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Agoraphobia: Spatial Estrangement in Georg Simmel and Siegfried Kracauer

Anthony Vidler

> The street in the extended sense of the word is not only the arena of fleeting impressions and chance encounters but a place where the flow of life is bound to assert itself. Again one will have to think mainly of the city street with its ever-moving anonymous crowds. The kaleidoscopic sights mingle with unidentified shapes and fragmentary visual complexes and cancel each other out, thereby preventing the onlooker from following up any of the innumerable suggestions they offer. What appears to him are not so much sharp-contoured individuals engaged in this or that definable pursuit as loose throngs of sketchy, indeterminate figures. Each has a story, yet the story is not given. Instead, an incessant flow of possibilities and near-intangible meanings appears. This flow casts its spell over the *flâneur* or even creates him. The *flâneur* is intoxicated with life in the street — life eternally dissolving the patterns which it is about to form.
>
> Siegfried Kracauer, "Once Again the Street"[1]

It is well known that the rapid growth of big European cities toward the end of the 19th century, the transformation of the traditional city into what became known as *die Großstadt*, or metropolis, engendered not only a vital culture of modernism and avant-garde experiments but

1. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York and London: Oxford UP, 1960) 72.

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also a culture of interpretation dedicated to the study and explanation of these new urban phenomema and their social effects. The disciplines of urban sociology and social psychology were only two academic results of this effort, which concentrated its attention on the radically new spatial and temporal conditions presented by the big cities. "Metropolis" by the First World War had become a word that implied both a physical site and a pathological state, which, for better or for worse (Carl Schorske, echoing Nietzsche, has characterized the sentiment "beyond good and evil"), epitomized modern life.[2]

In this essay, I am concerned with one aspect of this metropolitan discourse, the spatial and the architectural, in the context of a developing psychopathology of *Großstadt* in the writings of Georg Simmel and Siegfried Kracauer as they search in related but different ways for physical clues for understanding the social conditions of modernity. It will be my argument that, starting with the spatial sociology of Simmel, and developing in the paradigmatic spaces identified and described by his student, Kracauer, a unique sensibility of urban space is worked out, one that is neither used as an illustration of social history nor seen as a mechanical cause of social change, but rather a conception of space as reciprocally interdependent with society. This sensibility was by its very nature attached to certain kinds of social spaces that were, for social critics, inherently related to the social estrangement that seemed to permeate the metropolitan realm. In this sense, the critical strength of spatial paradigms was derived from their intimate association, if not complicity, with the material and psychological conditions of what Georg Lukács dubbed the "transcendental homelessness" of the modern world. For our writers, indeed, they existed as the tangible and residual forms of such alienation.

On one level, of course, it is already a commonplace of intellectual history to note the fundamental role of spatial form in the cultural analyses of social critics like Theodor Adorno, Siegfried Kracauer, and Walter Benjamin. The *intérieur* of Adorno, the site of his critique of Kierkegaard; the *Hotelhalle* of Kracauer, key to his reading of the detective novel as itself a reading of modern society; Benjamin's Parisian *passage*, the central figure of his interpretation of the 19th century as the prehistory of the 20th century: these emblematic spaces haunt

2. Carl E. Schorske, "The Idea of the City in European Thought," *The Historian and the City*, eds. Oscar Handlin and John Burchard (Cambridge: M.I.T., 1966) 95-114.

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their texts as symbolizing every aspect of the nomadism, the consumer fetishism, and the displaced individualism of modern life in the great cities. Kracauer's often-cited observation, that "spatial images [*Raumbilder*] are the dreams of society. Wherever the hieroglyphics of these images can be deciphered, one finds the basis of social reality,"[3] accurately captures the special nature of these spatial evocations: like hieroglyphs and their modern counterparts, dreams, these spaces stand ready to be deciphered. Neither simple illustrations nor fully analyzed examples, they seem to hover in a deliberately maintained state of half-reality, now glimpsed clearly, now lost in a cloud of metaphor.

And yet it is true that the central position of these spatial paradigms in the development of critical theory has more often than not been obscured by the equal and sometimes opposite role of temporality, of these theorists' concern with historical dialectics. Thus, Adorno's own critique of Benjamin's tendencies toward spatial reification, together with a tendency on the part of critics to follow Benjamin's preoccupation with memory and post-Bergsonian philosophy, has worked itself against the nuanced interpretation of any dominant spatial images. Perhaps, also, these images are themselves almost too self-evident, too overdetermined to be noticed as particular "constructions" in their own right. When Benjamin refers to arcades, or Kracauer to a hotel lobby, we tend to associate these forms immediately with their historical and physical referents, ignoring the degree of artifice and careful articulation that distinguishes Benjamin's *passage* or Kracauer's lobby from any that we might ourselves have known. For in a real sense these are purely textual spaces, designed, so to speak, by their authors; they possess an architectonics of their own, all the more particular for its ambiguous status between textual and social domains; they are buildings that themselves serve as analytical instruments. Here the appelation "Kracauer architect" both derives from and exceeds his actual career as a designer.

Agoraphobia

If we were to search for a common, explicit theme underlying the responses of writers and social critics to the big cities of the 19th century,

3. "Über Arbeitsnachweise," *Frankfurter Zeitung* 17 June 1930, ctd. in Karsten Witte, "Introduction to Siegfried Kracauer's 'The Mass Ornament,'" *New German Critique* 5 (Spring 1975): 63.

