From Kracauer to Clover: Some Reflections on Genre and Gender

in 70s/80s Slasher Films

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In his introduction to *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, Barry Keith Grant[1] notes that Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*[2] is the book that inaugurated an interest in looking at more specific historical and social contexts to explain the functions that particular films have during certain periods of time. *From Caligari to Hitler*—originally published in 1947—argues that the characters and stories on a nation's screens can be symptomatic of wider, social dispositions, and that films themselves can reflect, and even influence the course of future events. In Kracauer's case, 1920s Weimar cinema carried the spectre of German fascism. Grant says the underlying assumptions of this work can be found in the later contentions of writers on horror cinema:

> [such] as those of T.J. Ross, who makes the more general claim that "the monster belongs to our age of moral and ecological chaos" or the more specific explanation of the rise of the "horror of personality" film in the context of the violent events, including a number of widely publicized multiple murders, that filled the news headlines in the early 1960s.[3]

While as Grant himself notes these kinds of ideological and social ap-

proaches to horror cinema have proved fruitful, I am interested in this paper to look at a number of essays Kracauer wrote on film and mass culture during the 1920s: "Cult of Distraction", "Calico-World: The UFA city in Neubabelsberg" and "Boredom". These essays were not published in English until 1975 and have had far less impact upon film studies in the English speaking world than aforementioned texts such as *From Caligari to Hitler*.[4] Moreover, as Thomas Elsaesser[5] and Miriam Hansen[6] have both noted, these early essays reflect Kracauer's sensibilist approach to cinema. What they mean is that Kracauer in these early essays is particularly sensitive to the aesthetic form that is internal to cinema as a medium and to the spectator's immanent experience of this internal form. Such an experience still has an ideological dimension for Kracauer, but not one based on the allegorical function of films or on the social messages they communicate: both of which dominate Kracauer's texts.

I will focus on the contention in "Cult of Distraction" that that there have been historical changes to human experience which modern forms of technology such as cinema not only represent but materially express. These changes are ambivalent for Kracauer, representing both a break with what are for him past bourgeois myths of human identity and aesthetic taste which also heralds new forms of alienation. Moreover, it is through alienation itself that a "mode of cognition" can be developed "through which the mass public can understand and transform their own experiences".[7] In this short paper I cannot explain all the aspects that make up modern social change for Kracauer so I will limit my work to one strand of his thought concerning the modern experience of external distraction and popular, low-brow cinema. I will relate this thought to two samples of the key literature on 1970s and 80s slasher film spectatorship: the work of Carol J Clover and Tania Modleski. I will focus on two of Clover's arguments from her 1993 book: *Men, Woman and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. In order to give a richer context to one of these arguments I will refer to Modleski's 1986 essay "The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory."

I am particularly interested in creating a dialogue between Clover's work and one aspect of Kracauer's early thought. In doing this I aim to show that Kracauer's ideas not only underpin ideological and social approaches to cinema of the kind identified by Grant, but also form a back-drop to questions concerning the reception of sub-genres like the slasher film. While Kracauer's theoretical approaches to cinema stem out of a different cultural history to Clover's, I still believe that at least one aspect of his early thought serves as a background setting to contemporary perspectives on horror spectatorship. For different reasons both Kracauer and Clo-

ver have a shared appreciation of the social value of popular, low-brow cinema. However, their perspectives also differ in crucial respects. Thus, my goal is additionally to consider how the work of Clover, who looks at gendered viewing experiences, opens up other ways of thinking about spectatorship that enriches and complicates the early thought of Kracauer.

In "Cult of Distraction"[8] the films that Kracauer particularly has in mind are popular, entertaining fictions replete with glamorous stars and sensational narratives. His interest is thus in genre films, including those which present fantastic, implausible adventures, and not in avant-garde or documentary films. In looking at these popular films he also takes into consideration their display in exhibition spaces, the "picture palaces" as they were known. These picture palaces in Weimar Berlin did not simply exhibit films but also presented stage performances before the commencement of the screenings and had a live orchestra play during the screenings themselves. Kracauer's argument is that these different aspects of cinema spectatorship are constituted by the rapid, sensuous experience of surface effects and external distractions.

