



## THE VALUE OF THE PAROCHIAL: FILM AND THE COMMONPLACE

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I was still a young boy when I saw my first film. The impression it made upon me must have been intoxicating, for I there and then determined to commit my experience to writing.... I immediately put on a shred of paper, *Film as the Discoverer of the Marvels of Everyday Life*, the title read. And I remember, as if it were today the marvels themselves. What thrilled me so deeply was an ordinary suburban street, filled with lights and shadows, which transfigured it. Several trees stood about, and there was in the foreground a puddle reflecting invisible house façades and a piece of the sky. Then a breeze moved the shadows, and the façades with sky below began to waver. The trembling upper world in the dirty puddle—this image has never left me.

—Siegfried Kracauer ([1960] 1997)

### Introduction

What is parochial art in the age of globalization? A common observation amongst many cultural theorists is that globalization has given rise to creative forms of social and political life that are intensely local. The local, they argue, is not something that is the opposite of globalization but is inherent to its very articulation.<sup>1</sup> Artists increasingly engage with the local and localities in terms of a new orientation towards and circulation of actions and material life grounded in immediacy, ephemerality, and lived situations. This emphasis on the local is not the means to some new essentialism, but provides a way of materializing experience, discourse, and alterity, among other things, in a world of increasing movement and concomitant virtuality.

There is no doubt that the information media have injected a new sense of space-time and a new multiplicity of spaces and temporalities into the realm

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example: Massey (1994), Appadurai (1996), Hardt & Negri (2004), and Smith (2001).

of the everyday. The blurring of boundaries between geographies enabled by communications technologies has produced experiences which can be described as more fluid, interconnected, heterogeneous, and as Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan understood so well, profoundly discontinuous. We are, McLuhan realized in the early 1950s, more involved in each other's lives than in any previous age. But not only is there an increase in communication between people around the world, there is also a concomitant new awareness of distance and differences between people. McLuhan, like Walter Benjamin before him, understood the media in terms of the translation of experience. Translation is always a creative and productive action. This idea fed his ecumenical vision of the media, which he hoped would overcome distance while fostering plurality. Thus McLuhan can see two processes at work in globalization: the end of the nation-state as a stable juridical structure and greater global fragmentation due to the rise of tribal nationalisms and the struggle for recognition. This is the state of affairs that describes the global village not as a tidy place but, on the contrary, as a messy and unpredictable space of action where disunity, disharmony, and disorganization are the norm (McLuhan & Fiore [1968] 1997). McLuhan does not foreground political confrontations in the collective fabric as teleological, constitutive of a unified system of global governance, so much as he does a contradictory process of greater social controls, greater multiplicity, and changing relations between centre and periphery.

Globalization has given rise to new kinds of resistance, dissent, and collaboration, interconnectivities between disparate groups and social networks around the world (Hardt & Negri 2004). We saw evidence of this in the street demonstrations around the world both massive and local—perhaps most dramatically in February 2004, when more than ten million people acting in unison around the cities of the world took to the streets to protest US imperialism and the war in Iraq. It is the connections between the social and political groups enabled by different forms of social networking and mobile media that, I would argue, highlight the new centrality and political potential of art as communication. It is art's capacity to communicate across and through difference that is central to the new "expediency of culture," to use George Yúdice's critical phrase.<sup>2</sup> This communication is necessary for the production

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<sup>2</sup> Yúdice (2003) is sceptical of the new relationship between citizenship and culture whereby art is being called upon to serve a function, whether it is strengthening tourism or social activism. The notion that culture is a resource is an expression of globalization that arises out of the erosion of the nation-state, the complex interface of global economic interests and the concomitant neoliberal doctrines that support these interests. Yúdice's scepticism is important, and in considering the renewed activist energy that artists are bringing to their cities, the rise of

of a common understanding or the creation of “uncontrolled conversation” (Youngblood 2007) which allows all these different singularities to act in unison to define a common project, and indeed to envision a common world. Hardt and Negri write: “The common we share, in fact, is not so much discovered as it is produced.” Communication and collaboration are not based on the common but rather “produce the common in an expanding spiral relationship.” It is here, in this spiral, as “new development” that we might come to locate the new centrality of art in the creation of common spaces and the practice of politics inside of cities (xv).

