# *Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing: Adorno, Derrida, Kracauer*

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The vicissitudes of Adorno's reception in English-language cinema and media studies make a well-known and tedious saga. In its latest chapter, marked by the dissemination of British Cultural Studies in American academic institutions and publishing, the invocation of Adorno's writings on film and mass culture amounts to little more than a ritualistic gesture, reiterating the familiar charges of elitism, pessimism, and high-modernist myopia.[1] The trouble with such accounts is not that they are critical of Adorno — there is much to be critical about — nor even that they use him as a foil against which to assert the identity of a new paradigm or to defend the legitimacy of a field of study which Adorno himself, at his darkest, considered as little more than an appendix of political economy. The trouble is that such accounts effectively preclude critical engagement with the body of thought in question. They do so, for one thing, because they limit themselves to a rather well-trod and narrow basis of texts (narrower even than the amount of writings available in English, whatever problems there may be with the translations). More importantly, they evade the challenge posed by any historical theory of film and mass culture: how to discuss the theoretical claims made in these earlier texts without neutralizing their historical distance and contingency; and, by the same token, how to enlist their very historicity in theorizing the break,

1. For a recent example of such rhetoric, see Jim Collins, *Uncommon Cultures: Popular Culture and Post-Modernism* (New York, London: Routledge, 1989). The following essay is part of a larger research project that has been generously supported by the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

as well as the links, between earlier forms of mass culture and our own.

The more interesting critics of Adorno's writings on film and mass culture all, in one way or another, tend to take up this challenge. They try to engage his writings as "a living thought" by historicizing them, by tracing their concerns in relation to ours, by mobilizing disjunctions and contradictions in the texts themselves.[2] Whether reading "Adorno in reverse," "against the grain," or in the spirit of "redemptive critique," such revisionist approaches seek to defamiliarize the well-known arguments, both about him and his own, and to make the texts articulate problems for which they themselves may not have an answer. (Admittedly, this is more difficult in the case of Adorno than it seems for Benjamin. The latter's ostensible endorsement of cinematic technology's inherent political potential has earned him the status of good object in the same canon that dismisses Adorno — the status of a bourgeois theorist who could nonetheless envision a democratic, class-conscious appropriation of mass and consumer culture. Yet, if we wish to learn more from Benjamin than what merely confirms our intellectual-political desire, there is no question that this account needs to be defamiliarized as well.)

One strategy of redeeming Adorno's position on mass culture, in particular film, has been to highlight tropes of "writing" — the graphic, the scriptural — in those texts in which he attempts to conceptualize an aesthetics of film, irrespective of its industrial-technological context of exploitation.[3] To recall the familiar argument, Adorno's reservations against film are rooted in the photographic basis of cinematic representation which subtends its seemingly unmediated doubling of empirical reality; in semiotic terms, its indexically grounded iconic character, that is, a form of signification based in the perceptual likeness between sign and referent. In the context of Adorno

2. See, for instance, Andreas Huyssen, "Adorno in Reverse: From Hollywood to Richard Wagner" (1983), repr. in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986); Bernard Gendron, "Theodor Adorno Meets the Cadillacs," *Studies in Entertainment*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986); Richard Allen, "The Aesthetic Experience of Modernity: Benjamin, Adorno, and Contemporary Film Theory," *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987): 225-40; Gertrud Koch, "Mimesis und Bilderverbot in Adornos Ästhetik: Ästhetische Dauer als Revolte gegen den Tod," *Babylon* 6 (1989): 36-45; Thomas Y. Levin "For the Record: Adorno on Music in the Age of Technological Reproducibility," *October* 55 (1990): 23-47; the quotation is from Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London, New York: Verso, 1990) 7.

3. See Koch and Levin, as well as my introduction to Adorno's "Transparencies on Film," *New German Critique* 24-25 (Fall/Winter 1981-82): 186-98.

and Horkheimer's chapter on the "Culture Industry" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, this iconicity is seen as a major source of the cinema's ideological complicity, because it allows the filmic image to function as an advertisement for the world "as is." But even where Adorno begins to think about film in terms of an alternative artistic practice, as in *Composing for the Films* (1947) or "Transparencies on Film" (1966), the philosophical problem remains: that, in its very specificity, (live-action) film conflicts with the Biblical ban on graven images (*Bilderverbot*) which, as Gertrud Koch and other scholars have emphasized, constitutes a regulative idea in Adorno's aesthetic theory.[4] For film to become art, in Adorno's view, it would have to inhibit the photographic iconicity of the image flow by means of cinematic techniques that make it "resemble the phenomenon of writing," that would fracture the illusionist self-identity of the moving image and make it an object of immanent construction, figuration and deciphering. As Koch points out, the search for a specifically cinematic form of "determinate negation" finds one answer in the principle of montage which, according to Adorno, "arranges [things] in a constellation akin to writing"[5] — that is, discontinuous editing in the widest sense (which for Adorno and Eisler includes sound/image relations).

In a similar vein, Tom Levin defends Adorno against the charge of a Luddite and mandarin hostility toward the mass media by shifting the discussion to Adorno's writings on the gramophone record. Adorno could display a remarkably open, even enthusiastic attitude toward this particular medium of technical reproduction, Levin argues, because he saw in it an indexical, that is, materially motivated, form of inscription (acoustic waves etched into a vinyl plate) that was not hitched, as in film, to an iconically asserted surface resemblance and hence to false immediacy and facile intelligibility. Adorno goes so far as to justify the reification of the live performance by means of the phonograph record on the grounds that it reestablishes "an age-old, submerged and yet warranted relationship: that between music and *writing*." For

4. Koch 39ff.; Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, *Gesammelte Schriften* (in the following abbreviated as *ÄT* and *GS*), ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1970) 7: 106, 416 and passim. This is the place to reiterate Kluge's paraphrase of Adorno's iconophobia: "I love to go to the movies: the only thing that bothers me is the image on the screen." Klaus Eder and Alexander Kluge, *Ulmer Dramaturgien: Reibungsverluste* (Munich: Hanser, 1981) 48.

5. Adorno, "Transparencies on Film" (1966), trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *NGC* 24-25 (1981-82): 199-205; 201 (in the following abbreviated as "TF").

the phonograph record replaces the arbitrary conventions of musical notation with a form of non-subjective writing that is at once motivated and unintelligible, a language of "determined yet encrypted expressions." Adorno links this kind of writing to Benjamin's early speculations on language, in particular the *Trauerspiel* book's vision of a "last remaining universal language since the construction of the tower," and Levin in turn links both to the Romantic tradition of a "hieroglyphics of nature."[6]

Whether in the context of film aesthetics or the ontology of record grooves, "writing" for Adorno (as for Benjamin or, for that matter, Derrida) clearly means something different from the notation systems of phonetic languages. In both media, it refers to a form of inscription that is fixed and motivated in its discrete signs, yet is not immediately accessible and requires deciphering. For both film and the phonograph, the emphasis on "writing" implies a form of reception closer to the activity of "reading" than to the automatic consumption excoriated by Adorno in "The Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening" and elsewhere. If this were indeed the case, we should be able to extrapolate from Adorno's writings on film aesthetics and the phonograph not only an alternative practice of filmmaking and composition, but also a different vision of collective reception.

To emphasize Adorno's investment in the scriptural character of the technological media is, I think, a valid and necessary argument. It occludes, however, the negative valence that the terms "writing" and "reading" have for Adorno in the context of mass culture, nowhere as strongly as in his notion of film and other media as hieroglyphics. Focusing on the latter, I will ask what kinds of writing and reading, what processes of signification and reception are involved in that comparison. Among other things, this raises the question of the subject(s) and situations of reading, in particular the relationship of the critical theorist to both the mass-cultural hieroglyph and its "ordinary" consumers. Moreover, if we find that Adorno may have captured something about processes of mass-cultural identification for the period in which he was writing — that is, Hollywood at its most classical, American mass culture at its most Fordist — what does this analysis tell us about postmodern, post-Fordist media culture and its seemingly obverse strategies of

6. Levin, "For the Record" 35-41; Adorno, "The Form of the Phonograph Record" (1934), trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *October* 55 (1990): 56-61.

diversification? Finally, Adorno's untimely negativity may encourage us to rethink the possibility and necessity of critique, even if today we are likely to invest greater confidence in the ability of mass-cultural publics to reappropriate industrially manufactured meanings in diverse, oppositional and collective ways: the stakes and methods of manipulation may have changed, but postmodern media culture is still a far cry from any utopian, radically democratic notion of the "popular."

