migrant and diasporic European films or cross-border films, e.g. Michael Haneke, Claire Denis, Fatih Akin and others).

Third, in Kracauer's theory 'indeterminacy' was construed as a reflection of the irreducible complexity and richness of reality i.e., film's affinity for the indeterminate guaranteed a rare insight into complex underlying realities. By contrast, in the postmodern context of a general mistrust for grand-narratives, for any kind of 'insight' into 'underlying realities', indeterminacy no longer promises to reveal something about reality; instead, it refers to formal experimentations with, mostly deconstructions of, narrative structure and characterization (e.g. deliberate fragmentations of narrative time as well as of characters' identity).

The essential difference between cinematic postmodernism and...realist and modernist theories and cinemas lies in the fact that whereas postmodernism employs indeterminacy in order to defer and place limits on the search for an 'essential' core of meaning, Kracauer's conception of 'distraction', and the impressionist conception of photogenie, employ indeterminacy as a means of understanding underlying realities.Advocates of postmodernism regard this

emphasis on insight as problematic, and as the inevitable consequence of an intellectual tradition founded on the need to establish ideological ‘meta-critiques’.¹³

Contemporary art films such as *Carnage*, *Va Savoir*, *The Taste of Others* and *Venus Beauty Institute* employ strategies Kracauer associates with the basic affinities of film—such as distraction and episodicity—but they use them decoratively or too self-consciously. The films attempt to hide the main storyline by truncating it into many subplots whose sole function is to create the illusion of capturing the multifaceted and indeterminate nature of reality, the illusion that the story is not scripted but emerges ‘spontaneously’ from the context of the multiple intersecting ‘sub-stories’. *Venus Institute*, for instance, makes a very obvious and desperate attempt to create a sense of immediacy and spontaneity (i.e. a sense of realism) by structuring the narrative around a series of entrances into, and exits from, a Paris beauty parlour called Venus Institute. The main story (a conventional love story) is continuously and purposefully interrupted by the supposedly unscripted flow of customers through this public place, which becomes a sort of a theatre stage as we are forced to watch a handful of designated ‘quirky’ customers enter and exit, overlapping in speech and movement, literally bumping into each other to create a general and diffuse sense of ‘spontaneous’, ‘realistic’ busy-ness. Far from being episodic in the sense of ‘meandering’ or ‘indeterminate’, the narrative is highly stylized through crosscutting or parallel editing which links the separate vignettes thematically and/or compositionally, thus violating Kracauer’s demand that episodes should not be explicitly linked through a common, transcendent idea which they merely illustrate. Not only are the vignettes linked thematically but the overriding theme that links and thus predetermines them, despite their pretense at spontaneity, is the theme of making connections. The film’s form becomes its content: rather than ‘unself-consciously’ reflecting the indeterminacy of reality in its own indeterminate, episodic form, the film is *about* the indeterminacy, fragility, transience and fortuitousness of human bonds.

Carnage forces a series of “chance meetings, strange overlappings, and fabulous coincidences” into an “obvious compositional pattern.” Occasionally, though not consistently, the disparate vignettes are supposed to be more strongly linked via editing: e.g. on several occasions the movements of a character in one of the sub-stories are matched (through a match-on-action or a graphic match) with the movements of a character in another sub-story. The piling up of deliberately random, weird and insignificant detail, presented in a loose, uneventful narrative, produces an effect very different from that of Kracauer’s privileged episodic narrative as illustrated, for instance, by Italian neorealist films like de Sica’s *Umberto D*. The uneventful sequence of the maid waking up, often cited as an example of the use of ‘dead time’, is still meaningful insofar as it reveals, very economically, the maid’s daily routine; on the other hand, the randomness and uneventfulness of the episodes making up *Carnage* is self-consciously orchestrated, forcing us into the position of passive observers of a parade of escalating (and annoying) eccentricity. *Carnage* uses any possible excuse (from unlikely to highly improbable to downright fantastic) to make its multiple storylines intersect at some point and thus illuminate the overall theme (human relationships, including those between parents and children, between lovers, and between husbands and wives). The significance of what happens to these characters is supposed to lie almost entirely in the fact that they

co-exist, that whatever happens to them happens at the same time. The film tries to get a lot of symbolic mileage from stressing the idea of simultaneity, which is supposed to artificially add emotional significance to what are otherwise neutrally represented events.

