The Horrible Last-Minute Sprint of the Transcendental Subject: Sven Elvestad, Siegfried Kracauer, and the Detective Novel

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Abstract

Sven Elvestad (1884-1934), alias Stein Riverton, wrote 115 books, among them ninety-eight detective novels, eighty-five of which were translated into German in his lifetime, alongside translations into other languages. Elvestad is Norway's most important crime fiction writer of the early golden age (1910s and 1920s). His acknowledged masterpiece, *Jernvognen* (1909, translated to English as *The Iron Chariot* in 2019), uses a device that was later famously attributed to Agatha Christie. Moreover, Elvestad's *Death Checks in at the Hotel* (1921) is quoted in Siegfried Kracauer's *The Detective Novel: A Philosophical Treatise* (1925) in the central chapter "The Hotel Lobby," on the detective novel's "curious mysteries: an expression with an ironic and ambiguous meaning," pointing at "the distorted higher mystery . . . hidden in the totality of the legal and illegal activities taking place." In Elvestad's novels, the relation between rationality and mystery is also presented in terms of ongoing conflicts between law, legality, and the illegal. In this article, I follow Kracauer's analyses of the detective, the police, the villain, the plots, and the investigation processes in the detective novel with examples from Elvestad's novels.

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Introduction

Sven Elvestad, alias Stein Riverton, wrote 115 books, among them ninety-eight detective novels, eighty-five of which were translated into German in his lifetime, alongside translations into other languages. Elvestad is Norway's most important crime fiction writer of the early golden age (1910s and 1920s). His acknowledged masterpiece, *Jernvognen* (1909, translated to English as *The Iron Chariot* in 2019), uses a device that was later famously attributed to Agatha Christie. Moreover, Elvestad's *Death Checks in at the Hotel* (1921) is quoted in Siegfried Kracauer's *Der Detektiv-Roman. Ein philosophischer Traktat* (*The Detective Novel: A Philosophical Treatise*, 1925) in a discussion of the detective novel's "curious mysteries: an expression with an ironic and ambiguous meaning," pointing at "the distorted higher mystery . . . hidden in the totality of the legal and illegal activities taking place" (Kracauer, *Detektiv-Roman* 48).[1]

In this article, I discuss Elvestad's detective novels, taking Kracauer's analysis of the hidden mystery of the mystery novels as my point of departure. According to Kracauer, who was very familiar with the philosophy of Kant, the subject in the detective novel could be considered "the last frenetic rush of the transcendental subject" (*Detektiv-Roman* 40). Kracauer compares the status of the subject in Kant's philosophy with the status of the subject in the detective novel; the detective as a figure is impersonal, embedding the rationality of the capitalist society. The detective novel shows us that pure rationality is the dominating principle of this society. However, behind this rationality, the mystery is hiding. Every time the detective solves a mystery, a new mystery turns up. The row of mysteries is endless, but all the same the

[1] I quote from Thomas Y. Levin's translation of the chapter "The Hotel Lobby" when possible. All other translations from the German edition of *Der Detektiv-Roman* are by Arild Linneberg.

detective constantly tries to solve the mystery for us, seeking the hidden meaning or lack of meaning in life. In Elvestad's novels, the relation between rationality and mystery is also presented in the form of ongoing conflicts between law, legality, and the illegal. In this article, I follow Kracauer's analyses of the detective, the police, the villain, the plots, and the investigation processes in the detective novel with examples from Elvestad's novels.

Siegfried Kracauer and the Detective Novel

From 1922 to 1925, the German writer, sociologist, philosopher, and film critic Siegfried Kracauer (1889-1966) wrote *The Detective Novel: A Philosophical Treatise*. Kracauer was a luminary in the literary world of the Weimar Republic, and it is a kind of mystery that his treatise on mystery novels was not published in his lifetime and not until 1971. In Germany as well as in the Anglo-American world, Kracauer's treatise was practically a hidden secret for nearly fifty years. One chapter, "Hotelhalle," was published in a selection of Kracauer's essays, *Das Ornament der Masse*, in 1963, and an English version of this chapter, "The Hotel Lobby," appeared in *The Mass Ornament*, translated by Thomas Y. Levin in 1995. In 2007, a full version of *The Detective Novel* was translated into English.