In his 1953 essay, "Prolog zum Fernsehen" (Prologue to Television), Adorno speaks of mass culture as a "language of images," (*Bildersprache*), "pictographic writing" (*Bilderschrift*) or "hieroglyphic writing" (*Hieroglyphenschrift*). This language of images lends itself to the "will of those in charge," all the more so as it attempts "to pass itself off as the language of those whom it supplies":

> By giving visual representation to what slumbers in the preconceptual layers of their minds, [this language of images] simultaneously shows them how to behave. While the images of film and television strive to conjure up those that are buried in the viewer and indeed resemble them, they also, in the manner of their flashing up and gliding past, approach the effect of writing: they are grasped but not contemplated. The eye is pulled along by the shot as it is by the printed line and in the gentle jolt of the cut a page is turned. As image, this pictographic language is the medium of regression in which producer and consumer collude; as writing, it displays the archaic images of modernity.[7]

The analogy between mass-cultural images and hieroglyphic writing is grounded, at first sight, on the level of psychoanalysis, in the affinity of filmic/televisual discourse with pre- and unconscious modes of thought. Accordingly, Adorno footnotes an article by two Italian psychoanalysts who belabor that affinity drawing mainly on Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*.[8] But where these authors celebrate the pictographic and prelogical quality of filmic images as the ideal of "pure cinema," Adorno discerns a powerful mechanism of ideology, reminiscent of Leo Lowenthal's quip about the culture industry as "psychoanalysis in reverse." By mimicking the figurations of unconscious or preconscious phantasy,

7. Adorno, "Prolog zum Fernsehen" (1953), *GS* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1977) 10.2: 513-14.

8. Angelo Montani and Giulio Pietranera, "First Contribution to the Psycho-Analysis and Aesthetics of Motion-Picture," *Psychoanalytic Review* 33 (1946): 177-96.

Adorno argues, mass-cultural hieroglyphics actually spell out a behavioral script; by disguising the very fact that they were written, and with it their heteronomous origin, they create the regressive illusion of a common discourse. Similar to film theorists of the 1970s such as Metz and Baudry, Adorno ascribes this ideological effect to the configuration of the apparatus, the psychotechnical conditions of film reception, rather than a particular mode of film practice.[9]

The regression that Adorno sees facilitated by the hieroglyphics of mass culture, however, is not just a matter of individual or even social psychology. The statement that, "as writing," they display "the archaic images of modernity" points to another context — the historico-philosophical framework of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In the note citing the psychoanalytic article, Adorno primarily refers the reader to his (and Horkheimer's) use of the term hieroglyphic writing in the long-time apocryphal sequel to the chapter on the culture industry, entitled "Das Schema der Massenkultur" (not published until 1981). In that context, the notion of mass culture as hieroglyphics ties in with the familiar themes of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: the reversion of Enlightenment into myth and the resurfacing of the archaic in modern forms of domination; the dissociation of image and sign, and the concomitant instrumentalization of language and reification of aesthetic expression; the double character of mimesis; and the false identity of individual and social totality under monopoly capitalism, advanced by a cultural economy of commodity fetishism, repetition and regression.

In "The Schema of Mass Culture," the interpretation of mass culture as hieroglyphics seems to confirm the most problematic aspect of Horkheimer and Adorno's indictment of the culture industry, the thesis of total manipulation and delusion, compounded with the system's timeless, perennial quality. Like the fascist resurrection of archetypes, the ostensibly consumer-engendered dream production of Hollywood is seen as a manufacturing of archaic symbols on an industrial scale; like the former, these function as allegories of domination: "In the rulers' dream of the mummification of the world, mass culture serves as the priestly hieroglyphic script which addresses its images to those

9. Cf. Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus," and "The Apparatus," repr. in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, ed., *Apparatus* (New York: Tanam, 1980); Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982); Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath, eds., *The Cinematic Apparatus* (London: Macmillan, 1980).

subjugated, not to be relished but to be read." Predicated on repetition and effect, such pictographic language culminates the historical "transition from image to writing" or "script" (*Übergang von Bild in Schrift*), the absorption of mimetic capabilities by monopolistic practice.[10]

The term "priestly hieroglyphics" refers back to the opening chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in which Horkheimer and Adorno elaborate the imbrication of myth and enlightenment in terms of a genealogy of language. Here hieroglyphics is introduced as a "symbolic" language, mediated by "the doctrine of the priests," but one in which the functions of word and image still converged. The core of the symbolic is the mythical conception of nature as cyclical, endlessly renewable and permanent. The historical process of disenchantment, in Horkheimer and Adorno's account, inevitably entails a dissociation of verbal and pictorial functions. In the division of labor between science and the arts, language degenerates, on the one hand, into a "mere system of signs," into an instrument of recognizing nature by renouncing any similarity with it; as image (*Bild*), on the other, language is made to resign itself to the function of copy, imitation or reflection (*Abbild*), to become all nature but renounce any claims to recognize it.[11] Implied in this historico-philosophical construction, however, is another genealogy, which traces the fall of language as a movement from an originary *written* language to a demythologized language described in *phonological*, Saussurian terms. This implies further that the mimetic capability of language is conceived as belonging to its originary form as (hieroglyphic) writing, rather than the spoken word. With the shift to a phonocentric concept of language, mimetic capability recedes into the realm of the image, the preverbal layers of aesthetic expression. But inasmuch as that realm too, in monopolistic culture, is increasingly subject to reification, it reverts to a state of writing, in the sense of allegorical mortification. Thus, in the universal idiom of modern mass culture, the ancient hieroglyphs return to consummate mimetic desire with a vengeance. With the technologically enhanced "transition from image to

10. "Das Schema der Massenkultur," *GS* 3: 332; for a recent (not entirely reliable) translation by Nicholas Walker, see Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991) 53-84; 80 (in the following abbreviated as *CI*).

11. *GS* 3: 33-34, 41; *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Seabury, 1972) 17-18 (in the following abbreviated as *DE*). The sentence containing the distinction between language and "a mere system of signs" is missing in the translation, *DE* 41.

writing" the reversal of enlightenment into myth has come full circle.

As an instance of the progressive reification of aesthetic expression, the notion of mass-cultural hieroglyphics merely elaborates for film and television what Adorno had stressed earlier in his critique of popular music, in particular his writings on jazz and his essay on Wagner. There he traced the reification of musical expression into formulaic fragments that could be endlessly replicated, corresponding to the reduction of listening to hearing only what one has heard before. Instead of exposing or refiguring the effects of reification, alienation, and fragmentation, popular music, following Wagner, works to cover them up, to rehumanize and provide an affective "glue" for irrevocably sundered social relations.

By a similar logic, aggravated by the iconicity of the visual media, the hieroglyphics of mass culture exert a regressive appeal, in Horkheimer and Adorno's account, not because they would reflect the general state of reification ("the mummification of the world") but, on the contrary, because they mask that state, disguising script as pure image, as natural, humanized presence. In the emphasis on false concreteness, the notion of mass-cultural hieroglyphics echoes Marx's troping of the commodity as a "social hieroglyph," his attempt to locate the "magic" of the commodity in its simultaneously sensual and hypersensual quality.[12] If the commodity beckons the consumer as a real thing, its value, its "real" meaning, is determined by its abstraction of labor and its position within a total system of exchange. Similarly, the "secret doctrine" communicated by the hieroglyphics of mass culture is not the historical truth of reification, but the "message of capital." Its secrecy, its encryptment, however, has nothing to do with the enigma of the non-intentional, transsubjective language of aesthetic images; rather, it is a ploy of total domination to keep itself invisible: "no shepherd and a herd."

Simulating immediacy, individuality, and intimacy, the "characters" of mass culture spell out norms of social behavior — ways of being, smiling, and mating. Regardless of the explicit messages touted via dialogue and plot, the viewer is ceaselessly asked to translate image into script, to read the individual appearance of a star as an imperative of identity — "to be like her" — and to articulate the most subtle nuances in terms of the binary logic of "do and don't" (*GS* 3: 333; *CI* 81).

12. Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: International, 1975) 1: 74-75; on the structure of this Marxian trope see also W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago, London: U of Chicago P, 1986) chap. 6.