## I.

Let me begin where Michael Peter Smith ends his book *Transnational Urbanism: Locating Globalization*:

To understand the future of urban change we must ... focus our attention upon the communication circuits, no matter how complex, by which people are connected to each other, make sense of their lives, and act upon the worlds that they see, in which they dwell, and through which they travel. (2001, 194)

Smith’s book makes an important contribution to urban research by differentiating globalization from transnationalism. While the former is committed to the space of flows, which transcends the nation-state, the latter is concerned with the social relations that may well transcend nations but are nevertheless deeply inflected by them. Smith maintains that borders, national identities, state policies, etc. are important anchors for the articulation of social agency and cultural diversity. His challenge to urban researchers is to shift the discourse on globalization and global cities away from theoretical metaphors towards more grounded historical and ethnographic studies of places, localities, and the uneven spread of global cultural modernity. He seeks to relate macroeconomic and geopolitical shifts to micrological networks of relations and actions that delimit the experience of living in particular cities (Smith 2001, 6). While this opens some very useful ideas for researching cities and politics, one of the criticisms that could be levied against Smith’s proposal is that he never explores the very processes by which differences and localities are constituted inside cities, the difference that diversity makes to the common situation or collective purpose of a city (cf. Blum 2003, 103). Artists have a role

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collectives using media new and old, participating in local and translocal politics, a dialectical framework is needed.

to play in materializing and acting upon those circuits and networks that Smith describes precisely because the interpretation or encounter with place, with “the city,” is always a dialogue, always an act of imagination and creative engagement with the semiotic fabric of images, discursive formations, and myths in the production of a common place or shared language for sense-making.

The idea that art practices enhance intercultural communication has been something that the most progressive branches of cultural anthropology have long tried to incorporate and it is an idea that has always had special resonances in film studies. Almost half a century ago, Siegfried Kracauer put forward the notion that the cinema, by virtue of its basis in photography, is able to communicate across cultures not by representing differences but by excavating similarities, commonness, and shared material reality. In the now infamous epilogue to his *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960) completed in exile in the United States during the postwar / cold war period, Kracauer attempted to articulate the cinema’s realist vocation in terms of a new cross-cultural language of fragmentary moments. Trained as an architect, Kracauer is sensitive to the built environment and to the city’s relation to cinema. The film moments that he describes are consistently tied to the experience of the modern metropolis and most especially to the city “street” which refers to “dance halls, bars, hotel lobbies, airports.” The street is the cinema’s mainstay, where “the accidental prevails over the providential, and happenings in the nature of unexpected incidents are all but the rule” ([1960] 1997, 62). As a photographic medium, the cinema is able to engage with physical reality in a way that no other previous art form could. When the Lumière brothers began to use moving pictures to document everyday life in Paris, they focused on the scheduled moments: the lunch hour, the arrival/departure of a train, the end of the work day, a child’s meal. What fascinated audiences the most is what could not be controlled or scheduled in the scene: the frenetic movements of crowds, “the ripple of leaves stirred by the wind,” that is, life (Kracauer [1960] 1997, 31, 179). As a photo-based medium, film, according to Kracauer, offsets the temporal and material abstraction imposed by the modern world of industrial capitalism. To Simmel’s famous formulation of the city as a lonely place, Kracauer, his student, would propose that the cinema functions to reestablish a sensuous contact between citizens and the world of things and surfaces. Like his friend, Walter Benjamin, Kracauer sees the consumption of films and earlier forms of mechanical reproduction as a response to modernization, rather than an effect or even expression of it. Watching films provides an antidote to the alienated life. The cinema is the art of the city, it reproduces the flâneur’s “susceptibility to the transient real-life

phenomena,” it provides spectators with “the stuff of dreaming,” with a reality that “eludes measurement,” one that is open and full of possibility. It is the “flux” of the setting, rather than the story, that is most important for the dreamer, “taxi cabs, buildings, passers-by, inanimate objects, faces ... bar interiors; improvised gatherings” all hold “the opportunity of drama” (Kracauer [1960] 1997, 170–71).