Kracauer's study is extraordinary. He combines an analysis of the detective novel with a critique of scientific reason—of modern scientific rationality—and he discusses the detective novel in relation to the tradition of idealist philosophy, especially in the light of key concepts in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. His discussion of the detective novel is also a critique of the German philosophy of idealism, including Kant's concept of reason. In fact, Kracauer compares the detective novel with this philosophical tradition and finds striking similarities between the two. Kracauer's philosophical analysis of the detective novel exposes philosophical content in this type of crime fiction.

Sven Elvestad

One of Kracauer's central examples is the Norwegian author Sven Elvestad (1884-1934). Elvestad, alias Stein Riverton, wrote 115 books, among them ninety-eight detective novels, eighty-five of which were translated into German in his lifetime, and he has been translated into several other languages. His most famous novel, *Jernvognen* (1909)—in 2017 voted "the greatest Norwegian crime novel of all time" by Norwegian Crime writers—was translated into English as *The Iron Wagon* in 2003, and again as *The Iron Chariot* in 2019.

Sven Elvestad is the most distinguished crime fiction writer of the early golden age (1910s and 1920s) in Norway. His acknowledged masterpiece, *The Iron Wagon*, uses a plot twist that was later attributed to Agatha Christie in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926). Elvestad was widely read in the 1920s and 1930s, especially in Germany. In his thought image "Detective Novels, on Tour" (1930), Walter Benjamin mentions "Sven Elvestad and his friend Asbjorn Krag" (110); it is possible that Benjamin read Elvestad because his friend Kracauer did. Asbjorn Krag is the detective in Elvestad's detective novels, and Kracauer often mentions Krag in connection with Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and the creations of authors like Edgar Allan Poe, Gaston Leroux, and Maurice Leblanc, among others. In a review of a German translation of G. K. Chesterton stories in 1925, "Hamlet wird Detektiv" ["Hamlet Becomes Detective"], Kracauer starts by stating that "Chesterton follows the pattern that is successfully developed from E. A. Poe to Sven Elvestad" (350).

To Kracauer, detective fiction was important as an international sociological phenomenon: "The international character of the society, which is shown in the detective novel, exactly corresponds with the international impact of this novel" (*Detektiv-Roman* 10).[2] Elvestad's detective novel *Døden tar inn på hotellet* [*Death Checks in at the Hotel*] was published in 1921 and immediately translated into German as *Der Tod kehrt im Hotel ein*.[3] Kracauer discusses this novel as an example of the international development of the bourgeois, capitalistic society. The hotel lobby plays an important role in Elvestad's story, as do Kracauer's chapter "The Hotel Lobby" in both *The Detective Novel* and *The Mass Ornament*; the central quotation in this chapter is taken from Elvestad's *Death Checks in at the Hotel*. The storyteller in the novel tells us, "Once again it is confirmed that a large hotel is a world unto itself and that this world is like the rest of the large world" (*Døden* 37 qtd. in Kracauer, *Mass Ornament* 184).

Surface-Level Expressions

"The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from its epoch's judgments about itself" (Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament* 75). Thus, Kracauer opens "The Mass Ornament" (1928), and he continues, "The surface-level expression . . . provides unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things." For this reason, knowledge of the state of things depends on the interpretation of such surface-level expression (75). In Kracauer's view, the fundamental substance of an epoch and its surface-level expressions illuminate each other reciprocally. This is the underlying matrix of the treatise on the detective novel. As a popular-cultural phenomenon, the detective novel can tell us something fundamental about the society in which it is produced. When he edited his selection of essays from the Weimar period, *The Mass Ornament*, in 1963, Kracauer placed the chapter on the detective novel in the third part of the book, called "Constructions." Kracauer was trained as an architect, and he constructed his works in an architectonic way. He analyzes the underlying thought constructions of the epoch, which is also the epoch of the Golden Age of mystery stories. Following Kracauer, the mystery stories tell us about the hidden structures of society at the time, its secret structures. Almost like a detective, Kracauer detects these structures, above all, the ruling rationality of society.