He is aware that from the perspective of high-culture and intellectual scholarship such spectatorship is an un-essential aspect of cultural behaviour, a form of low-brow entertainment for the masses. For Kracauer, however, it is only in such films and their exhibition that sincere truths about reality can be expressed. The visual and aural entertainment provided by the picture palaces becomes the means through which audiences can see their daily lives reflected back at them. He argues that this is not the case with traditional art events such as thespian theatre:

> In a profound sense, Berlin audiences act truthfully when they increasingly shun these art events (which, for good reason, remain caught in mere pretense (sic)), preferring instead the surface glamour of the stars, films, revues, and spectator shows. Here, in pure externality, the audience encounters itself; its own reality is revealed in the fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions[9]

He says, however, that surface impressions and external distractions can only secrete social reality to audiences when such impressions and distractions maintain a fidelity to the social changes that have occurred within modern city and urban life. To maintain this fidelity, distraction and pure externality in cinema should not become the means toward producing products of high-culture. Such products are reflective, he says, of bourgeois notions of individual unity and wholeness as well as certain forms of aesthetic taste. By these forms of taste he means theatrical and literary art works that focus on the interior worlds of individualised characters con-

structed within a closed, linear system of classical drama. These high-cultural products are inherited from 19th century cultural, literary and theatrical modes and no longer reflect the reality of modern life which, for Kracauer is characterised by the experience of mass spectacles under capitalism.

Cinema is one form of modern mass spectacle that reflects and expresses this new experience within capitalism. As Miriam Hansen[10] has noted, cinema expresses for Kracauer a new form of subjectivity based on sensorial discontinuity, on the rapid, fragmented experience of surface effects, and on the dissolution of the ego. In cinema the individual identifies with the mass eye, and the materiality of their individual existence – the embodied sense of their own being – is converted into mass experience. As Kracauer says in another essay entitled "Boredom", the cinematic experience can be one in which the viewer's self is wrest away from them:

> And once the images begin to emerge one after another, there is nothing left in the world besides their evanescence. One forgets oneself in the process of gawking, and the huge dark hole is animated with the illusion of a life that belongs to no one and exhausts everyone.[11]

While this loss of self is a form of alienation for Kracauer it also represents and expresses changes to historical consciousness. Modern technologies like cinema embody the disintegration of 19th century sensibilities and sentiments. In "Cult of Distraction" Kracauer says that when distraction and pure externality in cinema do not become the means toward producing products of high-culture they have the potential to show audiences the social reality of disintegration. Out of this awareness come the first steps toward bringing about social change. Only first steps, it should be stressed: cinema is not the solution to modern alienation it is an expression of it through which a dormant, hidden reality can be accessed.

However, Kracauer suggests that many of the films as well as the way they are exhibited tend toward trying to sustain an ideal order and unity which hides this reality of city and urban life, the reality of disintegration and change. Thus, while on the one hand, the exhibition of popular genre films has an aspect about it that involves creating new forms of subjectivity, on the other, many of the films still have a drive toward "artistic form"[12] and the architecture of many of the picture palaces still privileges "the lofty and the sacred as if designed to accommodate works of eternal significance."[13] The remnants of bourgeois cultural values such as "personality, inwardness, tragedy"[14] and the 19th century thespian drive toward reaffirming the subject's ego through "unity of vision and continuity of consciousness"[15] ele-

vate cinema away from modern reality. As he says in his essay "Calico-World"

> The director is the foreman. It is also his difficult task to organise the visual material – which is as beautifully unorganised as life itself – into the unity that life owes to art. He locks himself and the strips of film into his private screening room and has them projected over and over. They are sifted, spliced, cut up, and labelled until finally from the huge chaos emerges a little whole: a social drama, a historical event, a woman's fate[16]

Art gives unity to life in the cinema by transforming the chaos of life, the discontinuous and self-shattering experience of modernity, into dramatic and historical form.

I would now like to consider this early strain of Kracauer's thought in relation to two key samples of the literature on 1970s and 80s slasher film spectatorship. As said in the Introduction, I will concentrate on Clover's book "Men, Women and Chainsaws" here, referring only to Modleski's essay in order to develop one argument made by Clover.