While we might expect this to happen to a supposedly passive viewer under the spell of diegetic absorption, Adorno and Horkheimer rather impugn mass culture's specific forms of hermeneutic pleasure, that is, narrative and generic conventions that encourage the viewer to second-guess the apparent mysteries of plot or construction. It is in the shift of the viewer's attention to the "how" by which the trivial resolution is achieved, "the rebus-like detail," that the "hieroglyphic meaning flashes up in him or her." In other words, Horkheimer and Adorno ascribe the effectivity of mass-cultural scripts of identity not simply to the viewers' manipulation as passive consumers, but rather to their very solicitation as experts, as active readers.[13] The identification *with* the stereotype is advanced by the appeal to a particular type of knowledge or skill predicated on repetition: the identification *of* a familiar face, gesture or narrative convention takes the place of genuine cognition.

In "Prologue to Television," Adorno gives the hieroglyphic imperative of identity a somewhat subtler twist by qualifying it as the culture industry's cynical recommendation, "become what you are."

> Its lie consists in the repeated affirmation and rigidification of mere being, of that which the course of the world has made of human beings. . . . Instead of paying tribute to the unconscious by elevating it to consciousness so as to fulfill its urge and at the same time pacify its destructive force, the culture industry . . . reduces human beings to their unconscious behavior even more than the conditions of their existence do all along. . . ." [*GS* 10.2: 514]

The ideological effect of mass-cultural hieroglyphics is not so much a matter of administering positive (or negative) models but, rather, of preventing human beings from changing, from being different, from distinguishing their own wishes and needs from those imposed upon

13. This observation ties in with Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of the peculiar fetishism of enlightened consumption which I discuss below. The critique of this kind of active reading has implications for attempts, such as David Bordwell's, to counter psychoanalytic views of the spectator as passive and manipulated with a conception of the spectator as an active participant "in creating the illusion," patterned on the "hypothesis-checking" unitary subject of cognitive psychology. Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Columbia UP, 1975) 7, 9; Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1985) 30. Horkheimer and Adorno's skepticism regarding consumerist expertise should also make us think twice about the *type* of knowledge generated by studio and fan publicity, as well as the vexed issue of Hollywood's "self-reflexivity."

them by distribution from above. As Adorno says in a later text, analyzing the myth of "consumer-oriented art": "By reproducing [the reified consciousness of the audience] with hypocritical subservience, the culture industry in effect changes this consciousness all the more, that is, for its own purposes: it actually prevents that consciousness from changing on its own, as it deep down, unadmittedly desires. The consumers are made to remain what they are: consumers" ("TF" 205).

In "Schema," Horkheimer and Adorno see the identificatory spell of the mass-cultural hieroglyph linked to the return of mimesis, as I suggested earlier, coupled with the resurfacing of archaic writing. "Mimesis," they propose, "explains the mysteriously empty ecstasy of the fans of mass culture." If this is clearly a perverted form of mimesis, it still feeds on its utopian opposite, the possibility of reconciliation. What "drives human beings into the movie theaters," Adorno and Horkheimer observe, as it were, in the same breath, may be "the deeply buried hope" that one day the hieroglyphic "spell may be broken." (*GS* 3: 334; *CI* 82).

"Mimesis" notably is a central category in Adorno's thought and a notoriously difficult one at that.[14] Like many of his key categories, mimesis has a number of different, possibly conflicting meanings depending on the constellation in which it is used — meanings to which I can only allude here in a rather reductive manner. In the anthropological-philosophical context of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the concept of mimesis is derived from magic and shamanistic practices as well as zoological forms of mimicry. It involves making oneself similar to the environment; a relation of adaptation, affinity and reciprocity, a non-objectifying interchange with the Other; and a fluid, pre-individual form of subjectivity. In this sense, the concept of mimesis assumes a critical and corrective function vis-à-vis instrumental rationality and the identifying logic of conceptual language which distances subject from object and represses the non-identity of the latter. Since, however, the historical subjugation of nature has irrevocably transformed nature and sundered its relations with society, mimetic practice can be thought of only in a utopian mode. As a utopian category, mimesis prefigures the

14. Josef Früchtl, *Mimesis: Konstellation eines Zentralbegriffs bei Adorno* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1986); Michael Cahn, "Subversive Mimesis: T. W. Adorno and the Modern Impasse of Critique," in *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Mihai Spariosu (Philadelphia, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1984) 27-64; see also Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (New York: Free Press, 1977) 87f.

possibility of a reconciliation with nature, which includes the inner nature of human beings, the body and the unconscious.

By the twentieth century, mimetic experience in the utopian sense is conceivable only in the realm of art, specifically art that inscribes the historical disfigurement of human, social relations with nature. In the context of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, mimesis marks a form of aesthetic expression that inverts traditional (Platonic) notions of mimesis as imitation, in particular Marxist theories of reflection.[15] Mimesis for Adorno does not pertain to the relation between sign and referent; it is not a category of representation. Rather, it aims at a mode of subjective experience, a preverbal form of cognition, which is rendered objective in works of art, summoned up by the density of their construction. Such moments of transsubjective expression constitute art's *promesse de bonheur*, the unfulfilled promise of reconciliation. At the same time, throughout modern art history, the mimetic impulse has also objectified itself in the bent toward imitation, in the futile attempt to close the gap with the object by doubling it.[16]

To the extent that it is patterned on zoological forms of "mimicry," Adorno's concept of mimesis involves the slippage between life and death, the assimilation to lifeless material (as in the case of the chameleon) or feigning death for the sake of survival. This paradox, indebted to Freud's theory of the death drive, structures the dichotomies of the mimesis concept in significant ways. In an unreflected form, mimesis as mimicry converges with the regime of instrumental reason, its reduction of life to self-preservation and the reproduction of domination by the very means designed to abolish it. In that sense, mimesis entails what Michael Cahn calls "a deadly reification compulsion" that perpetuates the state for which Adorno likes to cite Kürnberger's apothegm, "Das Leben lebt nicht" (life is not alive). In the context of aesthetic theory, however, this mimesis onto the reified and alienated ("Mimesis

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15. In its opposition to contemporary advocates of realism or naturalism, Adorno's concept of mimesis converges with Benjamin's, specifically as developed in "The Doctrine of Similarity" (1933), trans. Knut Tarnowski, *New German Critique* 17 (Spring 1979): 65-69, and the second version of this essay, "On the Mimetic Faculty" (1935), trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Reflections* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978). Like the latter, though with significant distinctions, Adorno opposes any surface resemblance of representation in favor of what Benjamin called a "non-sensual similarity," a mimetic "affinity" achieved only through materially specific techniques of determinate negation; like Adorno, Benjamin associated this non-sensual similarity with the phenomenon of writing.

16. *ÄT*, *GS* 7: 169ff., 424-25 and passim.

ans Verhärtete und Entfremdete"), the world of living death, is a crucial means of negation available to modern art — as an "admixture of poison," a pharmakon that allegorizes the symptoms though it necessarily fails as a therapy.[17]

In the context of the culture industry, the concept of mimesis is obviously dominated by the negative connotations of both an unreflected mimicry onto reified and alienated conditions and the misguided aesthetic investment in imitation. But it is important to remember that even at this low point of its dialectics, mimesis does not concern a semiotic relation between sign and referent, but the social relations between subjects and commodities. These are determined by a reification compulsion that enjoins economic and psychoanalytic senses of fetishism in the "I-know-quite-well-but-all-the-same" of enlightened consumption. The "triumph of advertising in the culture industry," the chapter on the culture industry concludes, is made possible by "the compulsive mimesis of the consumers onto the cultural commodities, even as they see through them."[18]

In "Schema of Mass Culture," Horkheimer and Adorno elaborate on this remark in terms of the hieroglyphic analogy. As hieroglyphic signs, the characters of film and television rehearse the compulsive assimilation of human beings to the commodity. In the very assertion of individuality, every face, every smile congeals into a mask, a grimace: "The face becomes a letter by freezing that which brings it to life — laughter." The secret of the "keep smiling" is that it transforms the horror over the possibility of such fixation "into obedience before the mortified face." In the economy of perverted mimesis, reification is not just a metaphor: mass culture "literally makes the human beings it reproduces resemble things, even where their teeth do not signify toothpaste, even where the lines of grief in their faces do not conjure up a laxative."[19] By identifying with such images, the viewers surrender their mimetic desire to the universe of death, accepting a false social identity in place of the genuine collectivity and reciprocity they secretly hope for in the experience of mass culture.

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17. Cahn 32-33; Adorno, *GS* 7: 39, 201f and passim.

18. "Das ist der Triumph der Reklame in der Kulturindustrie: die zwangshafte Mimesis der Konsumenten an die zugleich durchschauten Kulturwaren." *GS* 3: 191; in the translation, *DE* 167, the word "mimesis" is dropped from the text.

