

# Siegfried Kracauer's New York Networks

*by Johannes von Moltke*

*University of Michigan*



© 2022 by Johannes von Moltke



## Abstract

When Siegfried Kracauer arrived in the United States in May 1941 aboard the *Nyassa*, he was one of countless German émigrés to have narrowly escaped the Nazi conquest of Europe. By the time of his death a quarter century later, Kracauer had found his footing in the American scene, having published significant contributions to the emerging discipline of film studies (*From Caligari to Hitler*, 1947; *Theory of Film*, 1960). He had been hard at work on a monograph about the craft of the historian, which would be published posthumously as *History: The Last Things Before the Last* (1969). How did this exile gain his bearings upon disembarking in New York Harbor? What were the waystations? Who provided the helping hands? Where did Kracauer turn?

# Siegfried Kracauer's New York Networks

by Johannes von Moltke

When Siegfried Kracauer arrived in the United States in May 1941 aboard the *Nyassa*, he was one of countless German émigrés to have narrowly escaped the Nazi conquest of Europe. By the time of his death a quarter century later, Kracauer had found his footing in the American scene, having published significant contributions to the emerging discipline of film studies (*From Caligari to Hitler*, 1947; *Theory of Film*, 1960). He had been hard at work on a monograph about the craft of the historian, which would be published posthumously as *History: The Last Things Before the Last* (1969). How did this exile gain his bearings upon disembarking in New York Harbor? What were the waystations? Who provided the helping hands? Where did Kracauer turn?

## Manhattan Transfer: Locating Siegfried Kracauer

To piece together this story is not just an exercise in intellectual biography (for which Kracauer's papers in the German Literary Archives in Marbach, Germany hold the bulk of the relevant material). It is also a question of reconstructing the nodes and edges of networks in which Kracauer moved, which helped him secure his livelihood, and which became consequential for his own intellectual development. For this purpose, the trails and traces to be pursued in American archives are essential. They range from correspondences with friends and collaborators (e.g. with Barbara Deming, whose papers are held in the Schlesinger Library Collections at Radcliffe) to archives of journals and publishing houses with which he worked (such as Princeton University Press, though unfortunately some archives such as those of *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* appear not to have been kept with similar care), to institutional archives such as those of the Museum of Modern Art Film Library, or the university archives at Columbia and NYU. Given the Rockefeller Foundation's role in funding several of the projects in

which Kracauer would involve himself during those twenty-five years, the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) houses valuable materials for reconstructing the American years of this influential cultural critic.

During the Weimar Republic, Siegfried Kracauer established himself as a trenchant theorist of film, culture, and modernity, and he is now considered one of the key thinkers of the twentieth century. When he arrived in Manhattan aboard a crowded refugee ship in 1941, however, he was virtually unknown in the United States and had yet to write his best-known books, *From Caligari to Hitler* and *Theory of Film*. The monograph for which I was able to conduct research at the RAC, sets out to detail the intricate ways in which the American intellectual and political context shaped Kracauer's seminal contributions to film studies, and I show how, in turn, Kracauer's American writings helped shape the emergent discipline.<sup>1</sup>

Scholarship on Siegfried Kracauer himself has proliferated in recent years: in cinema studies, his two above-mentioned monographs were consecrated as "classics" of film theory soon after their publication in 1947 and 1960, respectively. But it wasn't until the centennial of Kracauer's birth in 1989 that his earlier work as one of the leading cultural and film critics of the Weimar Republic became more widely known in English language scholarship; a translation of Kracauer's writings from the 1920s (*The Mass Ornament*) followed in 1996 and cemented his new-found reputation as a keen reader of modernity and mass culture. To be sure, this reputation has grown in the shadow of other theorists affiliated with the Frankfurt School, many of them acquaintances and friends of Kracauer's – such as Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, or Walter Benjamin. Only recently, with the near completion of the critical edition of Kracauer's complete works from Suhrkamp in Germany, has the latter's work begun to take on a distinctly recognizable shape of its own, based largely on newly published materials from his large archive in Marbach Germany. In 2016, the fiftieth anniversary of Kracauer's death saw another wave of publications, including the first serious biography by Jörg Später, just recently translated into English. While Später's contribution is enormously important in that it takes a comprehensive view of Kracauer's life that includes its oft-neglected later stages,