In his earlier writings on city culture,<sup>3</sup> and in his *Theory of Film* especially, Kracauer frequently returns to “Once again the street,” because the essential equation that underpins his film aesthetics is: film strip / the street / the flow of life ([1960] 1997, 72). There is nothing utopian in this equation. As Miriam Hansen has so eloquently observed, Kracauer creates a theory of film that eschews a “fetishistic wholeness, perfection, distance and control” (Hansen 1997, xv). In his emphatic delineation of cinema’s capacity to capture the street with its “ever moving anonymous crowds,” its “indeterminate” shapes and patterns, which “cancel each other out,” its infinite possibilities “eternally dissolving” (Kracauer [1960] 1997, 72), Kracauer has incorporated “the threat of annihilation, disintegration, and mortal fear into his film aesthetics—as a fundamental historical experience of modernity” (Hansen 1997, xv). Kracauer’s interpretation of cinematic ontology was developed during the war and in exile from his home in Germany and must be situated, Hansen submits, in terms of film after Auschwitz.

## II.

We can see the development of strategies based on coincidence, accidents, indeterminacy, endlessness, and contingency in documentary and experimental filmmaking of the postwar period expressly in this light. As a means to work through some of Kracauer’s insights around cinema and the “whole world,” let me turn to a specific work—the short “travel” film *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion* (1984) by Canadian filmmaker Philip Hoffman. The film was shot under the influence of Jack Kerouac and inspired by the Beat Generation. Kerouac went on the road in the 1950s to wander and to have experiences, to create a scene across cities, New York, San Francisco, and Mexico. “On the road” refers specifically to a mode of writing that is quite literally writing while *en route*. It is after *The Town and the City* and through *On the Road* that Kerouac developed his art of “spontaneous prose,” an

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<sup>3</sup> Several of his early essays and reviews written for *Frankfurter Zeitung* are available in English translation in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, translated and edited by Tomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

improvisational method of writing in time connected to the flow of life, like jazz. Famously, he used a full roll of Teletype paper that matched the road and he typed the novel almost continuously over three weeks. The roll enabled him to write without stopping, without interrupting the flow of words, essentially mirroring the experience of driving. Kerouac, like Gertrude Stein before him, associates writing with a phenomenology of the mind, a writing that is “composed on the tongue rather than paper” (Ginsberg [1987] 2000, 74). Kerouac’s writing does not seek to transcend mediation so much as it does to document its actions so that writing becomes a record of the connection between inner and outer structures of perception, binding bodies to places through time. As much as it pushes the boundaries of presentness, writing, like film, is always in the past, although the fact of mediation between word and image is altogether different, as Kracauer would stress.