19. *GS* 3: 333-34; in the English version, *CI* 82, the word "Laxativ" is translated as "cosmetics."

This expectation is not entirely a matter of (self-)deception. Horkheimer and Adorno grant at least the potential for true mimetic experience to silent film as a medium and apparatus. For the tendency toward hieroglyphics, they argue, reached its full force only with the transition to sound: the masks of mass culture are all the more terrifying once they begin to talk, once they are naturalized by synchronized dialogue. In silent film, the alternation between written titles and images, as antithetical materials, allowed the images to retain some of their imagistic, mimetic quality. This dialectic, however, was incompatible with the culture industry's bent toward amalgamation and homogeneity. It altogether collapsed with the advent of sound, when written language was "expelled from film as an alien presence [*Fremdkörper*], but only to transform the images themselves into the writing which they in turn absorbed" (*GS* 3: 333; *CI* 81). The material heterogeneity of silent film thus harbors a moment of resistance which, once eliminated, makes technological progress all the more a catalyst of regression.

In a similar movement, Adorno's "Prologue to Television" affirms his case against the bad present by highlighting the critical difference of similar conventions in the past. There he contrasts the stereotypes of the mass-cultural hieroglyphic with stereotypical figures in earlier forms of popular art which, "in the spirit of allegory," registered and hyperbolized objective developments. Unlike the character masks of the modern mass media, "the highly stylized types of the Commedia dell'arte," for instance, "were so removed from the everyday existence of the audience that it would not have occurred to anyone to model their own experience after the mask-like clowns" (*GS* 10.2: 515).

But is this objectifying "spirit of allegory," a notion clearly indebted to Benjamin, not to some extent still present in the hieroglyphics of mass culture, in the very metaphor of hieroglyphics? The reified idiom of mass-cultural products is, after all, also the condition of their critical readability; only as figurations of writing can the naturalized images of mass culture be deciphered, can their "secret code" be cracked. As Adorno and Horkheimer assert in the introduction of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, echoing Benjamin's programmatic transformation of myth into allegory: "Dialectical thought interprets every image as writing. It teaches how to read in its own features the admission of its falsity so as to deprive it of its power and appropriate it for truth" (*GS* 3: 41; *DE* 24). The same double vision seems to inform Adorno's approach to mass-cultural hieroglyphics, specifically in the phrase quoted earlier:

"As image, this pictographic language is the medium of regression in which producer and consumer collude; as writing, it displays the archaic images of modernity."

Alas, not quite. It is easy to misread this phrase in light of the poststructuralist aura of "writing" and "reading," and I have done so myself by mistranslating the verb, "*zur Verfügung stellen*," as "display" instead of "supply" or "make available." A more adequate translation would therefore be: "as writing, [this pictographic language] supplies the archaic images of modernity," or alternatively, if we read "*der Moderne*" as the dative case, "supplies archaic images to modernity."[20]

There are actually, at least, two kinds of writing, and two kinds of reading, involved in Adorno's notion of mass-cultural hieroglyphics. Indeed, his argument hinges upon the distinction between a literal and a figurative, between a complicit and a critical form of reading.[21] Himself a critical reader, Adorno discerns the emergence of a different type of reading, a mode of enlightened viewer response which amounts to little more than predetermined picture-puzzle solving, based on a short circuit between mass-cultural conventions and the consumer's disfigured unconscious.

Adorno's concept of writing is just as ambivalent, and relative to constellations, as his concept of mimesis, to which it is intimately linked. In the context of the culture industry, writing apparently means script in the sense of *Vorschrift* or prescription, a discourse that masks itself in iconic images and familiar sounds. In the context of aesthetic theory, however, writing becomes *écriture*, the non-subjective, indirect language of modern music and abstract painting. In its renunciation of traditional imitational and even expressive elements, this *écriture* is profoundly historical. Adorno links the scriptural character of modern art to a "seismographic" capacity, the "breaking through of early mimetic behavior" comparable to physical irritations, by which such art registers

20. The subsequent sentence further eliminates any possible ambiguity in the word "writing" here: "As magic that has lost its enchantment, they [the archaic images of modernity] no longer convey any secret but are models of a behavior that corresponds as much to the gravitation of the total system as to the will of those in control" (*GS* 10.2: 514).

21. There is a third notion of reading in Adorno, on which he comments in conjunction with Hegel's writings, a "kind of gestic or curve-like writing" that makes the signifying function withdraw in favor of a mimetic one which compels the reader to retrace the thoughts with a "speculative ear as if they were musical notations." "Skoteinus oder Wie zu lesen sei," *GS* 5: 353f.

the tremors of distant, even future, catastrophes.[22] More generally, Adorno joins writing, and tropes of graphicity such as "cipher" and "hieroglyph," with the character of art as enigma (*Rätsel*). "All works of art are scripts [*Schriften*] . . . that is, hieroglyphic ones whose code has been lost and whose gravity [*Gehalt*] not least depends on the fact that their code is missing" (*GS* 3: 189). The enigmatic character of artworks is constitutive and unsolvable; the secret of mass-cultural hieroglyphs, by contrast, translates into a singular meaning — which in turn can be decoded only by the critical reader.

The ambivalence of Adorno's notion of writing may be yet another symptom of the split between his aesthetic theory and the analysis of culture as commodity and industry in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.[23] It would therefore make sense that the section on the mass-cultural hieroglyphic does not follow the rhetorical strategy of the culture industry chapter, that is, the pairing of particular aspects of mass-cultural practice with particular concepts of bourgeois aesthetics (such as "Gesamtkunstwerk," "catharsis," or the Kantian "purposefulness without purpose") which the culture industry at once mocks and consummates. The opposition between "script" and "*écriture*," between "secret code" and "enigma" has to remain implicit, because the absent counterpart belongs to a different register (as well as to a later phase of Adorno's work).

By the same token, however, it could be argued that, especially in Adorno's post-war texts, the distinction between writing as *écriture* and writing as script all too often coincides with the institutional divisions between high art and popular culture. The problem with this linkage is not so much the insistence on an aesthetic dimension (to which I will return), but the way it circumscribes the position of the critical theorist toward mass-cultural phenomena, in particular his relation to the "ordinary" consumers. Notwithstanding the principle of immanent critique, Adorno's attitude toward mass culture involved a notorious gap, if not an unreflected hierarchy between the critical intellectual and the subjects of consumption, the "slow-witted" or "batrachians" (*Lurche*). While it

22. "Über einige Relationen zwischen Musik und Malerei," *GS* 16: 628-642; 635-36, 633. Adorno explicitly adopts the term *écriture* from Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler to whom the essay is dedicated.

23. This is what Jameson argues, quite convincingly, in *Late Marxism* (107-08, 145), although I think he underrates the complex and problematic ways in which the concept of mimesis brackets both projects. See Albrecht Wellmer, *Zur Dialektik von Moderne und Postmoderne: Vernunftkritik nach Adorno* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1985); in Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge: MIT, 1990).

would be foolish to deny Adorno's "mandarin" sensibility, the issue is more complicated. For it raises the question as to the possibility of an alternative discourse on mass culture that is simultaneously receptive and critical, non-elitist and yet not simply "popular." Bound up with this question is the larger one of whether and how mimetic-aesthetic experience can be generalized, that is, democratized, even under the conditions of late-capitalist, electronic media publics. I will return to these questions via a detour through other concepts of film and mass culture as hieroglyphic, with a focus on Derrida and Kracauer.

The comparison between cinema and hieroglyphics appears rather early and frequently in discourse on film throughout the silent era; with the transition to sound, the analogy became less obvious and less opportune. In France, commentators like Victor Perrot celebrated film for its restoration of "humanity's first writing system" (1919) and filmmakers like Abel Gance claimed that the cinema would save the cultural heritage for the future by returning to the ancient Egyptian language of images.[24] In the United States, the poet Vachel Lindsay advertised film as a new "American hieroglyphics" as early as 1915, resuming the fascination with the Egyptian hieroglyph in the writings of Whitman, Emerson, Poe, and Thoreau as well as a popular undercurrent ranging from hieroglyphic Bibles to children's books like *Mother Goose in Hieroglyphics*. D. W. Griffith, at home in the tradition of the American Renaissance, was certainly familiar with Lindsay's slogan when he made *Intolerance* (1916), a film that put the hieroglyphic analogy into practice and thus aimed to affiliate itself with this particular tradition in American culture.[25]

In most commentaries during the silent era, the comparison between cinema and hieroglyphics is celebratory, if not apologetic; the underlying concept of hieroglyphics is one of a language of mystical correspondence and visual self-evidence, reincarnated in the new universal language of film. Yet there is another direction of conceptualizing film as hieroglyphic, or ideographic writing in a wider sense. In a famous essay of 1929, Sergei Eisenstein illustrates his argument for "intellectual montage" (the signification of an abstract meaning by

24. Abel Gance, "Le temps de l'image est venu" (1927), cited in Christian Metz, *Language and Cinema*, trans. Donna Jean Umiker-Sebeok (The Hague: Mouton, 1974) chap. 11.

25. Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Liveright, 1970); John T. Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983); Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991) chap. 8.

juxtaposing two separate visual representations) with reference to the Chinese ideogram and its composition from pictographic elements (which he calls "hieroglyphics"). During the 1930s, he abandoned this basically constructivist model in favor of a more complex notion of film as ideographic writing based on the psycholinguistic concept of "inner speech," a topic explored by the Bakhtin circle at the time.[26] The analogy between filmic writing and the process of association and figuration in the human mind, a process that mixes images, words, and symbols, entailed an emphasis on the composite character of the cinematic sign, its mixing of figural, graphic, and phonic matters of expression. If the filmic hieroglyph is thus conceived as fundamentally heterogeneous, however, its mode of signification is anything but self-evident, self-identical and universal.

It is in this sense that the hieroglyphic analogy has been revived, in the more recent past, by Derridean film theory.[27] The key text for this endeavor is notably *Of Grammatology* where Derrida traces the suppression of writing in the name of speech through the vicissitudes of the hieroglyph. In particular, he elaborates on the epistemological shift in the concept of the hieroglyphic sign, from the longstanding Western idealization of the hieroglyph as a form of mystical correspondence between sign and referent to the 18th-century discovery of the hieroglyph's simultaneously phonetic and non-phonetic mode of signification which enabled the deciphering of the Rosetta Stone. For Derrida, the conceptualization of "the organized co-habitation, within the same graphic code, of figurative, symbolic, abstract, and phonetic elements" emblematizes the moment at which "a systematic reflection upon the correspondence between writing and speech could be born."[28] The hieroglyph assumes a

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26. Sergei Eisenstein, "Beyond the Shot," *Writings 1922-34*, ed. and trans. Richard Taylor (London: BFI; Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988) 140f.; on the concept of "inner speech" see essays by Stephen Heath and Paul Willemen in *Cinema and Language*, ed. S. Heath and Patricia Mellencamp, American Film Institute Monograph Series, I (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1983).

27. Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, *Le texte divisé* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981); "The Graphic in Filmic Writing: *A bout de souffle*, or the Erratic Alphabet," *Enclitic* 5.2/6.1 (1981-82): 147-61; Gregory Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985); and, more recently, Tom Conley, *Film Hieroglyphs: Ruptures in Classical Cinema* (Minneapolis, Oxford: U of Minnesota P, 1991). Also see D. N. Rodowick, "The Figure and the Text," *Diacritics* 15.1 (1985): 34-50; Peter Brunette and David Wills, *Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1989) chap. 4.

28. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976) 81.

further paradigmatic function for Derrida in his reading of Freud, especially with regard to the pictographic writing of dreams which "exceeds phonetic writing and puts speech back in its place."[29]

Derrida's notion of hieroglyphics is no doubt more complex than Adorno's because, ironically one might say, Derrida historicizes the very concept of the hieroglyph which Adorno assumes as a given. While they converge in the critique of hieroglyphics as a "natural language," Derrida draws more radical conclusions from the irreducible heterogeneity of the hieroglyphic sign. Granting it an indeterminacy and indirection that Adorno reserves only for works of autonomous art, Derrida shifts the question of meaning from the sign to the reader: the hieroglyphic is ultimately not a property of the text but a method and metaphor of interpretation.

As a struggle of interpretations, the history of the hieroglyph exemplifies the indissociable relationship between writing and power. In his reading of Bishop Warburton's 1744 essay on Egyptian hieroglyphs, Derrida focuses on Warburton's contention that hieroglyphics were not originally a sacral, esoteric script but a natural medium for preserving knowledge and civil organization, and that its deflection from common usage came about by a historical and political act of encryptment which rendered writing a secret and reserved knowledge in the hands of the priests. While Derrida predictably questions the naturalist origin of the hieroglyph posited by Warburton, he stresses the latter's insistence that the hieroglyph's encryptment came about as a political event or strategy (rather than a divine mystery as earlier accounts would have it). Spinning out the dual figure of priest and hieroglyph, Derrida traces the net that binds writing to the production, circulation and contestation of meaning and knowledge, and both to a "caste" of intellectuals and institutions that ensure "hegemony, whether [their] own or that of special interests."[30] Unlike Warburton, Derrida sees the "crypto-politics of writing" as a necessary and inevitable process, inseparable from the effort to undo the "discriminating reservation." "Whenever a code is inverted, disencrypted, made public, the mechanism of power

29. Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978) 218. For Freud's own use of the term, see *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *Standard Edition* 4: 277-78; 5: 341; and "The Claim of Psychoanalysis to Scientific Interest," *Standard Edition* 13: 177.

30. Derrida, "Scribble (writing-power)," trans. Cary Plotkin, *Yale French Studies* 58 (1979): 117-47; 124. Warburton's Essay is the French translation of a part of the second edition of *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated* (London, 1742).

produces another one, secret and sacred, 'profound.'" Thus writing is never outside or independent of power, just as power cannot be grasped, or indicted, as a unitary and general principle; rather, it is a matter of "struggles and contending forces" that set up and permeate "writings and counter-writings." Nor is any form of writing or power originary. The cryptographic maneuver of intellectuals and politicians "*does not consist in inventing new religions but in making use of the remanence,*" Derrida concludes, quoting Warburton, "*in 'taking advantage of those that they find already established.'* "[31]

Such reasoning places Derrida in surprising vicinity with cultural theories indebted to Gramscian notions of hegemony or, closer to the Frankfurt School, with conceptions of the public sphere as multiple, hybrid and antagonistic such as we find in Negt and Kluge. This strand of Derrida's thinking on the gnoseo-politics of writing, however, seems to have had little impact on Derridean approaches to film and the electronic media. Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, for instance, the most eminent Derridean film critic in France, limits her elaboration of "filmic writing" (*cinécriture*) to certain "hieroglyphic texts" — Eisenstein's *October*, films by Resnais, Duras and Godard — and thus to a canon inspired by literary modernism. On the other end of the spectrum we have Gregory Ulmer's attempt to popularize Derrida in *Applied Grammatology*, a book that celebrates the electronic media in McLuhanesque fashion as the last nail on the coffin of the metaphysics of the "Book": "The pedagogy of grammatology is, finally, an educational discourse for an age of video."[32] In either case, there is hardly any reflection on the institutional parameters of film/video writing (and the hegemonic valorization of image over writing), its contestation within particular public spheres, its imbrication with networks of profit and power. By privileging "graphicity" as such, these adaptations perpetuate, to paraphrase Derrida, the "mystification" of the "singular abstraction," of Writing as much as of Power, "fostering the belief that one can do otherwise than to oppose powers to powers and writings to other writings."[33]

Moreover, Derridean film theory lacks a historical perspective that would relate the emergence of the mass media, as a rather specific

31. "Scribble" 140; 138; 117f.; 147.

32. Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology* 265. I am aware that this is a caricature of Derridean film theory, highlighting an idealistic tendency in the adaptation of the hieroglyphic analogy; for a critique of Ulmer, see Brunette and Wills 125.

33. "Scribble" 117, 144.

form of writing, to the cultural, economic and political transformations associated with modernity or, for that matter, postmodernity — to the emergence of new forms of subjectivity and knowledge, domination and resistance. One could argue that Adorno's indictment of mass-cultural hieroglyphics is just as ahistorical, unspecific and abstract as the Derridean valorization of Writing, and therefore just as inadequate to the tasks of critical media theory and practice. If the object of critique is the culture industry as "system" and totality, there is no space for concepts of cultural difference and contestation and hence no way to conceptualize historical change.

In each paradigm, the hieroglyph functions as an allegory of signification itself: in one case demonstrating the irreducible heterogeneity internal to the sign which undermines fictions of identity, unity, linearity, priority; in the other, rehearsing the script of reification that veils itself in moving images. These tropological structures inform the very styles of reading and reasoning. If catachresis is the master trope of deconstruction, Adorno reasons in figures of paradox and contradiction. For instance: "Every peal of laughter resonates with the blackmailer's threat and the comic types are written characters [*Schriftzeichen*] for the disfigured bodies of the revolutionaries."[34] Or: "The photographic assertion that the trees are green, the sky is blue and that the clouds are moving already turns these images [of nature] into cryptograms of factory chimneys and gas stations" — cryptograms, that is, of a double violation of nature, the industrial one as well as the cultural denial of such disfigurement in the industrial imaging of nature as pure (*GS* 3: 171; *DE* 149).