Carnage is a 'thesis film'. Its 'thesis' ('the human condition can be described, metaphorically, as carnage or psychological (and physical) damage') is illustrated with examples (the several sub-plots), appropriately placed long 'pregnant pauses' alternated with a 'significant glance' or a 'significant stare.' In short, a lot of pretentious weirdness is created by simply withholding information (e.g. the story of the sour relationship between mother and daughter, resulting in the mother's suicide, for which very good reasons are eventually provided) and thus reversing the usual relationship between causes and effects: effects are presented first and only later the motives for them, which, in themselves, are not that mysterious or hard to grasp. As a result, all events seem reversible: it seems that the 'events' making up the sub-plots could have been presented in any order without affecting the overall meaning of the film. Devoid of a sense of irreversibility, *Carnage* (as well as *Va Savoir* and *The Taste of Others*) tends toward allegory rather than drama. However, allegory is a far cry from indeterminacy, as Kracauer understands it.

Surprisingly, while episodic film like *Carnage* that fit into the associational, de-dramatized discourse privileged by Kracauer actually fail in their pretensions to realism, films that appear to be 'gimmicky' and over-determined in their obsession with, and deconstruction, of narrative—such as *Memento* or *Following*—approximate closer the indeterminacy advocated by Kracauer. In fact, Kracauer's own theory suggests the potentially cinematic nature of films preoccupied with their own narrative structure. By placing an extra emphasis on the chain of causes and effects responsible for events, such films demonstrate film's affinity for endlessness, because "the affinity for the fortuitous goes well together with the concern for causal interrelationships."¹⁴ Breaking down the chain of events into smaller and smaller fragments and trying to understand the role of even the most insignificant event in the unfolding of the action "impress[es] upon us the inexhaustibility of the causal continuum."¹⁵ Contrary to what he argues elsewhere, Kracauer here asserts that it is not by loosening the causal connections between events that a film suggests the arbitrariness and fortuitousness of reality but, on the contrary, by obsessively searching for the causal connections between micro-events.

This is why, contrary to what one might expect, Kracauer does not dismiss the detective film (and other related genres) as too formulaic. Sleuthing is cinematic, he argues, because when the detective is looking for material clues that have gone unnoticed he is engaged in restoring the world to our senses, in agreement with the 'revealing' function of film. Sleuthing also demonstrates the affinity of film for the accidental, the insignificant, and the irrelevant: the private eye studies every little detail as potentially meaningful and tries to inscribe it in a causal explanation of the crime he is investigating. As Poe's master sleuth Dupin declares, 'the larger portion of truth arises from the seemingly irrelevant'.¹⁶ Accordingly, Kracauer illustrates the idea of endlessness with two films obliquely indebted to the detective genre, *Citizen Kane* and *Rashomon*, both of which share with *Memento* a retrospective narrative structure. Narrative fragmentation of the sort we find in films like *Memento* and *Following* is cinematic from Kracauer's point of view because it foregrounds the creative process rather than its results. Films that experiment with narrative are closer to rehearsals than to finished products: they do not

give us a plot but preliminary sketches for a plot and ask us to rehearse putting together a narrative.

As I suggested earlier, the transformations and adaptations of Kracauer's idea of indeterminacy in contemporary cinema can be observed in the loose, anti-causal, hyper-associational discourse of many art house films (*Carnage*), in hyper-causal, usually self-reflexive contemporary variations of the detective genre (*Memento*), or in more philosophically inclined films that openly deal with the philosophical ideas of Chance, Accident, and Destiny rather than embodying indeterminacy in Kracauer's preferred unself-conscious way. It seems that Tykwer's and Kieslowski's films ought to be considered uncinematic because they thematize the 'inherent affinities' of film, reducing the inherent fortuitousness, indeterminacy and endlessness of reality to the Idea of the fortuitous, the Idea of indeterminacy, the Idea of endlessness. Nevertheless, insofar as these films are obsessed with *repetition*, both on the level of content and on the level of form, they demonstrate the revealing/redeeming nature of the film medium