Clover says that slasher films tend to be perceived by many cinephiles as one form of low horror that is unrefined and formulaic. She says this is a perception shared by both "respectable" middle-class audiences as well as trash cinema aesthetes. By such aesthetes she means fan groups who redeem low-brow films and marginalised genres on the basis of their aesthetic merit. Such fans often find slasher films too run-of-the-mill and without any artistic value. However for Clover, it is the very reasons given for dismissing these films that give them their social significance:

> the slasher film, not despite but exactly because of its crudity and compulsive repetitiveness, gives us a clearer picture of current sexual attitudes, at least among the segment of the population that forms its erstwhile audience, than do the legitimate products of the better studios[17]

Slasher films are "outside the usual aesthetic system."[18] Rather than present an original, individual vision they unapologetically re-work hackneyed tropes. The implication here is not that slasher films lack creativity but that they predominantly work in terms of generic formulas. Moreover, slasher films graphically explore repressed sexual wishes and dark fantasies and they do so without recourse to spiritual or moral instruction; in other words, without any sense of edification. In sum, slasher films are uncultured works that lack aesthetic legitimacy.

However, it is precisely because of this that they offer a clearer, more

transparent view of the sexual attitudes of their audiences - made up largely of young men says Clover - than other kinds of films. Such a perspective can be placed against the backdrop of Kracauer's view of popular, low brow cinema in essays such as "Cult of Distraction". The fact that slasher films do not belong to the normal "aesthetic system", both because they primarily employ generic modes of representation and explicitly present unconscious desires without a civilising mandate, is what enables them to more sincerely reflect sexual elements of audiences' daily lives.

Modleski's essay on the slasher genre echoes aspects of Clover's argument. Writing in 1986 Modleski argued that many contemporary exploitation and slasher films have "engaged in an unprecedented assault on all that bourgeois culture is supposed to cherish."[19] By bourgeois culture Modleski means general cultural attitudes as well as specific forms of art, such as the 19th century realist novel. She says that bourgeois culture valorises a harmonious individual ego that is ultimately at home in the family and champions narrative continuity and closure that historically ceils the individual in moral progression. She believes that the slasher film attacks these cultural attitudes and forms of art primarily through various narrative devices – the brutal dismemberment of individual characters and the family hearth being one such device. Another is the lack of story and character development and the open-ended, sequel form of many of the films which destroys the dramatic development and closure essential to the 19th century novel mode.[20]

If we add Modelski's assertion to Clover's contention that the non-edifying aspects of slasher films is what allows them to reveal aspects of social reality then we are entitled to make the following statement. Slasher films do not present the individual ego or individual sexuality in terms of closed, linear dramatic development or moral progression. This enables them to show sexual aspects of social reality that other filmic productions are unable to do. This statement stands against the background of Kracauer's early thoughts on popular genre films. He saw a redemptive function in modern technologies like cinema and in its popular, low-brow genres when they broke with 19th century cultural and artistic modes. Of particular concern to him was that these genres did not incorporate such modes at the expense of reflecting the reality of modern life.

However, this dialogue between Kracauer and Clover is one that requires further qualification. Firstly, while slasher films in the 1970s and 80s represented one kind of popular, low-brow genre they were not glamorous productions in any sense. Characterised by low-production values and B-star performers, these films were never sensational in the big-production sense of that term. Hence, insofar as Kracauer includes within his list of

low-brow films those with high-production values and A-star performers, slasher films do not conform to all of the kinds of films he has in mind. Secondly, while 70s/80s slasher films at the level of theme and narrative arguably broke with 19th century bourgeois cultural codes and values, they were not part of the same kind of mass experience that Kracauer was analysing in 1920s Weimar Berlin. For example, while low-budget, independent films such as *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* had theatrical distribution around the world and high audience attendance rates in many countries[21] slasher films from the late 70s onwards were increasingly viewed domestically on video and by the 80s many of them around the world were going straight to video. In fact, Clover largely bases her contention that males constitute the majority of slasher film audiences on rental sales of videos at a number of video shops in the United States. The private, domestic experience of watching film is characteristically different from watching film in a movie theatre as part of a public event. The conditions for the dissolution of the ego to take place, insofar as these conditions involve the congregation of a mass of people, is not met in the private domestic space of the home.

While these qualifications modify the shared assumptions that Clover and Kracauer share they do not eclipse the common appreciation at the heart of these assumptions. Firstly, while slasher films were not A-grade productions they were still a popular form of low-brow generic entertainment replete with implausible plot lines and various forms of crude sensationalism. In these respects, they share some key characteristics with the narrative films Kracauer has in mind.[22] Secondly, while the reception of cinema in the 70s and 80s was diversified through new forms of media technology this does not detract from the fact that in an important respect both Kracauer and Clover share a similar appreciation of low-brow genre. I am not arguing that this appreciation is built around their same experience and understanding of mass entertainment. What I want to stress is Clover's assertion that because slasher films are low-brow, generic works that lack civilised instruction in the realm of sexuality they offer an access to social reality other filmic productions cannot. When we add this to Modleski's understanding that the slasher film attacks bourgeois cultural attitudes and aesthetic tastes, a dialogue with Kracauer's early thought is established. Popular, low-brow films are able to secrete social reality to audiences precisely because they are *not* high-cultured products.