From a deconstructionist point of view, such statements flaunt a moral pathos that impairs their analytic claims. But they also illustrate a crucial difference of cognitive interest, not just between Derrida and Adorno but between deconstruction and Critical Theory in a wider sense. If the former seeks to demonstrate the epistemic primacy of language over history, the latter is concerned with the historical inscription of the present, as the juncture of economic, social, political forces that

34. "Schema," *GS* 3: 335; *CI* 82. This statement is part of Adorno's desparate argument with Benjamin who valorized the collective laughter inspired by slapstick comedy and Disney cartoons as an "antidote," a "therapeutic detonation" of technologically created mass psychoses and violent tensions; see earlier versions of the Artwork Essay, Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1972-) I.2: 462; VII.1: 376f.; Adorno, letter to Benjamin, 18 Mar. 1936, trans. Harry Zohn, in Fredric Jameson, ed. *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: New Left, 1977) 123f.

are not outside or before language yet also cannot be explained solely in terms of the problematic of language.[35] The dissociation of language and experience, like the dialectic of writing and mimesis, itself becomes a mark of historicity, linked to the advent of modernity, even if — as in Adorno and Benjamin — modernity is seen as entering into peculiar constellations with prehistory.

The question of the historical place of modernity leads me to my last example, an alternative concept of mass culture as hieroglyphic in the context of Critical Theory. In his articles and reviews of the 1920s and early 1930s, Siegfried Kracauer reads the ephemeral, unnoticed and culturally marginalized phenomena of everyday life as configurations of writing, resorting to scriptural figures such as "hieroglyph," "ornament," "rebus," or "arabesque." With his turn to the quotidian and neglected, Kracauer belongs to a larger tradition, related in turn to the philosophical program of "the readability of the world."[36] In the crisis perceived as modernity, this program finds a particular inflection in the work of Jewish intellectuals — Simmel, Benjamin, Bloch, Franz Hessel, to mention only a few — who direct reading skills developed in the interpretation of sacred and canonical texts to the spaces and artifacts of modern urban life, trying to decipher a hidden subtext that is referred to redemption. Like Adorno, Kracauer realized the importance of Benjamin's study on the *Baroque* Trauerspiel for the contemporary situation, particularly the latter's redefinition of allegory in the framework of *Naturgeschichte*. But Kracauer also insisted that Benjamin's own allegorical method, "the dissociation of immediately experienced unities," would not reach its "detonating" force unless actually applied to the present.[37]

Kracauer's recourse to scriptural metaphors, like his entire

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35. This is a particular problem with DeManian readings of Benjamin that tend to reduce the promiscuous and contradictory quality of Benjamin's texts to a single, doctrinal core — a tendency rehearsed in de Man's own ingenious reading of "The Task of the Translator," *Yale French Studies* 69 (1985) 25-46.

36. The phrase is from Hans Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1986). Also see Benjamin's programmatic invocation of Hofmannsthal's phrase: "to read what was never written." *GS* 1.3: 1238.

37. Siegfried Kracauer, "Zu den Schriften Walter Benjamins" (1928), *Schriften* 5.2, ed. Inka Mülder-Bach (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1990): 123 and passim. On the tension between violence and redemption that characterizes this secularized Jewish reading program, see Anson Rabinbach, "Between Enlightenment and the Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism," *New German Critique* 34 (Winter 1985): 78-124.

emblematic mode of reading, seems initially motivated by an apocalyptic sense of withdrawal of meaning from the world, which blends contemporary theories of alienation and reification (Weber, Lukács) with the imagery of Jewish Messianism and Gnosticism.[38] Adorno, reared on the same discourse, was wont to imagine the social reality of reification in images of mortification, rigidification and death by freezing (*Kältetod*) — the most negative form of mimesis. Kracauer, using similar imagery, visualized the effects of reification simultaneously as a process of dissociation, as a "disintegration of the world" (*Weltzerfall*). Once he moved beyond a history of decline, Kracauer saw the fracturing of all familiar relations and shapes increasingly (that is, before 1933) as a chance — to point up the "*preliminary* character of all given configurations,"[39] to watch the fragments reconfigure themselves, perhaps into something new.

The crystallization of the social environment into scriptural figures is no more the "authorless script" of a metaphysical History than it is an invitation to random readings. From the mid-20s on, Kracauer conceives of this process quite concretely in terms of the effects of capitalist rationalization, specifically, the abstraction of human labor and bodies; the progressive detemporalization and discontinuity of perception and experience; and a turn to the "surface," the tendency toward "pure xternality" he discerned in the emerging mass culture of entertainment and consumption.[40] Like many Weimar intellectuals, Kracauer welcomed mass culture as a practical critique of the remnants of bourgeois high culture and philosophical attempts to patch up the actual state of disintegration and disorder. The figuration of the "mass as ornament," for instance, which Kracauer observed in musical revues and sports displays, objectivates the "exodus of the human figure from sumptuous organic splendor and individual shape into anonymity" and thus promotes the demise of concepts such as personality

38. Miriam Hansen, "Decentric Perspectives: Kracauer's Early Writings on Film and Mass Culture," *New German Critique* 54 (Fall 1991): 47-76; 50-59; also see Inka Mülder, *Siegfried Kracauer — Grenzgänger zwischen Theorie und Literatur: Seine frühen Schriften 1913-1933* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1985) 19ff.

39. "Die Photographie" (1927), *Schriften* 5.2: 97.

40. "Cult of Distraction" (1926), trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987): 91-96; 94. On Kracauer's own "turn to the surface," see Inka Mülder-Bach, "Der Umschlag der Negativität: Zur Verschränkung von Phänomenologie, Geschichtsphilosophie und Filmästhetik in Siegfried Kracauers Metaphorik der 'Oberfläche,'" *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift* 61.2 (1987): 359-73.

and the self-identical subject.[41]

Above and beyond this iconoclastic, allegorizing function, the mass ornament remains profoundly ambiguous — as ambiguous as the historical process which it congeals into legibility. On the one hand, the anti-organic tendency of such figurations has a utopian dimension for Kracauer in prefiguring a state in which only those remnants of nature prevail that do not resist reason. On the other, the mass ornament encapsulates the dialectic of capitalist rationality (which points in the direction of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*): instead of emancipating humanity from the forces of nature, capitalist rationality perpetuates society as mere nature and thus reverts into myth; reproducing forms of economic and social organization that do not include the human being, the process of disenchantment stops half-way, arresting thought in empty abstraction and false concreteness.[42] While the mass ornament achieves a measure of (aesthetic) abstraction and succeeds in inspiring in the spectating mass a measure of spontaneous recognition (of their own reality), its patterns ultimately remain "mute," renaturalized, unpermeated by reason. Kracauer's distress seems to be far less over the parallel between chorusline and assembly-line, as is often claimed, than over the "muteness" of the mass ornament, its lack of (self-)consciousness, as it were, its inability to read itself. But the answer, as Kracauer asserts here as in other contexts, is not evasion or critical rejection: "the process leads right through the middle of the mass ornament, not back from it."[43]

Not all of Kracauer's scriptural tropes are that clearly defined or decoded in historico-philosophical terms. More often, the figures he traces are writerly attempts to register a multiplicity of phenomena that are as yet unnamed; the very image of the "turn to the surface" is an effort to trope them into legibility. What these phenomena share is an increased focus of perception on the visual, a "primacy of the optical" that Adorno found characteristic — and problematic — in Kracauer's own mode of thinking.[44] It is no coincidence that so many of Kracauer's

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41. "Das Ornament der Masse" (1927), *Schriften* 5.2: 64; "The Mass Ornament," trans. Barbara Correll and Jack Zipes, *New German Critique* 5 (Spring 1975): 67-76.

42. Obviously, Kracauer had a slightly more optimistic view of the Enlightenment than Horkheimer and Adorno, as he did of the emancipatory possibilities of capitalism. Thus, against romantic anti-capitalists who seek to overcome alienation by restoring a *Gemeinschaft*, he insists that the problem with capitalism is not that "it rationalizes too much but *too little*" (*Schriften* 5.2: 62).

43. *Schriften* 5.2: 67.