sustained attention to his American years remained something of a gap in scholarship, which I sought to fill with *The Curious Humanist*. My argument there is that the American experience, the intellectual and institutional contexts in which Kracauer worked during the final quarter century of his life (1941-66), is as important as the pathbreaking works from the Weimar years that have received most attention since 1989.

During his years in the United States, Kracauer moved several times, but only in a relatively small radius, more or less confined to Manhattan's Upper West Side. Given this location, but also the networks he sought to build in the city, I originally set out to ask what it means to consider Kracauer as the "New York Intellectual" that he became. Over the course of my research, I would learn to distinguish carefully between a descriptive use of this term – Kracauer was an intellectual based in New York – and the group designation of the New York Intellectuals, a loosely defined "tribe" of renegade mid-century critics and thinkers with an outsize influence on American intellectual life and culture. Though Kracauer moved on the periphery of their circles, at times connecting tangentially but never penetrating to their centers, it would be wrong to include him among this group. And yet, the points of contact, though sporadic and not always consequential, seemed significant as one facet of Kracauer's New York situation. Adopting a transatlantic perspective on Kracauer's work, I wanted to demonstrate how he pursued questions in conversation with contemporary critics from Theodor Adorno to Hannah Arendt, from Clement Greenberg to Robert Warshow: questions about the origins of totalitarianism and the authoritarian personality; about high and low culture; about liberalism, democracy, and what it means to be human. From these wide-flung debates, I wanted Kracauer's own voice to emerge as that of an incisive cultural critic invested in a humanist understanding of the cinema.

If the New York Intellectuals constituted one open-ended network in which to situate Kracauer, another included his contact with fellow émigrés, particularly members of the Institute for Social Research that had relocated from Frankfurt via Geneva to Columbia University. Here, Kracauer remained in close contact with his friend Leo Löwenthal, as the published correspondence reveals. His relations

with the leading figures, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, were far more rocky, yet also significant.

While there is excellent literature on both the New York Intellectuals<sup>2</sup> and the Frankfurt School in Exile,<sup>3</sup> Siegfried Kracauer rarely figures in these studies. I claim that Kracauer's life and work in Manhattan bridged these two intellectual traditions from opposite sides of the Atlantic, whose significant contributions to our understanding of culture and society have been treated largely in isolation. Ex-centric to both of these circles, his interactions and contributions remained, as I said, at the margins – and consequently needed to be reconstructed on the basis of archival research. Here, the Rockefeller Archive Center's holdings are invaluable in that they allow us to connect the dots between various institutional contexts that involved Rockefeller Foundation funding on the one hand, and contributions by Kracauer on the other. They also provide glimpses into developing personal relationships such as that between Kracauer and John Marshall, director of the Rockefeller Foundation's Division of Humanities, who took characteristically detailed notes of several meetings in his office memos.

## **Kracauer and the Film Library at MoMA**

The Rockefeller Foundation played a key role in funding the Film Library at the Museum of Modern Art, and the RAC holds a comprehensive collection of documents relating to the work of the library, its acquisitions, and its plans for expansion. Some of this has been detailed in published scholarly work<sup>4</sup> and biographies of key players,<sup>5</sup> but again, the collection allows us to zoom in specifically on Kracauer, who appeared on the Rockefeller Foundation's doorstep barely three weeks after his arrival in New York: on May 9, 1941, John Marshall received Kracauer's curriculum vitae.<sup>6</sup>