Strange Mysteries

> Once again it is confirmed that a large hotel is a world unto itself and that this world is like the rest of the large world.
>
> Sven Elvestad, *Døden tar inn på hotellet* (37)

"The Hotel Lobby" is a mysterious chapter in Kracauer's philosophical treatise on the detective novel. The chapter begins with a comparison, an analogy between the hotel lobby and a church. Kracauer wrote a monograph (never published) about the sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel, in which he states that Simmel's main

[2] My translations from the German edition.
[3] As far as I know, this novel has not been translated into English.

rhetorical device was to establish analogies, drawing parallels between distant phenomena. Another background for Kracauer's discussion of the relation between the hotel lobby and the house of God is the philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard, especially his theory of spheres. Man exists between two spheres, the higher and the lower sphere, the world of sensual perception and the spiritual world; man lives between nature and the supernatural. The house of God represents the higher sphere in the lower sphere; the hotel lobby represents the lower sphere; however, in this lower sphere a longing for the higher sphere is hiding (*Detektiv-Roman* "Sphären" 11-30; "Hotelhalle" 38-50).

Kracauer finished his treatise in 1925, one year after Louis Aragon had written the first part of *Le Paysan de Paris* [*Paris Peasant*]. "The Metaphysics of the Concrete" is a central thought figure in Aragon's surrealistic work, and it is an interesting parallel between this surrealistic figure and Kracauer's philosophy of the detective novel, because, in Kracauer, a metaphysics of the concrete is applied to the mysteries in puzzle-based mystery fiction.

Many mysterious murders take place at the beach hotel in Elvestad's *Death Checks in at the Hotel*. A friend of detective Asbjorn Krag has asked him to come to the hotel to investigate what is going on, and the detective has checked in incognito as a guest at the hotel. Of course, he soon finds some clues. The director of the hotel and his wife try to conceal the murders for the guests, and, to begin with, the guests know nothing. Kracauer quotes from Elvestad: "The guests here roam about in their light-hearted, careless summer existence without expecting anything of the strange mysteries circulating among them." "Strange mysteries," Kracauer repeats the words and continues, "Strange mysteries": the phrase is ironically ambiguous. On the one hand, it refers quite generally to the disguised quality of lived existence as such; on the other, it refers to the higher mystery that finds distorted expression in the illegal activities that threaten safety ("The Hotel Lobby" 184).

The murders, the illegal activities that threaten safety in this novel, refer not only to what is happening in reality, but also to a supranatural, metaphysical world. Elvestad's novel, as a "Queen's evidence" of the detective novel, contains strange mysteries that refer to other higher and hidden mysteries. In my reading of Kracauer and Elvestad, one of them is the connection between the detective novel and the tradition of idealist philosophy.

The Horrible Last-Minute Sprint of the Transcendental Subject

The detective solves all the riddles, from Sherlock Holmes to Asbjorn Krag. Kracauer asks what this detective figure represents, and his answer is that the detective represents the rationality of capitalist society. In a certain sense, detectives exist as pure reason. In traditional detective novels—to Kracauer the tradition from the very beginning to Conan Doyle, Chesterton, and Elvestad—the detectives generally do not have a normal life, no biography, no sexual life; they may have a secretary, a housekeeper, assistants, but they are not portrayed as common people living normal lives. They live their lives in celibacy, ascetic like monks or, in the case of Father Brown, actually as a Catholic priest. The detective is a representative of God on earth in the sense that he represents a higher reason. Because of their intelligence, their ratio, the detectives stand above other humans: They are, in Kracauer's words, "almost divine" (*Detektiv-Roman* 54)

The "emptied-out individuals of the detective novel" are "rationally constructed complexes" and as such "comparable to the transcendental subject" ("The Hotel Lobby" 177). This individual "is indeed detached from the existential stream of the

total person" and "reduced to an unreal, purely formal relation" (189). Kant himself "still believed there was a seamless transition from the transcendental to the preformed subject-object world" and was therefore "able to overlook this horrible last-minute sprint of the transcendental subject" (190). The transcendental subject's last-minute sprint can be observed in the hotel lobby: In "tasteful lounge chairs," "a civilization intent on rationalization comes to an end" (191).

The detective novel too is a rational construction of reality and of the rationality underlying this reality. Kracauer compares this rationally constructed complex with its emptied-out individuals with the abstract idealistic philosophical systems since the Enlightenment. Like the detective novel, these systems do not catch the empirical reality, and they do not embrace human existence and everyday life. The philosophical systems intend to circumscribe and define a totality, which they are not capable of grasping. That does not mean that these philosophical systems have no importance, but they are insufficient. Already in *Soziologie als Wissenschaft* [*Sociology as Science*] (1922), Kracauer had criticized both Husserlian phenomenology and Kant's philosophy for this insufficiency (Koch 11-12).