44. Adorno, "The Curious Realist: On Siegfried Kracauer" (1964), trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, *New German Critique* 54 (Fall 1991): 163.

essays traverse sites and media of visual fascination: photography, film and movie theaters, hotel lobbies, bars, streets, squares, arcades, department stores, city maps, neon lighting, amusement parks, circus and variety shows. Visuality itself becomes a cipher that Kracauer explores from a number of different and conflicting angles, often within one and the same text. While the paradigm of reification and disintegration and their opposite, the ideological masking of such developments in the "flight of images," remains an important code for Kracauer throughout, these emblems of visuality also occasion reflections on the historically changed relation between image and reality, epitomized by the relation of photography and history.[45] On whichever side he comes down in the particular case, his readings at their best describe new forms of subjectivity, fantasy and pleasure that we now associate with the psychosexual dynamics of consumption — new forms of ideology but also new possibilities of collective experience and expression.

But the historical process not only brings forth emblems of glamor or excesses of so-called information. What Kracauer understood like hardly any of his contemporaries is how a society that "externalizes" itself in terms of visuality and visibility defines what remains repressed, hidden from public view. In his 1930 essay on Berlin unemployment agencies, he rejects the official debates and interpretations of statistics in favor of a reading of unemployment as an arrangement of social space, as a spatial hieroglyph:

> Every typical space is produced by typical social relations which it expresses without the distorting intervention of consciousness. Everything denied by consciousness, everything studiously ignored participates in the construction of such a space. The images of space [*Raumbilder*] are the dreams of society. Wherever the hieroglyph of a spatial image is deciphered, it displays the foundation of social reality.[46]

Notwithstanding the epistemological optimism, this hieroglyph is anything but unitary. Kracauer maps the dreams of society in terms of the nightmares of those who have been ejected from it. What makes his account so poignant is not only his description of the misery, psychic as well as physical, that congregates in these spaces; it is his tracing of the

45. See, in particular, his 1927 essay on Photography; on Kracauer's affinity with postmodern reflections on image-reality relations, see Hansen, "Decentric Perspectives" 63ff.

46. "Über Arbeitsnachweise: Konstruktion eines Raumes" (1930), *Schriften* 5.2: 186.

ways in which society administers that misery, through signs, directions, and instructions that speak the ideology of property and propriety. "This is, after all, the genius of language: that it fulfills orders which it was not given and that it erects bastions in the unconscious" (5.2: 189).

As one might imagine, Adorno was rather disturbed by this text and accused Kracauer of having accepted "Benjamin's formula of buildings as the dreams of the collective — just without using the word collective which I can't stand either."[47] Kracauer was quick to distance himself from Benjamin's "romantic" notion of the city as "a dream of collectivity": he was using the word "dream" merely in the sense of uncensored manifestations, as opposed to an "epoch's judgments about itself."[48] And yet, if one reads Kracauer's essays side by side with Benjamin's, one cannot help feeling that Adorno's critique of Benjamin's concept of the "dialectical image" to some extent also aired his misgivings about Kracauer's hieroglyphic readings; the epistemological shortcut he observes in the one could as well be held against the other:

> The notion of collective consciousness was invented to divert attention from true objectivity and its correlate, alienated subjectivity. It is up to us to polarize and dissolve this "consciousness" into a dialectical relationship of society and individual, rather than galvanize it as an imagistic correlate of the commodity character.[49]

One can see how Adorno himself came to use the metaphor of the mass-cultural hieroglyph —.as "an imagistic correlate of the commodity character" — in such a singularly condemnatory sense, all the more so since he was increasingly convinced that any existing collectivity could only be false. In the systematic analysis of the culture industry, the hieroglyph epitomized modes of reception and identification assumed to manipulate people other than oneself; its particular meanings, accordingly, were predetermined by a critique of ideology.

Like Benjamin, Kracauer was not primarily interested in a critique of ideology (though he considered that too his task, especially in his work as daily reviewer for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*); his impulse was the work of critical redemption. Nor was he primarily concerned with the

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47. Adorno, letter to Kracauer, 25 July 1930; quoted in Mülder, *Kracauer* 181, n. 17.

48. Kracauer, letter to Adorno, 1 Aug. 1930; quoted in Mülder, *Kracauer* 181, n. 17.; "Ornament," *Schriften* 5.2: 55; "Mass Ornament" 67.

49. Adorno, letter to Benjamin, 2 Aug. 1935; trans. Harry Zohn, in Jameson, ed. *Aesthetics and Politics* 113 (trans. modified).

relation of individual and society or, for that matter, the question of collectivity, at least not from the mid-20s on. The more pressing issue for Kracauer, I believe, was the increasingly repressive, conflictual, volatile make-up of the public sphere, and the place of the intellectual within that public sphere. For much as he maintained a critical perspective, he would rather have considered himself a member of the spectating mass — and, as an employee, potentially one of the unemployed — than a consciousness apart from, or above, the battleground of publics and counterpublics.

What is at stake, then, in reading the scriptural figurations of modernity is a question of, to borrow Derrida's term, the "gnoseo-politics" of the public sphere. Kracauer's distress over the "muteness" of the mass ornament has to do with the blockage of its rationalizing force: it fails to include the mass it abstracts in the process of cognition. Just as Kracauer, as I have argued elsewhere, knows himself to be vulnerable to the lure of mass-cultural fascination, he proceeds on the assumption that, in principle, the capacity for critical reading is available to others as well, including those who are the target of — and in practice often complicit with — capitalist manipulation.

The possibility that consumers could relate to the scriptural condensations of modern life in a simultaneously receptive and critical manner distinguishes Kracauer's reading politics from Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of mass-cultural hieroglyphs and their single-minded customers. For Adorno, the dialectic of mimetic experience and critical reflection that characterizes Kracauer's — and Benjamin's — approach to mass culture is reserved only for works of autonomous art, and only insofar as these works acknowledge their precarious status, the price of their autonomy. To the extent that aesthetic experience becomes the refuge of an individuality alone capable of critique, it runs the risk of functioning as a "discriminating reservation." The problem is not just that this aesthetic double standard led Adorno to hypostasize the opposition between the subject of mass manipulation and critical subjectivity, but that it also prevented him from imagining alternative — and unpredictable — engagements with the hieroglyphics of mass culture; in other words, that he denied the mass-cultural hieroglyph even the potential of indeterminacy and ambiguity that he assumes for the hieroglyphic *écriture* of modern art.

Or did he? Earlier in this essay, I referred to efforts to revise Adorno's position on film and mass culture with recourse to moments in

his oeuvre in which he himself crosses the dividing line between aesthetic theory and the critique of the culture industry. Among those moments (which are far more numerous than generally assumed) his 1966 essay "Transparencies on Film" has been singled out as his most systematic attempt to redeem film as an aesthetic medium. In a key passage of that text, Adorno recommends that an aesthetics of film should base itself on a subjective form of experience which it resembles: "A person who, after a year in the city, spends a few weeks in the mountains abstaining from all work, may unexpectedly experience colorful images of landscape coming over or through him in dreams or daydreams." Elaborating on this type of experience, Adorno resumes his earlier comparison of film as writing and film viewing as reading. In its discontinuous movement, he observes, the flow of these involuntary mental images resembles the phenomenon of writing, "similarly moving before our eyes while fixed in its discrete signs." "As the objectifying recreation of this type of experience," he concludes, "film may yet become art. The technological medium *par excellence* is thus intimately related to the beauty of nature [*dem Naturschönen*]" ("TF" 201).

As Gertrud Koch has shown, the imbrication of mimetic experience with writing permits Adorno to envision techniques of immanent aesthetic construction that would permit film to negate its technologically grounded violation of the *Bilderverbot*; to achieve mimetic expression by filmic means of "enscriptment" (*Verschriftung*) such as montage.[50] However, in light of the problematic of writing I have tried to unfold, this aesthetic redemption leaves crucial questions untouched. While it is an important contribution to theorizing avant-garde and feminist film practice (as Koch suggests), it also reproduces the split between modernist *écriture* and mass-cultural script on another level, by making the possibility of critical difference in cinema a matter of whether and how film can "yet become art."[51]

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50. Koch 44. It should be added here that, notwithstanding his own endorsement of montage in *Composing for the Films*, Adorno remained skeptical as to the aesthetic scope of the procedure; see "TF" 203 and *ÄT*, *GS* 7: 90, 231-34.