As becomes evident from the subsequent materials, the Rockefeller Foundation was instrumental in helping to set up Kracauer at MoMA, where he would be appointed “a kind of theorist in the work which the Film Library is now contracting to undertake for government agencies” – i.e. the study of Nazi

propaganda and German film more broadly that would ultimately lead to the publication of *From Caligari to Hitler*.<sup>7</sup> The files show the behind-the-scenes efforts to find permanent employment for Kracauer at MoMA but note the constraints on hiring the recently arrived émigré, who was still considered an “enemy alien.”<sup>8</sup>

## **Kracauer and the Research Project on Totalitarian Communications at the New School**

A second connection for Kracauer was downtown at the New School, where the Rockefeller Foundation was involved in financing a “Research Project on Totalitarian Communications,” under the aegis of Hans Speier and Ernst Kris. Extensive correspondence between Kris and Marshall shows the development of that project, and details early attempts to integrate Kracauer into the team of researchers that Kris and Speier had assembled. While it is unclear that this integration ever happened, the record of the discussions helps us understand how Kracauer’s work in New York took shape around questions of film and Nazi propaganda: the Totalitarian Communications project was focused primarily on radio, but its directors expressed an interest in cross-media comparison with film. Kracauer was ideally situated to undertake the film-related work, and we know from his own files that he would soon begin working on a detailed analysis of precisely the films that interested Kris and Speier in this context – most notably *Sieg im Westen*, which in May 1941 was still playing in the 96<sup>th</sup> Street Theater on New York’s Upper East Side. Here, Kracauer went to see the film multiple times, took notes, and eventually penned a document that would become integrated into *From Caligari to Hitler* as an epilogue devoted to “Propaganda and the Nazi War Film.” Though that manuscript was completed (much earlier than the book) under the aegis of MoMA, it is highly likely that the Totalitarian Communications project provided a strong impetus for its conception. Moreover, the New School provided a first anchor for Kracauer’s work in New York, though he would gravitate from the downtown project to his midtown affiliation with the MoMA.

## The Communications Group

Both the “Totalitarian Communications” project and Kracauer’s work at MoMA formed part of a larger effort, spearheaded by the “Communications Group” at the Rockefeller Foundation, to study wartime mass communications, both by the Nazis and by Americans and the Allies.<sup>9</sup> Many of the names of that group’s prominent members can also be found in the archive of Kracauer’s correspondence during those years, and the contacts would serve as steppingstones for his further employment, research, and other activities in New York. Among them were not only Marshall himself, but also towering figures of American social sciences and communications research such as the political scientist Harold Lasswell; Paul Lazarsfeld, the Viennese émigré who headed the Columbia Office of Radio Research (later Bureau of Applied Social Research), for which Kracauer and members of the Frankfurt School would eventually work as well; Hadley Cantril, the director of the Public Opinion Research Project at Princeton, who in the mid-1940s encouraged Kracauer to translate his work on cinema into the American context by working on Hollywood, and who subsequently hired Kracauer to work on a UNESCO project later published under the title “National Types as Hollywood Presents Them”; and Charles Siepmann, communications analyst for the BBC, whose work Kracauer read carefully and who would review *Theory of Film* for the *Public Opinion Quarterly* in turn.<sup>10</sup> These contacts, in other words, placed Kracauer at the center of American debates on democracy, public opinion, totalitarianism, and propaganda.