Hoffman made *Somewhere Between* after attending a conference devoted to the legacy of *On the Road* in Boulder, Colorado. Yet Hoffman’s film is not so much on the road (the highway) as it is on the street, featuring two cities (Boulder and Toronto) and towns somewhere between the cities of Guadalajara and León. The film cuts across various scenes in these places with lengthy (often twenty-eight seconds) unedited sequences of action and black leader as “measured pauses” (Kerouac’s silence or breath) between sequences. These juxtaposed moments play out a reflexive rhythm that foregrounds the randomness and stubborn indeterminacy of the images of everyday life, and of their placement in the film. We are presented with situations that are delimited without being explicated. The film opens with a text on the screen: “Looking through the lens / at passing events / I recall what once was / and consider what might be.” Two early sequences in the film give image to these words. The first is an image of what is now a cliché of globalization. The static camera poised on a street corner in the centre of a small town in Mexico frames, in long shot, a mule and buggy parked beneath a large red Coca-Cola sign and a tangle of telephone wires above low rise dilapidated buildings. The only movement in the frame is the cars, driving in and out of it, and a woman and child crossing the street. Yet movement and layers of interaction are implicit in the juxtaposition of the mule and the global corporation, which co-exist in this place. This image is preceded by another static shot of a church down the street, doubly framed between two pillars of a Catholic arch. Looking in, the camera reveals someone deep in prayer. After a motionless few seconds, a child interrupts the stillness of the sequence, enters the frame and begins a game of crawling up and down on chairs. The child’s sudden appearance is precisely that kind of “unexpected incident” that Kracauer delights in—“the stirring” of nature and people that the Lumière films first captured. The kind of

“spontaneous writing” that we often find in experimental ethnographies favours a self-reflexive methodology.<sup>4</sup> In this instance, it focuses on the physicality of the scene to include the temporal structure imposed by the camera (i.e., the spring wound Bolex’s twenty-eight second take) and the filmmaker. The acts of “looking through the lens,” as Hoffman’s text tells us, calls upon a time-based aesthetic where past and future co-exist beyond the edges of the frame. Yet it is not only the film strip / flow of life analogy that foregrounds this temporality. It is also the reoccurring themes of religion and children, of tradition and horizons, that Hoffman finds across the different places in the film.

Given that the film concerns the story of a Mexican boy run over by a truck somewhere in Mexico, these themes resonate throughout. The boy’s death is an event that the filmmaker refuses to film (or include in the film), but instead conveys through a poetic text on the screen that is intercut throughout the film. Filled with black holes overwritten with the poem that remembers the boy’s death, the film’s architectonics are structured by the words that never conflate the commonalities between the situations. The poem embeds the boy’s death in all of the images of the film so that it is not inconsequential to the corporate sign, the superstructure in the opening images, but rather stands in a contiguous relationship to it as to all the images in the film. The melancholic saxophone that draws the line from Mexico to Colorado to Toronto, seems to synchronize momentarily with the musicians and children holding out cups to collect money in these different places, but then separates and floats over them from an off-screen space that leaves the frame open to a multiplicity of found stories: children playing games on different streets in different cities, a crowd kneeling outside a church, the Feast of Fatima procession in a Portuguese neighbourhood in Toronto, little girls dressed as angels, streets lined with telephone poles, the beautiful patina of peeling walls aged by the weather, graffiti palimpsests in different languages, a paint brush sketching a likeness of Jesus from a painting of Jesus, a child crawling up and down on a large sculpture of a seashell in an outdoor street mall, a pond surrounded by trees at dusk. The camera stages situations from a distance and in long shot; sometimes the movements of bodies are slowed. But it is the materiality of the built environment that is framed to equalize the human and the nonhuman (trees, benches, windows, sidewalks, statues, cars, signs), which are counter-

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<sup>4</sup> Take, for example, the films of Jonas Mekas, Andy Warhol, Jean Rouch, Agnès Varda or Chris Marker, who use the camera as an intrinsic aspect of performance. We could also include some of the more self-reflexive documentaries by the Unit B directors at the National Film Board of Canada. Cf. Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography* (1999).

influencing and interpenetrating processes. We see here the manifestations of global cultures, national and urban idioms, and technologies that the film stages as commonplace.