Kieslowski's films (*No End*, *Blind Chance*, *The Double Life of Veronique*, *A Little Film About Killing*, *A Little Film About Love*, and especially *Trois Couleurs*) explore the idea that everything new that happens to us is simply the repetition of something we did not notice the first time around, an idea clearly related to Kracauer's premise that we notice things only when they are extracted, briefly, from the 'flow of life' only to return to it again. Things become cinematic when we suddenly grow aware of their sheer presence, when they are defamiliarized or, following Kieslowski, repeated. In Kieslowski's films, repetition does not presuppose something that has already happened; rather repetition is precisely what allows something to happen, to appear. Reality—including camera-reality—is never simply 'given' to us but has to be revealed. The philosophical idea that everything is always already connected to everything else, that events have always already happened but need to be repeated in order for us to become aware of them, is reflected in Kieslowski's editing method which works through 'anticipation':

I really feel strongly that this method gets the audience used to the way we tell stories. We give a preview of things that will happen later on. We don't quite know their meaning which will only become clear later on. It's not retrospection. It's anticipation. We introduce an element that will work and become clear only a little later. (Kieslowski's "Cinema Lesson," *White*)¹⁷

Coincidence is essential to editing inasmuch as editing is discovering connections or echoes between scenes which were not predetermined but which, in retrospect, appear inevitable. Kieslowski's approach to directing actors reveals a similar fascination with, and an absolute trust in, involuntary gestures and facial expressions which, precisely through their accidental nature, reveal a significance that far surpasses in intensity and authenticity any sort of prefabricated, rehearsed meaningful gesture or movement. Kieslowski builds his characters from the 'outside'—from involuntary micro-gestures, smiles, looks, sighs, ways of walking, even swallowing—rather than from within. He demands that his actors be always poised on the verge between two different (even opposite) emotions, never knowing in which direction they would lean.

Like Kieslowski, who strongly influenced him, Tom Tykwer (*Winter Sleepers*, *Princess and the Warrior*, *Run Lola Run* and *Heaven*) is obsessed with “chance meetings, strange overlappings, and fabulous coincidences.” Although his films violate Kracauer’s demand that such coincidences not be forced into an obvious compositional pattern, they nevertheless do not make these patterns meaningful i.e., they do not recuperate chances, accidents and coincidences but treat them as constitutive of reality. The characters in *Winter Sleepers* fatefully intersect each other’s paths: a ski instructor visits his lover, forgets to lock the door of his new car; an amnesiac film projectionist walking home from work steals the car, has a car accident in which a young girl is killed; the amnesiac does not remember the accident but the girl’s father tracks down the car, assumes its owner, the ski instructor, is the one responsible for his daughter’s death, and pursues the ski instructor on the mountain slopes, where the latter falls to his equally accidental death.

Although the film patiently strings together a series of completely unrelated incidents to show us clearly how one accident leads to another, the events do not, because of that, become more meaningful. What fascinates Tykwer is the discovery that all things are interconnected, rather than the particular nature of that connection—in fact, *the more decisively these disparate elements of the narrative come together in an inexorable way, the less causally related they appear to be*, lending support to Kracauer’s argument about causality. Even after the sequence of accidents has been successfully reconstructed, the girl’s accidental death does not make any more sense and neither does it become easier to distribute the blame for it; in fact, the real murderer (the amnesiac) goes unpunished.

One final perspective from which the associational discourse, which Kracauer considers most expressive of the ‘basic affinities’ of the film medium, can be approached is the transnational perspective we find, for example, in contemporary European cinema. Before the end of the Cold War, European cinema distinguished itself from Hollywood cinema not in terms of expressing a coherent European identity but mostly in terms of a different film form, characterized, among other things, by narrative ambiguity and characters deprived of clear motivations. In the last couple of decades, however, the search for a shared European identity has effected a significant shift in the notion of realism: the ‘return of the real’ film scholars have noted in contemporary European films refers to these films’ *shared subject matter rather than to shared formal or stylistic features*. Targeting cultural theory’s failure to address questions around “social solidarity and shared material interests, which cut across cultural differences”¹⁸ critics like Mike Wayne argue that “what European cinemas share is a set of common problems and needs rather than a common culture.”¹⁹ Such arguments can be seen as an interesting (political?) variation on Kracauer’s idea of ‘cinematic subjects’. While Kracauer argues that there are certain parts of reality that are inherently more cinematic than others and thus demand to be represented by the medium of film, proponents of European integration seem to suggest that there are certain subjects which demand to be represented to compensate for their previous marginalization and exclusion from European cinema.