As soon as he had taken up work at the film library, Kracauer’s first job was “to develop methods by which the analysis of the German film output can be related to other types of German communication.”<sup>11</sup> Originally described by Iris Barry as “a study of wartime communication through film,”<sup>12</sup> Kracauer’s work joined other Rockefeller Foundation-funded projects engaged in “process research” – a term coined by Lasswell for a series of intermedial, basic investigations aimed at establishing ways of mapping, analyzing, and interpreting propaganda, public opinion, and communication. At Marshall’s request that he focus on this type of methodological research,<sup>13</sup> Kracauer would contribute his model for the “structural analysis” of Nazi newsreels. Eventually, though, his work would

branch off, in keeping with the sponsorship by the Humanities Division of the Rockefeller Foundation, in a more interpretive and less quantitative direction, whereas the work in other affiliated projects would constitute the founding moment of communications research as a (largely quantitative and empirical) social science. As such, a number of these projects would subsequently be critiqued by some of the more prominent scholars they had employed – albeit temporarily: after his experiences with the Princeton Radio Research Project, Adorno’s well-known misgivings about empirical social research and specifically what came to be known as “administrative research”<sup>14</sup> are perhaps only the most famous of these. Kracauer, too, would later argue the limitations of quantitative procedures in communications research.<sup>15</sup>

Regardless of how these divisions played out in the subsequent history of disciplinary formations, it appears characteristic of the historical moment that distinctions between quantitative and qualitative methods, and between the social sciences and the humanities were not yet sharply drawn. Thus, the Frankfurt School could find ways of yoking its brand of critical theory to the kind of empirical research under Lazarsfeld with which it is today considered largely inimical;<sup>16</sup> and Kracauer’s theoretical work could still align with Speier’s and Kris’s quantitative tabulations of, for example, “non-military sentences” as a percentage of all sentences in German radio broadcasts on different military campaigns.<sup>17</sup> Regardless of their emerging methodological differences, such projects, it was sensed, contributed to a common goal of understanding cultural and mass communication in the age of totalitarianism. At the heart of the intense debates about these studies and their object (alternately “propaganda” or “communications”) were consequently questions of media, public opinion, and democracy. The “Communications Group” weighed the American response to Nazi propaganda against fears of overreaching and advocating forms of directing and controlling public opinion that would themselves be perceived as fascist or authoritarian.<sup>18</sup> Inevitably, in other words, communications research on propaganda was bound up with assumptions and debates concerning democracy: its characteristic forms (and constraints upon) knowledge and communication, the use and abuse of public opinion, the ability of “the people” to speak back to its representatives. In searching for ways to counter the apparent successes of

totalitarian propaganda, the options considered ranged from trust in rational discourse, to the privileging of “expert” over public opinion, to the adoption of authoritarian structures even by democratic government. As Peter Decherney’s work has shown, such debates were inscribed deeply into the institutional, historical, and political contexts in which Kracauer took up work at MoMA.

## **Conclusion**

At the Rockefeller Foundation, the emerging discipline of communication studies was championed by John Marshall, himself a Harvard-educated humanist. At the time of Kracauer’s arrival, shortly before the United States’ entry into WWII, distinctions between social scientific and humanities research were, I have suggested, arguably secondary to the shared sense of political purpose. But if we adopt a retrospective view from our current institutional landscape, where disciplines such as film studies and communication studies are housed in separate divisions and occasionally compete over funding, students, and even the very objects that they study (not to mention the methods with which to study them), the historical juncture of the 1940s seems profoundly consequential. For from the wartime collaboration among institutions and personnel as different in purpose and temperament as the Museum of Modern Art, the Rockefeller Foundation “Communications Group,” the American Jewish Congress, the Office of Strategic Services, the Bureau of Applied Social Research, the various radio research projects, and many more, certain paths bifurcated. The study of film, which was integral to research on propaganda, communication, public opinion, and even to the *Studies in Prejudice*, might easily have taken the turn towards the social sciences. As Lee Grieveson rightly notes, film studies emerged out of social scientific interests as much as from the arts-centered pedagogy charted by Dana Polan and the political machinations chronicled by Decherney. Kracauer’s work in New York hovered precisely around this bifurcation, but his sensibilities as a humanist did not: despite his occasional interest in instrumentalizing his own insights, he never considered that the latter could be generated in any other way than through an interpretive, theoretically reflexive form. Kracauer was and remained a humanist first, and a social scientist a distant second.