In the study of localities, filmmaker and anthropologist David MacDougall points out that it is not singularities but interconnectivities and flows between particular cultures that lead to the cinema's capacity for deeply phenomenological and pedagogical gestures. *Somewhere Between* gives us the interval or the interface between places where identities and experiences take up their meanings in Hoffman's memories of a shared world. Yet it is also the characteristic of the "found story" that it remains open, fragmented, that it burns through myths and clichés. It must resist the "self-contained whole" that would betray its force by casting a tight structure with a beginning, middle, and end around its anonymous core. The "found story," Kracauer explains, arises out of and dissolves into the material environment, often in "embryonic" forms that reveal patterns of collectivity ([1960] 1997, 246). The found story comes from the aesthetic of the street and, we should add, holds infinite possibilities for the psychic investment in the whole, even as it takes it apart. In the end, Hoffman may well have broken with Kracauer's prescriptive visual aesthetics by staging reality with word, image, and black leader in a way that actively petitions the dreamer to envision what was and what might be. What holds the spectator's interest in Hoffman's film is the gap, the place of imagining: the black smoke from the truck, the children weeping, the sky, and the boy's spirit as it "left through its blue."

### III.

If Kracauer's film theory incorporates "a fundamental historical experience of modernity" into its central ontological claims, it also seeks to find redemption in this experience in and through film. For the cinema is not only an "eternally dissolving" world but also a possible way forward out of that experience in the creation of a shared world. What these fragments of filmed moments portend is nothing more and nothing less than the "redemption of physical reality." What does Kracauer mean by redemption and why is it specific to film? Kracauer looks to his friend Erich Auerbach and his work *Mimesis* ([1946] 1953) for illumination on this question. Auerbach's work on literature will locate redemption in "the moment" as something that is both historical and phenomenological: these moments concern not only the individuals depicted in them, but "the elementary things which men in general have in common. It is precisely the random moment which is comparatively independent of the controversial and unstable orders over which men fight and despair; it passes

unaffected by them, as daily life” (qtd. in Kracauer [1960] 1997, 310). For Auerbach, who wrote his book in Istanbul between May 1942 and April 1945, and who was responding to a profound pessimism and relativism among German Jewish intellectuals, this commonality was a way of thinking about ethics and enabling judgment. Auerbach defines judgment as making oneself at home in a world without fixed points of reference, without universals “in keeping with the constantly changing and expanding reality of modern life” (Auerbach [1946] 1953, 489). Auerbach’s study of Western literature and realism fails to note, Kracauer contends, that the task of rendering visible the “texture of everyday life” is most powerful in the photographic media. There is no other period in history that has access to such a vast photographic archive of its past as the twentieth century. These photographic cultures “virtually make the world our home” (Kracauer [1960] 1997, 304). Despite the accusations of naïve realism that greeted his book, Kracauer is not advocating an end of ideology or celebrating the end of history (Hansen 1997, ix). Rather, he is concerned to locate in the “exploratory type of representation,” a means to make a “common life of mankind on earth”; while this goal is still very far off, it “begins to be visible” (Auerbach qtd. in Kracauer [1960] 1997, 310).

Kracauer gives special mention to Paul Rotha and Basil Wright’s *World Without End* (1953), a documentary that brings together the similarities and the differences between the people of Mexico and Thailand without conflating their different economic and social situations.<sup>5</sup> Finally, it is Satyajit Ray’s film *Aparajito* (1957) that perhaps best illustrates his point, making the everyday in Calcutta intelligible to someone in “Manhattan or Brooklyn or the Bronx,” with scenes such as:

... the camera focuses on the ornamental bark of an old tree and then slowly tilts down to the face of Apu’s sick mother who yearns for her son in the big city. In the distance a train is passing by. The mother walks heavily back to the house where she imagines she hears Apu shout “MA.” Is he returning to her? She gets up and looks into the empty night aglow with water

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<sup>5</sup> We could add to Kracauer’s list, Pabst’s extraordinary *Kameradschaft* (1931), an early sound film which sees French and German miners working together across languages and borders in solidarity to rescue workers from an accident. Or the recently restored *No Man’s Land: Hell on Earth* (1931), by Victor Trivas, produced the same year, a pacifist film that seeks to highlight a socialist vision across national boundaries—with French, Russian Jewish, English, American, and African soldiers stuck underground together. In these films, necessity and sympathy create social bonds for peace.

reflections and dancing will-o'-the-wisps. India is in this episode but not only India. (Kracauer [1960] 1997, 310–11)

The parochial image is layered with material realities that include emotions, dwelling, nature, and a tapestry of relations contained in the material circumstances and affective dimensions of everyday life. It is precisely the parochial as rendered through the photographic arts that Kracauer feels creates, paradoxically, not a transcendent but a communicative bond.