One implication of this kind of reasoning is that ‘realistic’ cinema becomes identified with ‘representative’ cinema, in the sense that there are certain subjects—mostly identities—that are in need of being represented. The formerly marginalized, and by virtue of that now exoticized subject, somehow acquires the aura of the ‘real’. Not only is the marginal invested with the potential of giving us access to the ‘real’ but now it

appears as though the real itself is defined by its degree of marginalization and otherness. The marginal is hypostasized as ‘the real’, most likely in an attempt to (over)compensate for all past ‘evil’ grand narratives, the nation state, national identity, national cinema being the usual culprits. Not only can such ‘cinema of the margins’ create the illusion of pluralism by using local struggles (in themselves significant) as an “advertisement for some universally tolerant late capitalism pluralism and democracy,”²⁰ but stories about the margins of Europe are too often little stories trying to get extra mileage from their alleged resistance to grand, essentializing narratives: “Yet there is often a sense in which telling ‘smaller stories’ gets conflated with telling rather inconsequential stories....There is also the danger that the small story, while it has the chance to focus in on...the specificities of culture, must also guard against a tendency...to emphasize cultural eccentricity which risks becoming...a kind of cosmopolitan whimsy.”²¹ Furthermore, low budget filmmaking—usually said to enhance the realism of a film—“often equates budgetary restrictions with small scale ambitions and a lack of engagement with the kind of big themes which can strike a cord with broad based audiences.”²² Contemporary films exploring Europeans’ shared experience of borders and thereby opening up the possibility “to make comparisons, make links, forge solidarities”²³ between Europeans, can be seen as a political adaptation of Kracauer’s claim that film reveals “the solidarity of the universe.”

Finally, it is interesting to ask whether there might be culturally specific differences in film realist discourse. A brief detour into American and European versions of the multiple/parallel worlds chronotope can perhaps offer some insights. The American version of the multiple/parallel worlds chronotope is the type of narrative revolving around the specularization or virtualization of the real, e.g. *The Matrix Trilogy*, *Virtuosity*, *Total Recall*, *The Butterfly Effect*, *Donnie Darko*, *The Truman Show*. These films, in which there is only one real world and a number of corrupted copies parading as reality, are usually structured like a game whose main purpose is to guess which of the many worlds is the real one. Take *The Butterfly Effect* (2004), for instance. This film is exemplary of a narrative that has become quite popular in the last decade. The story is told from the point of view of a protagonist who, we discover at the end of the film, is actually dead, suggesting that everything we have seen up to that point was imagined, unreal. Other films using this structure include *The Sixth Sense*, *Vanilla Sky*, and *Donnie Darko*.

American films exhibit an obsession with time as recordable, time as play back, time as simulation (*Blade Runner*, *Paycheck*, *Minority Report*, *Back to the Future*, *Total Recall*, *Terminator*). The preoccupation with infinitely reordering, restructuring, reediting events, with alternate pasts and futures, might appear liberating and optimistic. However, the assumption that thoughts, memories, previsions, intuitions are recordable, that the future can be designed and the past erased, the now cliché notion that we are the sum of our memories, all point to a far more sobering understanding of time as essentially foreclosed: there is no future, because all of the future is already available (*Minority Report*) or because the future, even if presented as real, nevertheless continues to exist in a suspended state, awaiting confirmation from the past that will make the future ‘really’ possible and real (*Back to the Future*, *Terminator*), and there is no past precisely because all of the past is preserved, stored, recordable and, if need be, erasable (*Paycheck*, *Total Recall*). If time is significant in Hollywood films, it is mostly in terms of how it is

reconstructed rather than how it is lived or, alternatively, living is equivalent to reconstructing, remembering, reconstituting, where the logic of this essentially investigative or detective approach to time precedes, and determines, the specific acts and events this overriding logical narrative structure seeks to organize. While American cinema obsesses over the difference between the real and the unreal, European cinema is burdened with distinguishing destiny from chance or meaning from meaninglessness, a typically European existential quest that can be summarized in questions such as: “Are events meaningful or absurd?” and “Am I responsible for chance events?”