However, what we find in Clover's work also opens up another way of thinking about spectatorship. Unlike Kracauer, Clover is concerned with gendered viewing positions; young males are "the slasher film's implied audience, the object of its address."[23] While she acknowledges that young

men are not the slasher films sole audience she argues that they still constitute its majority. She says there is a gender-specific subject position and identification produced for the male spectator in the slasher film, specifically in terms of their perception of 'The Final Girl'. Clover describes this Girl as a female victim-hero, a character who survives at the end of many slasher films after fighting off and maiming the male slasher. Clover feels 'The Final Girl' represents a fundamental change to the horror genre, a change that began in the late 1970s. She says this change has ramifications for how we think about the politics of spectatorship in cinema and also expresses changes in the social reality of gender. Clover argues that male spectators both masochistically identify with 'The Final Girl' as victim, as a figure who is subject to physical and psychological terror, but also identify with her as a masculinised character who is able to survive and render powerless the psychotic male stalker.

It should be pointed out that 'The Final Girl' is an ambiguous figure for Clover. On the one hand, she both represents and expresses masculine castration anxieties and sadomasochistic fantasies. In this sense she is an enactment of certain psychoanalytical models of sexuality that construct, argues Clover, a binary, 'two-sex' theory of gender, one which shows "a world in which male and female are at desperate odds."[24] On the other hand, however, 'The Final Girl' is politically progressive insofar as she confronts male spectators with the fact she is a female who performs masculine traits, who enacts qualities that in classical narrative cinema typically belong to male characters. In this respect, 'The Final Girl' shows masculine and feminine identity to be symptomatic of gendered performance rather than existing as a fixed code.

For Clover, then, slasher films represent and express specific gendered experiences at both the psychic and performative levels of identity. For Kracauer, gender is not an issue at the level of alienation and distraction. In essays such as "Cult of Distraction" and "Boredom," mass spectacles like cinema are predicated upon homogeneous responses, upon deindividualisation. As Thomas Elsaesser[25] puts it, Kracauer analyses mass culture in many of his early essays not in terms of "gender-specific perception but...(rather) the collective nature and de-personalizing forces of modern visual pleasure." Cinema represents and expresses a new form of cultural experience produced out of modern capitalism. In such an experience audience pleasure is not predicated upon the sexual difference of individual subjects.

To conclude, we can say then that on the one hand Clover's work highlights issues concerning gendered spectator experiences and in this respect she can arguably further enrich and complicate Kracauer's early

thesis. Her work poses a direct challenge to the general perspective Kracauer has of popular, low-brow film. As already discussed, Kracauer sees cinema as representing and expressing historical changes to human consciousness which involve the fragmented experience of sense impressions and the dissolution of the ego. The question remains whether sexually defined subject positions inform the spectators' experience of cinema at this level of alienation and distraction.

On the other hand, however, re-engaging with Kracauer's early thought allows us to re-think about how sexual difference in spectatorship, and more specifically the politics of gender in sub-genres such as the slasher film, are expressed. For Kracauer the effects of modern alienation and distraction occur to all peoples regardless of gender and involve collective and de-personalising experiences. His work poses a direct challenge to Clover's. It asks us to reflect on how theories about differently sexed subject positions in cinematic spectatorship account for the effects of homogenisation, for the immanent experience of pure externality in cinema that equally addresses the spectator as part of a whole. Even if spectatorship since the introduction of visual/aural technologies such as television, video, DVD and the internet is no longer constituted by the same kind of mass experience that was evident in the early twentieth century, Kracauer's sensibilist approach to the visual screen invites us to consider what the immediate, aesthetic experience of cinema means for theories about the construction of subjectivity in spectatorship. His work opens up the question of whether there is a de-individualised and genderless experience of aesthetic form in cinema or whether spectatorship is necessarily first determined by gendered viewing positions.

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NOTES

[1] Barry Keith Grant, "Introduction" in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).

[2] Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1966)

[3] Grant, "Introduction" 6.