In his book *Our Films, Their Films*, Satyajit Ray states that one of the biggest influences on his filmmaking career was Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1949)—the film of the street *par excellence*. Ray writes that the power of this film is not in its technique so much as in its emotional registers. *The Bicycle Thief* “is the fundamental rediscovery of the fundamentals of cinema” (1998, 117). While Kracauer does not trace such interconnectivities, the idea of shared influences is implicit in his thinking of a world that is increasingly interconnected through images. For in the end, what is the substance of the redemption he locates in the documentary trend predicted as cinema's future? It is quite simply that photographic images open up in their “anonymous reality” (Sève), a relation between people (Kracauer [1960] 1997, 69). Redemption is not only a space connected to the past, but it is also potentiality. This is why Kracauer ends his book by looking to the interrelation between cultures, to film's communicative capacity to bridge cities and nations and to open up new understandings.

While Kracauer's “challenge” was unfulfilled in its (impossible?) ambition to explain the material complexity of film through one theory, he had the great acuity to understand the cinema in terms of communication and in terms of the creation of a public sphere of images that do not belong to any one subject. What he could not predict is the extent to which “the blizzard” of images that defined visual culture of the 1940s and 1950s would implode into an entirely new apparatus of global interconnectivity—an apparatus that would dematerialize, dissolve, and disintegrate audio-visual images beyond the frame, making their production and circulation more flexible, more anonymous, and more democratic.

To return to the idea of “the common,” let me conclude with Steve Dietz's landmark 2003 exhibition currently travelling out of the Walker Arts Center: *How Latitudes Become Forms: Art in a Global Age*. This exhibition exemplifies the idea of a common culture spiralling outward through conversations. This is the first exhibition of its kind and it constitutes an extensive and indeed ongoing study of translocal new media art cultures. *How Latitudes Become Forms* brings together three “platforms” of networked-based

art from Brazil, China, Croatia, India, Japan, Mexico, Singapore, South Africa, Turkey, and the United States. It is unique in its recognition that the interconnection between artists is more than simply technological. The artist projects involve not only virtual art, but installations, performances, conferences, publications in the material spaces of neighbourhoods, and public spaces in and across cities. In the exhibition's statement, Dietz raises a series of questions which usefully situates the problematic I have been developing throughout this essay:

Translocations explore notions of what constitutes the local in a globally networked environment. This is not simply a question of where the "trans-there" lies. If the nonspace of cyberspace can create the possibility of a diasporic community, united not by geography but by shared interests, what precisely is held in common? How do similarly worded ideas translate across cultures? Do the same mixes sound different depending upon where they are sampled? Is there the possibility of transcultures that are neither isolationist nor imperialistic? What is the public commons of digital intercourse? (Dietz 2003)

This presents the issue of difference and similarity, of what is held in common and what will always remain distinctive in these new cultural interfaces. Artists who use new media technologies increasingly engage with the local and trans-localities in terms of a new understanding and circulation of actions that are often tied to anti-globalization and civic politics. Artists in the Americas and many parts of Europe and Asia have diversified their practices through digital media to both resist and take advantage of new global economies, forming new kinds of partnerships and collectivities with artist communities and community activists around the world. At a time when the cinema's new marvels increasingly belong to what Mackenzie Wark has called the "military entertainment complex" (2005, 11) in reference to the alliance between media and military research, organizing through shared interests rather than identities might in fact present a crucial strategy for creative forms of resistance.

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