Kracauer considers the detective novel as a further development of abstract philosophical systems, or rather as a new version of the abstract system of rationality. In my opinion, this is also the reason he called his work "a philosophical treatise"; his main theme is philosophical. The detective novel is abstract philosophy in a new key, the key of popular culture in its most sophisticated form in the 1920s. The reason crime fiction was so widespread at the time is that it contains the fundamental principle of capitalist society: an alienated rationality. Moreover, by reading detective novels we can observe the alienation of ratio and mankind's alienation from itself. The detective novel speaks the truth about modernity and the instrumentalization of reason in a disenchanted world, where human beings are atomized to the state of marionettes, so to speak, dancing after reason's—and the detective's—tune.

Purposiveness Without Purpose

In this epistemological investigation of crime fiction, Kracauer also discusses what sort of aesthetics characterize the detective novel. Kracauer is no literary theoretician, and he does not register the distinctive features that constitute the detective novel as a genre. Instead, he examines the construction of the novel's internal world in relation to the fundamental principles of aesthetics since Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790). As a philosopher of aesthetics, especially film aesthetics, Kracauer stresses the sensual perception of the work of art and of reality. His *Theory of Film* (1960) has the subtitle "The Redemption of Physical Reality." The function of film as art is to give us a new feeling of the empirical reality, and make us look at the world around us with new eyes. In this sense, Kracauer's aesthetics are formalistic in the tradition of the Russian formalists, or at least his aesthetics share some decisive similarities with the aesthetic theories of Victor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, and the formalist school.

The treatise on the detective novel is one of Kracauer's early contributions to aesthetics, and it carries traces of the Hegelian idealistic tradition, following Georg Lukacs' *Die Theorie des Romans. Ein geshichtsphilosophischer Versuch über die Formen der großen Epik* [*The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*] (1920). It is no surprise that we can find traces of both the idealistic tradition and a formalist view in Kracauer's treatise, because in the early 1920s Kracauer was moving from an idealistic to a materialistic position, from *Geistesgeschichte* (intellectual history) to historical materialism.

In 1921, Kracauer actually wrote a review of Lukács' theory of the novel. The correspondences between Lukács' essay and Kracauer's treatise are striking. One of Kracauer's main themes in the 1920s is transcendental homelessness ["transcendentale Obdachlosigkeit"], echoing Lukács' definition of the main characteristic of the hero in the modern novel of disillusionment since Balzac. "The novel seeks to establish and recreate reality's hidden totality": so Kracauer summarizes Lukacs' concept of the modern novel ("Georg" 119). However, in a world deprived of meaning all the novel can do is to build up a reality of abstract concepts in an endless process. In this world devoid of meaning, Kracauer continues, Lukács states that "the writer, who seeks to create the fragmented reality, has to use irony as a main device" (119-20). Lukács understands irony as "the negative mystics in a world without God," and this godless world of the modern novel is inhabited by demonical creatures (120).

Kracauer started to write "The Detective Novel" directly after he had written the review of Lukács' theory of the novel. Whereas Lukács created a unique, historico-philosophically based typology of the great epic forms from antiquity until his own present time, Kracauer established a unique, historico-philosophically based typology of the detective novel from its very beginning early in the nineteenth century until his own present time. The transcendental homelessness, irony, the demonic: these predominant subjects in Lukács' work we also find in Kracauer's treatise (I discuss irony and the demonic below). Last but not least, the construction of the world's hidden totality in the novel has a central place also in Kracauer's analysis of the detective novel. Following Lukács' description of the novel, Kracauer states that all the detective novel can do in a world deprived of meaning is to build up a reality of abstract concepts in an endless process.

Obviously, Kracauer got a brilliant idea after having read Lukács' work on the forms of *great epic* literature, namely to write a similar treatise on the most *popular epic* literary genre of his time, because in Kracauer's view it was in popular culture that one could now find the essential structures of the epoch. No wonder the work was never published in his lifetime; it was probably too radical for his contemporaries to treat popular cultural forms that seriously. In my opinion, he also did it with a sense of humor. In applying the most serious philosophy of art to the deep structures of surface-level expressions, many of his writings on popular art were a slap in the face of the establishment: "Educated people . . . judge anything that entertains the crowd to be a distraction of that crowd," but no matter "how low one gauges the value of the mass ornament," Kracauer continues, "its degree of reality is still higher than that of artistic productions which cultivate outdated noble sentiments in obsolete forms—even if it means nothing more than that" (*The Mass Ornament* 79). Even in this sense his writing was avant-garde.