51. In a lecture on "Art and the Arts," delivered the same year as "Transparencies," Adorno himself calls the "question as to whether or not film is art," a "helpless" question, inasmuch as film (and here Adorno invokes Benjamin's Artwork Essay) has paradigmatically challenged that distinction. Yet, unlike Benjamin, Adorno concludes: "Whereas, by its immanent laws, film tries to rid itself from any resemblance to art — as if that contradicted its own aesthetics — by its very rebellion it becomes and expands art. This contradiction, which film is prevented from acting out in a pure form by its dependency on profit, is the vital element of all truly modern art"

To make the imbrication of mimesis and writing productive for a theory of cinema and mass culture we need to complicate both terms, writing and mimesis, with the negative connotations they have in the critique of the culture industry. For a film aesthetics that brackets the institutional conditions of production and reception remains an aesthetics of film rather than one of cinema or mass culture. By the same token, however, a cinema and media theory that jettisons the question of aesthetic difference ultimately resigns itself to rationalizing existing practices in the name of reception studies.[52]

To theorize the nature of the aesthetic experience that, to echo Benjamin, people have a right to expect from film, the concept of mimesis needs to be expanded beyond the individualistic bent that characterizes Adorno's notion of experience in relation to art, as in the passage from "Transparencies" cited above. To recall an earlier point, mimesis in its perverted form animates the mass-cultural script not only by the reduction of the image to iconic doubling, but also in the consumers' adaptation to the false image, the reification compulsion operating in the hieroglyphic spell. This form of mimesis, however baleful, is a collective one, grounded in the institution of cinema, its economic origins as much as its public mode of reception. Under the conditions of the culture industry, the collectivity enacted is a mirage, enhancing the false identification of individual and social totality. Yet in "Transparencies," Adorno himself attributes an intrinsic collectivity to film, mediated by the "mimetic impulse" of its movements, which gives it an affinity with music. He even goes so far as to speak of "the constitutive subject of film as a 'we,'" albeit a rather vague collective id/it that lends itself to ideological misuse. "The liberated film would have to wrest its *a priori* collectivity from the mechanisms of unconscious and irrational influence and enlist this collectivity in the service of emancipatory intentions" (203-4). If this entails the possibility of a filmic *écriture* that would give expression to collective experience, then one would also have to conceive of this collective as a plural, heterogeneous term, capable of

("Die Kunst und die Künste" (1967), *GS* 10.1 [Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1977]: 451-52). That the reservation is phrased in economic rather than technological terms may make it less absolute: if film cannot act out the contradiction "purely," it could just as well do so in an impure form.

52. To the extent that Cultural Studies approaches have privileged the area of mainstream reception to the exclusion of alternative practices and a critique of production they could be said to repeat, on the level of analysis, the negative-mimetic adaptation to reified conditions that Adorno observed in the consumers themselves.

diverging readings and interpretations. Such pluralization would shift the potential for resistance, which Adorno occasionally grants the isolated, damaged subject, to an intersubjective agency of readings and counter-readings, publics and counter-publics.[53]

It is not surprising that Adorno's concept of mimesis has been claimed, within the tradition of the Frankfurt School, for a theory of communicative reason, notably by Habermas in his *Theory of Communicative Action* (1982). This adaptation involves removing the category from the language philosophy underpinning the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* — which, in Albrecht Wellmer's words, places mimesis in a position "extraterritorial to the sphere of discursive reason" — and conceptualizing it instead as "a mimetic-communicative dimension *internal* to discursive reason."[54] It also means turning Adorno's utopia of a reconciliation with nature (which pertains to relations within the subject, between subject and object, and among objects) into a regulative principle for the communication *between* or *among subjects*, that is, intersubjective action and the organization of the public sphere. But, as Josef Früchtl and others have cautioned, such adaptation of Adorno's mimesis concept cannot be accomplished without a paradigm shift. Not only was Adorno adamantly opposed to a subjective, let alone intersubjective grounding of reason but, to the extent that he could think of mimesis as an intersubjective relation at all, it was mediated by objective forms of communication, such as the non-communicative language of art.[55]

From the perspective of a theory of cinema and mass culture, I share these reservations, not necessarily to preserve the purity of Adorno's legacy, but because the communicative inflection of his mimesis concept tends to occlude the relation between mimesis and writing, which I consider one of Adorno's key insights into film. This is not to collapse the two terms: on the contrary, the tension between expressive and constructive elements in filmic *écriture* is essential to preventing their bad convergence in the mass-cultural hieroglyphic. Yet, while the preverbal or, rather, nonverbal qualities of the mimetic may or may not be diametrically opposed to language as speech, they are definitively not outside or other to writing, but part of it. This is important with regard to film and the mass media for two reasons.

One, film and other forms of mass culture have given rise to more

53. Huyssen 26.
54. Wellmer, *Zur Dialektik* 97.
55. Früchtl 190ff., 235-40.

and more mediated, deterritorialized forms of *Öffentlichkeit*: publics that crystallize around texts which are always already written, fixed by means of their — indexical and often iconic — technology, and whose dissemination, as commodities, increasingly exceeds the boundaries of local and even national space. These publics can no longer be theorized in terms of an ideal of communication modelled on face-to-face relations, but require a concept of the public that accounts for the profoundly changed organization of social experience.[56] Two, to think of the mimetic as an element of filmic writing implies conceiving of the filmic sign as irreducibly heterogeneous, whether in a Derridean sense or that of "inner speech," a heterogeneity Adorno himself stressed when reflecting on the critical potential of silent film versus the practice of synchronized sound. On the level of the public sphere, this corresponds to an irreducibly composite, hybrid make-up of 20th-century "publicity," its mixing of industrial-commercial, bourgeois and popular, global and local, technologically generated and live elements. According to Negt and Kluge, such volatile mixture makes for unexpected fissures, conjunctures and alliances — and thus provides the conditions for the formation of counterpublics.

This argument returns us to a question raised earlier, concerning the historicity of Adorno's observations. If his analysis of the hieroglyphic mechanisms of identity captures something about cinema and mass culture during the 1940s and '50s, how does it help us understand analogous processes in the present? Postmodern culture has not only obviated the divisions between high and popular art, but also replaced the Fordist principles of standardization and homogenization with new strategies of differentiation on a global scale. Whether the diversity of this new culture of consumption will set into play the conditions of a "new cultural politics of difference" (Cornel West),[57] or whether it represents just another, more subtly disguised form of subjection and stabilization remains to be seen. If we "relativize" Adorno's critique of mass culture as hieroglyphic (in the spirit of Wellmer's proposal for a relativization — not moderation — of his critique of reason),[58] it

56. See my introduction to Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*, forthcoming (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993).

57. Cornel West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Cornel West, eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, London: MIT, 1990) 19-36.

58. Wellmer, *Zur Dialektik* 99.

could help us formulate critical perspectives that would keep both these possibilities in view. Thus the split between mass-cultural script and modernist *écriture* could be mobilized into a stereoscopic vision that spans the extremes of contemporary media culture: on the one hand, an instrument for the ever more effective simulation of presence and relentless reinscription of difference and identity; on the other, a matrix for a postmodern culture of difference, for new, syncretistic forms of experience and unpredictable formations of public life.

Finally, if the split between script and *écriture* today acquires a different meaning, it is not in the name of the foolish assertion that postmodernism has abolished aesthetic distinctions. This shift is indicated, rather, by developments within mass-cultural practices, in particular with the proliferation of video and its impact on cinema — developments that have decisively weakened the reality or doubling effect, film's insistence on its iconic character, that Adorno abhorred. In "Prologue to Television," Adorno himself observed how television deviated from cinematic standards of verisimilitude, speculating that "the public" must be unconsciously aware of the discrepancies: "The suspicion will grow that the reality that is being served up is not what it pretends to be" (*GS* 10.2: 510). Contemporary film and television practice abounds with examples of such "discrepancies," with highly stylized, ironic, hyperbolic forms of representation, from camp to overt parody and excentric fantasy. To modify Adorno's point about the allegorical quality of the Commedia dell'arte: even if, unlike the latter, television programs purport to relate to the everyday existence of the audience, it is questionable whether viewers would *model* their experience after the mask-like characters of soap operas, although they are likely to use them to *interpret* their own lives. However problematic the nexus of media and corporate power remains, the institutional weakening of iconicity would permit mass-cultural hieroglyphics to become *écriture*, to generalize the possibility of mimetic experience and memory within and against the very institutions that promote their reification. This *écriture* may not look like the modernist one theorized by Adorno; it may have many different faces and styles. Its distinction from the mass-cultural script can only be relative, impure and conjunctural; its difference will remain, at any rate, a matter of readings and counter-readings.