

SIEGFRIED KRACAUER

The Street

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Kracauer began his career as an influential film critic for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in May 1921 with a short report on educational film („Der Film als Erzieher“), and occasional film reviews (roughly 30 in three years). Only in 1924 did Kracauer, now fully employed by the *Frankfurter Zeitung* as a cultural critic, began to review films regularly and also reflect on the present state and future potential of cinema. (Between 1924 and 1933, Kracauer published no fewer than 700 film reviews and articles on cinema.) One of his first serious engagements with an individual film was his encounter with Karl Grune's, *Die Strasse* (The Street), which had its premiere in Berlin on November 29, 1923. Kracauer saw in this film the possibility of a philosophical film that reveals secrets about human existence not available in any other art form. Below is his first review of *The Street*. He follows with two more, both included in the *Promise of the Cinema*, no. 178 (February 4, 1924) and no. 179 a year later, May 5, 1925. Kracauer grappled with this film as key text for his metaphysical understanding of modernity again in his exile works, *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947) and *Theory of Film* (1960).

The film THE STREET, which is now playing in the U.T.-Lichtspielen, presents the silent and nightmarish encounter of languorous souls and *existenzlos* rubble. In it, the blink of an eye, which is merely a point in time, becomes visibility; the types into which the *Gesamtmenschen* decline when they lose their truth, move

like specters through an irreal world. At the beginning, the husband (Eugen Klöpfer) lies on the sofa in a bourgeois living room that is supposed to be a home even though it cannot be one. While the wife (Lucie Höflich), who finds satisfaction in idle isolation, prepares supper, light from the street creeps through the curtains and across the ceiling, and a shadow play develops that bewitches the dreamer. He looks at the street, and while the woman who follows him sees only the street as it is, the meaningless, seductive chaos of drunken existence unveils itself to him. To be sure, it is no more a home than the living room, but it offers adventure and unknown possibilities instead. Here, the film becomes a series of futuristic tableaux; it expresses what drives the yearner, and it can express it because only fragmented images, like dreams, can still fulfill the already lost interior, which is devouring itself. The man goes forth like a sleepwalker, in old-fashioned dress with an umbrella and a stodgy hat; he wanders from street to street, distressed and alone amidst the surging crowds and the rushing automobiles. And one thing leads to another, the plot thickens and then untangles itself again, because everything is just an illusion and stays what it was: nothing. A girl who stands in the corner is a symbol of this nothingness, as through the play of shadows, she suddenly transforms into Death. Death is all around, and because the people are dead, inanimate objects consort with them as though it were a matter of course. A limestone wall announces a murder, and the neon signs flicker like glinting eyes. The man falls in with a girl (Aud Egede Nissen); the girl introduces him to her pimp (Anton Edthofer), whose friend (Ludwig Trautner) is in on the scheme; a man from the country (Leonhard Haskel) joins up with them, they are in a nightclub; caught up in the rush of gambling, the man bets a check that does not belong to him, then

wins it back and more on top of it—none of it is true and tragedy is out of place—coexistence expands ever further, without ever becoming involvement. Those who get absorbed into it are dead, and lonely like the blind man (Max Schreck), who do not know how to find any other way of life. Finally, the pimp murders the man from the countryside and, after initially lying, admits the deed, because his child (Sascha) unknowingly shows him the way to his doomed self—this is the only event that transpires without the horror of emptiness, and thereby slips out of the structure of the other scenes. The child, which did not know itself and the world, is the only truly living being in this chaos, and her caretakers are very logically the police, whose duty to preserve public order completely encompasses an increasingly externalized life. The whole thing ends as it began. The husband, cleared of the suspicion of murder, returns in the early morning, crossing barren streets where scraps of paper are blown about; his bleary-eyed wife hands him the reheated soup, and both look through the window again, he deflated, she with dawning comprehension.

The film is a *masterpiece* by the director Karl Grune and his crew, which includes Ludwig Meidner. The actors' performances are perfect too; looks and gestures completely express what they need to say, and totally replace superfluous words. The future belongs to films like this.