Kracauer's conclusion on the aesthetics of mystery stories in "The Hotel Lobby" is typical. He discusses Kant's definition of beauty in the *Critique of Judgment* as "disinterested satisfaction" and "purposiveness without a purpose" in relation to the detective novel. In the hotel lobby "the person sitting around idly is overcome by a disinterested satisfaction in the contemplation of a world creating itself, whose purposiveness is felt without being associated with any representation of purpose" ("The Hotel Lobby" 177). The Kantian definition of the beautiful "is instantiated here in a way that takes seriously its isolation of the aesthetic and its lack of content." Consequently, "in the hotel lobby . . . the formula purposiveness without purpose also exhausts its content" (183).

Law and Legality

In the 1920s, the relation between law and legality was the order of the day. Walter Benjamin raised the question in "Zur Kritik der Gewalt" ["The Critique of Violence"] in 1921, where he argued that the relationship between violence and law is twofold. Law is instituted by—illegal—violence, and violence outside the law could thus be a "lawful," however "illegal," way of establishing a new revolutionary order and a new law. What is right and just, and what is wrong and unfair, are not so obvious as they present themselves to be; the law is demonically ambiguous.

Remarkably enough, Kracauer discusses this crucial question in relation to the detective novel. Like Benjamin in his critique of violence, Kracauer discusses Anatole France, known for his famous 1894 statement, "The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under the bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread" (*Detektiv-Roman* 14; Koch 18-19). Accordingly, in the detective novel, the relationship between law, legality, and the illegal is at stake. This is decisive for the characterization of the detective as a literary figure; the detective not only stands between the law and the legal—he is situated between the legal and the illegal. The detective transcends the legal domain towards both the illegal and the law.

Kracauer gives a detailed discussion of these connections. First of all, he looks into the detective's relation to the police. The police solely represent the legal. Their task is to maintain law and order: "The police in the detective novel represent the legal, that is not derived from any higher law source and for this reason it does not point beyond itself" (*Detektiv-Roman* 73). The detective stands above the police and operates in a grey zone inside and outside the legal. He is able to and allowed to use illegal methods to reach his goal: to reestablish legality—and here is where irony comes in. The detective as representative of a higher rationality has an ironic attitude towards the police: "The stylistic device by means of which the detective expresses his sovereignty vis-à-vis the police, is *irony*, which brings rationality to bear against legal force" (88). Kracauer's main example is Hercule Poirot: how Poirot feels free to give the police the honor for having solved a case, knowing he represents a higher rationality, whereas the police narrowly represent the legal.

This structural relation between the detective and the police is typical for the detective novel, and it is clearly the case when it comes to Elvestad's Asbjorn Krag. Krag is a different type of detective than Poirot, although Elvestad's hero is representative of ultimate reason as well and solves all the mysterious cases he gets involved in. He is half retired from his work as a police investigator, and is now a private investigator with important connections to the Christiania (Oslo) police. In this position, he stands above the police and has the same ironic attitude towards them. As Kracauer remarks, the police, representing the legal as such, always appear somewhat stupid. In the case that the detective is a police investigator, his police commander in chief is always stupid and stubborn.

The detective is superior. He does not obey any external division between legal and illegal domains, but transgresses these zones. Kracauer comments on Maurice Leblanc's "unbelievable Arsène Lupin," who is both a gentleman thief and a detective, and "whose only task is to disturb the security of the legal, to deny it because of its injustice" (94). In the novels of the Swedish writer Frank Heller (Gunnar Serner), the hero is also both a thief and a detective, and Kracauer (like Adorno) accentuates the social criticism in Heller's fiction: "the detective Mr. Philip Collin alias professor Pelotard," Kracauer writes, "is friendly and ironic in a way that reminds of Anatole France, his ethical mission is to destabilize a corrupt society." Heller's detective is "a salon-heretic, who stands up against the legal" (95).

Another token of the ambiguity between the legal and the illegal is the special type of criminal that we find in both Leblanc's and Heller's stories—and in Elvestad's—the already mentioned gentleman thief or gentleman burglar. This sort of criminal embodies society's ambiguous nature in relation to law, legality, and the illegal; the gentleman thief is at the same time a representative of society's establishment and a criminal, thus simultaneously personifying the legal and the illegal. Arsène Lupin and Philip Collin are significant examples of the way the important questions of the relations between law, legality, and the illegal are treated in this sort of crime fiction: the borders are blurred.