Reviewing Kracauer's New York networks and his work on film, politics, and popular culture allows us to gauge the lasting relevance of a unique intellectual constellation during the 1940s. We can gain new insights into the relationship between art and politics; modernism and mass culture; media and experience; and the beginnings of film studies in the United States, among others. At the height of postwar debates about totalitarianism and the future of liberalism, Kracauer's work unites these concerns through a lasting humanist commitment that is worth revisiting from our ostensibly post-humanist present.

---

1 von Moltke, Johannes. *The Curious Humanist: Siegfried Kracauer in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016.

2 Wald, Alan M. *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987. Jumonville, Neil. *Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. Teres, Harvey M. *Renewing the Left: Politics, Imagination, and the New York Intellectuals*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

3 Wheatland, Thomas. *The Frankfurt School in Exile*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. Jenemann, David. *Adorno in America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

4 Decherney, Peter. *Hollywood and the Culture Elite: How the Movies Became American*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

5 Sitton, Robert. *Lady in the Dark: Iris Barry and the Art of Film*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

6 Culbert provides an excellent account of some of this material. Culbert, David. "The Rockefeller Foundation, the Museum of Modern Art Film Library, and Siegfried Kracauer, 1941." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 13, no. 4 (January 1993): 495–511.

7 John Marshall office memo January 28, 1942. Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), Rockefeller Foundation Records (RF), RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 251, Folder 2990.

8 John Marshall office memo May 22, 1942. RAC, RF, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 251, Folder 2990.

9 It is interesting to note, in view of the subsequent developments of communication studies and film studies as academic disciplines, that this research was pioneered by and carried out under the aegis of the Humanities division at the Rockefeller Foundation.

---

10 Siepmann, Charles A. "Kracauer, Siegfried, Theory of Film." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1961): 153. Gary, Brett. "Mobilizing for the War on Words: The Rockefeller Foundation, Communication Scholars and the State." In *The Nervous Liberals: Propaganda Anxieties from World War I to the Cold War*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

11 So determined at a luncheon meeting between Lasswell, Lazarsfeld, and Marshall on June 7, 1941. RAC RF, Officers' Diaries, RG 12.

12 Letter to John Marshall, 14 May 1941. RAC, RF,, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 250, Folder 2989.

13 John Marshall office memo July 7, 1941. RAC, RF, RG 1.1, Series 200, Box 251, Folder 2990.

14 Lazarsfeld, Paul. "Remarks on Administrative and Critical Communications Research." *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1941).

15 Siegfried Kracauer, "The Challenge of Qualitative Content Analysis," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1952): 631–42; Adorno's most explicit reflections on the meeting between critical theory and communications research appear in "Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 215–42. But note Jenemann's refutation of this stereotypical, "cantankerous" Adorno in favor of a more nuanced account of Adorno's own, more nuanced, positions on social research over the years – and especially after his return from the United States.

16 Jenemann, David. *Adorno in America*

17 Kris, Ernst, and Hans Speier. *German Radio Propaganda; Report on Home Broadcasts during the War*. London, New York [etc.]: Oxford university press, 1944. This project's methods relied on word counts ("words connoting bravery;" mentions of Hitler's name and those of enemy leaders; etc.), the quantification of particular sentence types (such as "non-military process sentences") and the number of references to particular topics (German culture; British vs. German morale; youth and age stereotypes; national attributes; etc.); it then correlated these findings with the course of the war and its various, specific military campaigns from the invasion of Poland to the battle of Stalingrad, to find that "the decline of Nazi propaganda [preceded] that of the German army" (vii).

18 This was specifically Charles Siepmann's concern in response to a 1940 report on "Research in Mass Communications." See Brett Gary, *The Nervous Liberals: Propaganda Anxieties from World War I to the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 104; On the "Communications Group," see also Decherney, *Hollywood and the Culture Elite*, 146ff.