We saw that in Kracauer’s discourse melancholy refers both to the human condition in modern mass culture, in which we feel nostalgic for “glittering, allusive, infinite life”, and to the detached, self-estranged state of mind encouraged by the inherent indeterminacy of the film medium, which satisfies this hunger for life. According to Kracauer, the associational and fragmented discourse of associational (episodic) film discourse approximates most closely the ‘flow of life’ thereby ‘curing’ our melancholy and reviving our connection to the material world in all its complexity and endlessness. However, associational discourse as such can be interpreted positively or negatively. The increasing fragmentation of film narratives could be seen as an instance of the postmodern critique of grand narratives, manifested in the privileging of spatial, episodic—and because of that supposedly more realistic—narratives over causal, temporally structured ones. Kracauer is representative of such a positive reading.

However, a less flattering reading offers itself when we consider that associational film discourse is subtended by a cyclical view of time, according to which time has no beginning and no end i.e. every event is a repetition of itself. Since everything has happened and will continue to happen an infinite number of times, the concepts of ‘past’, ‘present’, and ‘future’ lose all significance. The cyclical view of time renders all events reversible, coincidental and meaningless inasmuch as repetition implies reversibility whereas irreversible events are not repeatable and not accidental. Thus, one important implication of reversibility in cinema is that it renders tragedy and pathos unthinkable. The modern paradigm, reflected in narratives emphasizing chronological, causal, linear and historical thinking, depended on a strong sense of inevitability or irreversibility. Its tragic pathos becomes impossible in postmodern associational discourse. One could argue, then, along with Charles Shiro Inouye,²⁴ that the gradual displacement of narrative by associational discourse is made possible by mass culture: only in mass culture can one achieve the sort of ‘pleasing arbitrariness’ whereby arbitrary vignettes are strung together and still seem to make sense in their arbitrariness, because under the conditions of mass culture all important differences between things become blurred so that arbitrary connections between them become not only plausible but the only ones possible.

Notes

¹ Aitken, Ian. *European Film Theory and Cinema: A Critical Introduction*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001. 21-22.

² Ibid 173

³ Kracauer, Siegfried. *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997. 168-169.

⁴ Ibid 169

⁵ Ibid 17

⁶ Ibid 170

⁷ Ibid 72

⁸ Orr, John. "New Directions in Cinema." *European Cinema*. Ed. Elizabeth Ezra. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004. 301-313.

⁹ Kracauer 19

¹⁰ Ibid 64

¹¹ Ibid 65

¹² Orr 315.

¹³ Aitken 156

¹⁴ Kracauer 65

¹⁵ Ibid 66

¹⁶ Poe qtd. in Kracauer 275

¹⁷ Kieslowski, Krzysztof. *White*. (1994) CAB Productions, Canal+, MK2 Productions, Zespól Filmowy Tor. With Zbigniew Zamachowski, Julie Delpy, Janusz Gajos, Jerzy Stuhr.

¹⁸ Wayne, Mike. *The Politics of Contemporary European Cinema: Histories, Borders, Diasporas*. Portland, OR: Intellect Books, 2002. 29. A materialist approach to European cinema need not, however, dismiss formal experimentation as incompatible with or irrelevant to the new social realities interrogated by European cinema. Wayne's critique of the fetishization of difference is part of a larger attack on what he believes to be an undue "overestimating of the entrenched nature of the postmodern"(57) which treats the postmodern as "the death of ideology" instead of taking the more reasonable position that the postmodern is "the temporary unchallenged ascendancy of a particular ideology: neo-liberalism"(56). Accordingly, sweeping critiques of recent cinema in France for example--Susan Hayward's condemnation of French cinema of the 80s and 90s, the cinema du look, as enamoured with itself and politically disengaged—needs to be reevaluated: rather than being mere stylistic exercises, these films actually explore real social problems such as the deprived lifestyles of certain French subcultures.

¹⁹ Ibid 27

²⁰ Jameson, Fredric in *Screening Europe: Image and Identity in Contemporary European Cinema*. Ed. Duncan Petrie. BFI Working Papers. London: BFI Publishing, 1992. 89.

²¹ Wayne 22..

²² Ibid 26

²³ Ibid 23

²⁴ Inouye, Charles Shiro. "In the Show House of Modernity: Exhaustive Listing in Itami Juzo's *Tanpopo*." *Word and Image in Japanese Cinema*. Eds. Dennis Washburn and Carole Cavanaugh. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 126-146.