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Arcadia, Mouse and „The Last Things Before the Last“. Paradigms of Dialogue in Siegfried Kracauers and Erwin Panofsky Letters 1941-1966

I Close Up as Dawar Ahcher: „Tentative Outlines of not Wishing to Compromise“

Until the late twentieth century the letter was still a central form of communication within the private and public spheres and across their somewhat fluid boundary. With the rise of life writing studies, letters have become the subject of an increasing number of interdisciplinary analyses. Their common ground is the plausible suggestion that letters are proto-genres whose distinctive yet infinitely malleable features can be best understood through the social and literary codes of relationship, and in the case of Kracauer and Panofsky they are as such part of an multifaceted intellectual performance, influencing the concrete pursuit of their academic and intellectual lives. Letter writing was thus not only an important technique of relationship-building and networking but also a tool of developing own ideas and discourses in correspondence with the partner addressed. The act of writing letters was a useful exercise in creating a succinct but persuasive argument, which is still open and not fixed in form of an essay or book, open for the challenging response of the other. Ideas even expressed as a comprehensive and coherent point of view were transformed through the practice of correspondence that activates the possibility to see or state things differently.

In broad accordance to the indepth research done on the letters of Panofsky and Kracauer, especially by their editor Volker Breidecker, I liked to further highlight their correspondence both as a hybrid genre as well as a complex performance of theoretical reflexion. Writing letters in this sense was a performance of reflexion in flux as well as an annotation of everydaylife, with an in-between, at times even a liminal status. In my talk today I liked to explore the hypothesis, that the correspondence of Kracauer and Panofsky between 1941 and 1966 is a paradigm of developing an own research model of relational investment. I am specifically interested in the theoretical potential of these correspondences

containing a methodological model operating against the grain of disciplinary boundaries in most contemporary universities, subverting the the fatuous and politically empty rhetoric of the interdisciplinary. Until today these letters are a laboratory of cultural picture-history, and are as such documenting the effort of both scholars enlarging the field of humanities to include “images in the broadest sense“, nevertheless strictly mapped by discourses, aiming to serve as models for a deeper understanding the dynamics of cultural transformation.

Before addressing some of the key methodological and conceptual implications relating their correspondences, I liked to delineate in a snapshot the social scope and function of the letters, inscribed in their composition. Basically, the letters between Kracauer and Panofsky performed social courtesies. An abundant rhetoric of politeness, kindness and mutual support made their correspondence a form of ritual gift-giving. They were stimulating self-reflexion rather than critique, evaluating each others potentials in a sense of giving almost unconditional affirmation to the intellectual pursuits of the other. This aspect touches upon the personal and introspective uses for which they employed letters, the ways in which they articulated their scholarly lives, thoughts and experiences. In other words: These letters served as a material site for the intellectual ‘self’. They document an intimate exchange between the two writers as known set of shared understandings that are not made explicit. In as much the letters served a private and social purpose, they also implicitly addressed a wider ranging audience. Therefore the realm of the correspondence was always an insentive for a broader exchange. As such the letters were a display of a mosaic of microanalysis in general and case studies in particular, intertwined with casual configurations of real life incidences. This form of a display of a theoretical reflexion is neatly corresponding with Kracauers own notion of a mosaik, stressing the importance to collecte and analyse flotsam (Treibgut) as essential detail, suitable for wider dissemination. Most importantly however, the correspondences achieved significance not merely as reflexive remains, but through the very act of writing itself, interrogating traditional conceptions of scholarly writing. This performative mode of letter writing unfolded itself as a way of shuffling back and forth between

reception and production, monologue and dialogue, the written and the spoken word, a process which literarily takes place in the act of writing.

Although the historical legacies of Kracauer and Panofsky have neatly diverged, with each accorded a secure and separate place in the established narratives of European-American intellectual life during the fatal years between the First World War and the Postwar Years after the Second World War, the depth of their shared presuppositions in methods of research and thinking in regards to visual culture only more recently have come into focus. Thirty years after the closure of their correspondence — in the German edition of 1996 — the letters reveal the most prominent common field of interest for both: film, more precisely, film as a medium to understand major turns in art as well as history.

In this pursuit the letters express explicitly a methodological attitude I would label as radical comparative approach, an exploratory and rigorous practice of research, one could tentatively describe as displaying orientation marks posted by difference. Surprisingly a recurring key figure for Panofsky explaining Poussin's „Et in Arcadia ego“ was a mouse. But not so much the mouse sitting next to Guercino's skull or the mouse he mused „Michelangelo failed to carve“. It was Mickey Mouse, which the Art Historian appreciated in animation. Walt Disney seemed to epitomize cinema in general and when Panofsky's „Style and Medium in the Moving Pictures“ appeared in transition in 1937, he took the Mickey Mouse cartoons „as the ideal manifestations of film possibilities“. Over ten years from 1937 until 1947 Panofsky worked on different versions of this film essay and was at the same time writing on the book „Das Leben und die Kunst Albrecht Dürers.“(1943) In the correspondence with Siegfried Kracauer in these years as well as in his other writings nobody drew more cinematographic comparisons than Panofsky. He compared Greta Garbo to Dürer; in the silent movies she had developed a style “which relates to the regular art of acting as graphics to painting.” By limiting herself to silent movies she had established an autonomous style similar to Dürer's mastership in copperplate print. But when she talked she acted, according to Panofsky, like a watercolored etching done by Rembrandt. In his famous Dürer book he compared his workshop with Walt