[4] "From Caligari to Hitler" has not only remained popular in the English speaking world because it was first published in English in 1947. It has arguably also served

to give an explanation to the horrors of German fascism that has concentrated on the history and psychology of the German nation at the expense of looking at the complicity or involvement of other Western countries in what occurred. This has suited many of these countries insofar as they have sought to disavow such complicity or involvement. For a discussion of the international reception of Kracauer's book see Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar cinema and after: Germany's historical imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000). For a discussion of the international expectations of Germany to turn inward and seek explanations for the atrocities of the 1930s and early 40s solely in the history and psychology of the German nation see John E. Davidson, *Deterritorializing the New German Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999)

[5] Thomas Elsaesser, "Cinema - The Irresponsible Signifier or "The Gamble with History": Film Theory or Cinema Theory" in *New German Critique. Special Issue on Weimar Film Theory* 40 (Winter, 1987)

[6] Miriam Hansen, "Decentric Perspectives: Kracauer's Early Writings on Film and Mass Culture" in *New German Critique: Special Issue on Siegfried Kracauer.* 54 (1991) 47-76.

[7] Ian Aitken. *European Film Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001) 170.

[8] Siegfried Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction" in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* Trans. Thomas Y. Levin. (London: Harvard University Press, 1995).

[9] Siegfried Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction" 326.

[10] Miriam Hansen, "Decentric Perspectives" 47-76

[11] Siegfried Kracauer, "Boredom" in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays.* Trans. Thomas Y. Levin. (London: Harvard University Press, 1995) 332.

[12] Siegfried Kracauer "Cult of Distraction" 327.

[13] Siegfried Kracauer "Cult of Distraction" 327.

[14] Siegfried Kracauer "Cult of Distraction" 326.

[15] Miriam Hansen, "Decentric Perspectives" 459.

[16] Siegfried Kracauer, "Calico-World: The UFA city in Neubabelsberg" in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays.* Trans. Thomas Y. Levin. (London: Harvard University Press, 1995) 288

[17] Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women & Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 1993) 23

[18] Clover, *Men, Women & Chainsaws* 22.

[19] Tania Modleski, "The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory" in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture.* Ed. Tania Modleski (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986) 158

[20] Modleski notes that key elements from these bourgeois forms of culture and art were carried over into cinema in the early twentieth century. These forms were developed through the classical narrative, realist system inaugurated in European and Hollywood productions in the 1910s and 20s. Miriam Hansen has said that Kracauer too recognises that 19th century bourgeois notions of identity and aes-

thetic taste underpin the development of this system. It is important to note that these earlier theatrical and literary forms were not seamlessly transplanted into cinema rather they were developed in respect of the properties that are unique to cinema as a medium. Thus the classic, realist system was characterised by the combination of a number of different things, including principles of continuity editing, linear, cause and effect plot development and the construction of clear psychological goals for characters. The vast majority of slasher films from the 70s and 80s employ elements of this classic narrative system, such as continuity editing. I am not thus arguing that slasher films from this period represent an entire break with the classic realist system. I am only agreeing with Modleski that in significant respects slasher films disrupt at the level of theme and narrative a number of codes of this system, codes that have a lineage going back to 19th century bourgeois attitudes and tastes.

[21] For example, as Vera Dika notes in terms of independent productions "Halloween" is one of the highest grossing box-office films of all time while the original "Friday the 13th" was the second highest attended film for seven weeks in the US in the summer of 1980. See Vera Dika, *Games of Terror: Halloween, Friday the 13th, and the Films of the Stalker Cycle* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990)

[22] Obviously, the graphic violence in slasher films represents one major difference from the depictions of violence in 1920s silent cinema. This difference opens up interesting questions regarding the affects of screen violence on audiences and how such affects relate to alienation and distraction and to the ability for slasher films to reveal truths to audiences about their social reality. Such questions are beyond the scope of this paper although one implication in Clover's work is that the graphic mutilation of bodies is part of the crude qualities that allow slasher films to honestly depict sexual fantasy and repression. Given Kracauer's contention that sensationalism is a key part of the revelatory effects of popular, low-brow films his early work would seem to have relevance for the proposition that crude violence on screen offers insight into sexual desire.

[23] Clover, *Men, Women & Chainsaws* 23.

[24] Clover, *Men, Women & Chainsaws* 22.

[25] Elsaesser, "Cinema - The Irresponsible Signifier" 77.