Apart from that, the detective has another important function in the constellation of law, legality, and the illegal. The detective is a godlike creator, the "Detective-God" in the godless world (54). As a representative of the highest rationality he solves the mysteries, and he is also like a god when he again and again reestablishes the lost, heavenly order after the outbreak of chaos that the crime has caused (51). In the modern world of total rationalization, the detective represents pure ratio, that is the divine principle of the Absolute. But the detectives are not gods; they are more like magicians or demons, "the unwilling helpers of the divine" (55). In this respect they are symbols of something transcendental.

The Metaphysics of the Concrete

The phrase "strange mysteries" in Elvestad's *Death Checks in at the Hotel* is "ironically ambiguous," Kracauer writes. On the one hand, it refers to "the disguised quality" of lived existence; on the other, it refers to a "higher mystery" that finds "distorted expression" in the illegal activities that threaten safety in everyday life ("The Hotel Lobby" 184). That is to say, the detective novel is this distorted expression of a higher mystery.

Also, in Elvestad's novel, the detective solves the mysteries as a representative of rationality. However, behind this rationality, the mystery is hiding. Every time the detective solves a mystery, a new mystery turns up. In a chapter called "Process" in *The Detective Novel*, Kracauer argues that this endlessly ongoing process of solving is a fundamental structure in stories of this sort. The row of mysteries is endless, but all the same the detective constantly tries to solve the mystery for us, one after the other. Why? Because the readers are constantly seeking a higher meaning behind the secrets of everyday life, Kracauer says.

This is particularly understandable in the context of the 1920s, when Kracauer wrote his treatise. In other writings from the same period, he points at the many new religious movements that were popping up; they clearly expressed people's need for a transcendental meaning. In Kracauer's writing there is, however, also a deep theological impulse. Although more or less an agnostic, Kracauer was deeply influenced by Jewish mysticism, kabbalah, as were his friends Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, and Theodor W. Adorno. In Kracauer's essays on Benjamin, Kafka, and film in the 1920s and 1930s, there can be no doubt about this influence. A messianic and kabbalistic nomenclature is correspondingly characteristic of his *Theory of Film* (1960).

The philosophy of *The Detective Novel* is difficult to understand. Like kabbalah it represents another way of thinking that is not linear, but a thinking in constellations. Kracauer's juxtaposition of the hotel lobby and the house of God is a characteristic constellation; moreover it is a constellation of the profane and the sacred that follows a fundamental principle of kabbalah. In Jewish mysticism, the world is distorted and has to be corrected. In Kracauer's treatise, this relation is the underlying pattern for

the detective novel's rational construction of reality. Due to the illegal activities, it is demonstrated again and again that the world is out of order. The principle of rationality, that is the godlike detective, again and again brings order to chaos. But it does not help, because reality itself is distorted as such. Rationality cannot solve the problem.

In the last chapter of the book, Kracauer argues that the solving of the problem in the detective novel is not a real one, but an aesthetic construction based on the principle of rationality. It is *kitsch* (134). The image of reality in the detective novel is not a true picture: It presents an illusion, the illusion that we can grasp reality with rational abstractions.

Kracauer's analysis of the detective novel is a critique of scientific reason, of the modern scientific rationality that governs the modern world. However, the underlying constellation in *The Detective Novel* is the relation between the detective novel and the tradition of abstract philosophy since the Enlightenment. And so Kracauer ends his philosophical treatise with a critique of philosophy: abstract philosophical constructions do not grasp the empirical world of living existence. Kracauer's remarkable conclusion is that this abstract philosophy is also *kitsch*. His treatise on the detective novel is philosophy in a new key, and in this new philosophy the detective novel is more comfortable than the idealist philosophical tradition.

This by no means suggests that Kracauer is a positivist. He never was. On the contrary, he is concerned about the metaphysics of the concrete, the metaphysics of everyday life. And here, I believe, we find his reasons for reading detective novels: because he loved to read crime fiction. In eloquent crime fiction, there is excitement and suspension, and to live is, Kracauer says, like "waiting in the anteroom." In the messianic tradition, there is hope. We live in suspension, waiting for a better world to come. In the meantime, we can read detective novels.

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