Disney's atelier, and he even analyzed the portraits according to cinematographic categories, confirming to Kracauer "that we both learned something from the movies!" The same is true of the Leonardesque Codex Huygens, in which Panofsky saw not only the "kinetic possibilities" but also the "cinematographic representation" and the preformation of "the modern cinema." Panofsky nominates four essential elements of film as folk art: horror, pornography, humor, and a clear-cut moral. Instead of a whole set of reservations, tending to see mass culture as both vulgar and authoritarian, both Panofsky and Kracauer used the analysis of film as a side for orientation marks posted by difference. Consequently they were able to open up the field of their research for new models of experience as a cultural and historical turn. Film to both of them was as an important innovation as the central perspective in the Renaissance.

Unmistakingly however, their radical comparative research came along with a deep reflexive and even elitist distance to the subjects they analysed. And this was important to Kracauer also on a different level: the interweaving of micro- and macrohistory. Among the notes Kracauer drew up for his post-humous book on history is a page entitled "Emphasis on minutiae—Close up—micro-analysis," to which Breidecker has carefully drawn attention. As an example of a close-up, Kracauer insits on the "principle of disjunction" described by Panofsky. In contrast the comparative approach as junction, was an ongoing principle in the correspondence between Kracauer and Panofsky. In a later letter from October 1960 Panofsky refers to Kracauer's new „Theory on Film“ with the following comment:

„I have only „schnuppered“ around in it and, needless to say, find myself in complete agreement with everything I have thus far encountered. I was particularly amused by your admirable comparison of the beholder, torn between picture and text demanding to be appreciated as poetry, to Buridan's ass. This in a nutshell, sums up my whole theory, and with this one Kracauer passage in mind no one will ever have to read Panofsky.“

Because especially Kracauer's wide-ranging works emerge from no rigidly unified approach, instead always remaining open to unusual and highly innovative perspectives, the correspondence with Panofsky accordingly resists the temptation to force generalization. The letters in exchange do, however, identify recurring tropes in both their lifetime's effort to perceive the basic posture and composition of particular cultures through their visual manifestations. The correspondences between Kracauer und Panovsky thereby conduct a movement of thought („Denkbewegung“) resulting in deep methodological convergences. Kracauer developed in his own words „methods of approach for a content analysis of films“ as equivalent for what Panofsky called „iconography in a deeper sense“. Atopic in its direction, yet dialogical in method, Kracauer finally states rather dryly in „History“: „Contemporaries commune with each other in various ways; so it is highly probable that their exchange give rise to cross-linkages between accomplishments and transactions of the moment.“ (p. 152)

II Wide Angle as Another Concern: „A Thighrope Walking between Yesterday and Today!“

To my own surprise the letters of Karacauer and Panofsky not only appear to be valuable for reflexions of methodology in transdisziplinary research but also offer possibilities to further engage in questions concerning relational aesthetics or as I tried to heuristically name it relational investments. Relational aesthetics through the lens of the critic Nicolas Bourriaud, drafted in 1997's collection of essays *Esthetique Relationnel*, bring specifically collective or communal aspects of art into focus. Bourriaud defines relational art as whereby 'meaning' is interpreted collectively, socially, rather than intimately or individually...; mostly beholden to environment and audience, where the recipient is not simply addressed, but encouraged to be or start a community or take an action. "A do-it-yourself, microtopian ethos is what Bourriaud perceives to be the core political significance of relational aesthetics," Claire Bishop sums up the argument in her study „Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectorship“. Bishop concludes not with a suggestion that relational art or aesthetics needs to develop greater social conscience, so much as raising the cautionary note that while all

relations which produce “dialog” are automatically assumed to be democratic and therefore good, ending with the question “what does democracy really mean?” Taking a relational approach, we were thus challenged to consider the ways in which our subjects and research engages with urgent social, cultural and political issues.

From this backdrop of debate I liked to sketch two further aspects of my today's brief introduction of the idea of „relational investments“ for a possibly more elaborate contribution to the pursuit of „Another Concern.“ I consider the keywords „selfreflexive method“ and „relational practice“ as pinpoints for research perspectives on „Theory and the German-Jewish Literary Tradition“ so to speak from a wide angle lense. A Wide Angle lense? Technically this type of lens allows more of the scene to be included in for instance a photograph, which is useful in interior or landscape photography where the photographer may not be able to move farther from the scene to photograph it. A wide angle lens also enables either large tilt and shift movements with a view camera, in other words, a wide field of view.

From this perspective selfreflexivity in the realm of „Another Concern“ could draw specific interests in the potential of identifications or disidentifications beyond familiar identity politics. In question are here at large not only German Jewish identity politics, but also questions of agency in the contemporary academic world, thriving for international as well as interdisciplinary potency. Non-binary ways to think identification, deeply rooted in Jacques Derridas theory of *différance*, have put the oppositional terms of the binary in ceaseless motion and many cultural theorists have in the last decade pioneered a fluid concept of intersectional identities functioning as, in a phrase of Stuart Hall, „points of identification ... not an essence but a positioning.“ Karcauers referreal to the myth of Ahasver in „History - The Last Things Before the Last“ is as much situated in his meditations on history as well as his everyday's life experience (*Lebenswelt*), reconstructing him/himself as figure in shifting borderlands of time and space, which allows for the in-between status of identifications which resist the structural terms of a simplistic binary. Instead one can see in this formation how

identifications across ethnicity and class are unfolding and maybe more importantly, strategies of disidentification are deployed as distancing aspects of his negotiation with existing cultural codes. As in much later years queer theory with its insistently politicized quality, Kracaue's figure of Ahasver mobilizes complex models of identification involving relationality, hybridity and last but not least contradictions, allowing identifications to remain open ended. Recurring to the letters of Kracaue and Panofsky from the period of 1941-1966 exemplifies from my point of view the precious but also precarious task of reevaluating historical positions and questions, differences and convergences. This also may include juxtaposing theories from the past with the present. Maybe even from this almost „vintage“ appealing perspective the aesthetics of the correspondence between Kracaue and Panofsky can open up a form of understanding as event, that precisely, tends to refuse closure. This aesthetic promotes setting in motion a relation of contemplation as well as disrupting our expectations – putting the world in motion, opening us to the other and different.

As Rosi Briadotti has recently pointed out in „Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics“, that with diasporic transformations in cultural identifications new forms of multi-layered relationality have been developed, acknowledging structures of power and belief systems calling for a notion of agency within the existing discourses and power structures. And she puts further into the agenda: „The point of nomadic subjectivity is to identify a line of flight, that is to say a creative alternative space of becoming that would fall not between the mobile/immobile, the resident/the foreigner, but within these categories. The point is neither to dismiss nor to glorify the status of marginal, alien others, but to find a more accurate, complex location for a transformation of the terms of this political interaction.“ (p. 60) From this perspective the correspondence of Kracaue and Panofsky appears to be just one of many examples prefiguring the idea of an interrelational research experience, eventually encouraging more than an just interrelational approach to interpretation and understanding

Thus I see my unassuming contribution to this workshop as an first awkward step to collectively explore, expand and transfer this „model of relational investment“ for today's tasks and solving of problems, opening academic discourses for nothing but correspondences in real life. (Motivation from a personal point: Maybe as a broken echo of Kracauer's for me untranslatable dictum „von der Errettung der äußeren Wirklichkeit“) In other words: This is what I roughly try to pinpoint as „relational practice“. Thereby I consider displacement as a key strategie. Displacement could serve as strategie of relating seemingly separated fields of research by putting them in places where they conventionally do not belong. Pursuing a more or less pragmatic direction, three aspects could come into view: 1. A radical collaborative commitment to the development transdisciplinary methods in a specific field of research 2. The use of performative and theatrical methods aiming at the reenactment of texts, theories and discourses. This encourages specifically the students to get involved in public-facing, participatory projects designed to exchange ideas with wider, non-academic audiences. And 3. The hybridisation of a dominantly text-based scholarship as an practise based exploration in and with other media, working in the digital realm.

At this point it seems difficult for me to come to an closure, stumbling again over what seems to be more than a perfect stance of modernist thinking: Letter number 39 Kracauer to Panofsky New York, May 1947:

Ich selber war hin und her gezerzt zwischen Fremdheit und Nähe, wunderte mich manchmal, dass ich etwas von aussen beobachtetes so gut von innen kannte – wie wenn man heute deutsch sprechen hört und zugleich hinter und vor der Sprachwand ist – und war glücklich wenn sich bei Gelegenheit mein damaliges Urteil und heutige Erkenntnis als eins erwiesen. Im Schreiben kam ich mir wie ein Arzt vor, der eine Autopsie vornimmt und dabei auch ein Stück eigener, jetzt endgültig toter Vergangenheit seziert. Aber natürlich, einiges lebt, wie immer verwandelt fort. Es ist ein thightrope walking zwischen und über dem Gestern und Heute. Mit guten Gedanken und sehr herzlichen Grüßen – Ihr, Siegfried Kracauer

As I stumble again over this passage, I decide that my escape from this is last but not least a detour, a glimpse on a page where thightrope walking is actually taught; in the internet on a homepage under the headline „How to walk a thightrope“ it says: „Walking the thightrope requires focus and balance, patience and practice, but anyone can do it.“ And it also says: „If you begin to loose your balance, keep your head up ... !“