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it would perhaps be found in the general concept of "estrangement": the estrangement of the inhabitant of a city too rapidly changing and enlarging to comprehend in traditional terms; the estrangement of classes from each other, of individual from individual, of individual from self, of workers from work. These refrains are constant from Rousseau to Marx, Baudelaire to Benjamin. The commonplace of romantic irony and self-inquiry, as well as the leitmotif of the marxist critique of capital, the idea of estrangement, together with its cognate, alienation, were seen as both a psychological and a spatial condition. From Baudelaire's laments over the disappearance of old Paris ("the form of a city changes, alas, more rapidly than a man's heart") to Engels's wholesale critique of what he called "Haussmannization," the physical fabric of the city was identified as the instrument of a systematized and enforced alienation. Here the political critique of urban redevelopment forced by the growth of cities came together with the nostalgia of cultural conservatives lamenting the loss of their familiar quarters, creating a general sense of distantness, of individual isolation, from the mechanical, mass-oriented, rapidly moving, and crowded metropolis.

This "spatial pathology" of the city, already fully present in the organicist metaphors of romantic, realist, and naturalist novelists alike, gained new and apparently scientific support in the last quarter of the 19th century with the gradual emergence of the disciplines of sociology, psychology, and psychoanalysis. The space of the new city was now subjected to scrutiny as a possible cause of an increasingly identified psychological alienation — the Vienna circle was to call it "de-realization" — of the metropolitan individual, and further, as an instrument favoring the potentially dangerous behavior of the crowd.

In this context, we might well begin a sociopsychological history of metropolitan space in the year 1871, not so much with the events of the Commune (although as the first political uprising against Haussmannization, this event is hardly without significance) but rather with the publication in that year of a short article by the Berlin psychologist Carl Otto Westphal, one which identified for the first time a condition of urban anxiety that he named *agoraphobia*.[4] This psychological condition,

4. Carl Friedrich Otto Westphal, "Die Agoraphobie, eine neuropathische Erscheinung," *Archiv für Psychiatrie und Nervenkrankheiten* 3 (1871): 138-61. Trans. in *Westphal's "Die Agoraphobie"* (Lanham, Maryland: UP of America, 1988); see intro., "The Beginnings of Agoraphobia," by Terry J. Knapp and Michael T. Schumacher. All subsequent references refer to this translation.

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the symptoms of which included palpitations, sensations of heat, blushing, trembling, petrifying fear of dying, and extreme shyness, occurred when Westphal's patients were walking across open spaces or through empty streets, or anticipated such an experience with a dread of ensuing anxiety. Patients' fears were to a certain extent alleviated by companionship but were seriously exacerbated by the dimensions of the space, especially when there seemed to be no boundary to the visual field. Agoraphobia was, so to speak, an essentially spatial disease — indeed, only a year before, Benedikt had dubbed it *Platzschwindel*, or dizziness in public places. In later years it was variously to be called *Platzangst*, *peur d'espace*, *horreur de vide*, topophobia, and street fear.

Now the identification of such a phobia in the early 1870s would be significant enough in the history of urban pathologies, but its role in the spatial description of metropolitan ills was to prove even more interesting. For at the same time as the doctors were inquiring into its etiology and writing its pathographies, urbanists saw it as uniquely characterizing the psychological condition of the modern city as a whole, a disease, that is, endemic to urbanism and its effects. Thus, no more than eighteen years after the publication of Westphal's paper, agoraphobia was identified not simply as an affliction of the modern city dweller but as proof that contemporary cities were in their very form bad for health. This contention occurs in one of the seminal attacks on 19th-century urbanism, Camillo Sitte's *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*, published in Vienna in 1898. Sitte's well-known broadside against the development of the Ringstraße, couched in terms of an aesthetic analysis of the compositional qualities of traditional public spaces, found common cause with the psychologist in seeing the wide-open spaces created by modern functional and monumental demands as essentially anti-human:

> Recently a unique nervous disorder has been diagnosed — "agoraphobia." Numerous people are said to suffer from it, always experiencing a certain anxiety or discomfort whenever they have to walk across a vast empty place. Agoraphobia is a very new and modern ailment. One naturally feels very cozy in small, old plazas. . . . On our modern gigantic plazas, with their yawning emptiness and oppressive ennui, the inhabitants of snug old towns suffer attacks of this fashionable agoraphobia.[5]

5. Camillo Sitte, *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*, trans. George Collins and Christiane Crasemann Collins (New York: Random House, 1965) 45.

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Underlining this point by couching it in the form of an aesthetic principle of monumental scale, Sitte proposed wittily that even statues might suffer from this disease, "that also some people formed out of stone and metal, on their monumental pedestals, are attacked by this malady and thus always prefer to choose a little old plaza rather than a large empty one for their permanent location." The "universal trend of the time," concluded Sitte, was the fear of open spaces.[6]

Sitte would, no doubt, have been happy to read the report of a lifelong sufferer of this modern disorder some twenty years later, one who, while managing to work through his fear of crowds, nevertheless continued to be adversely affected by spaces and their surrounding buildings: "An immense building or a high rocky bluff fills me with dread. However, the architecture of the building has much to do with the sort of sensation produced. Ugly architecture greatly intensifies the fear." The author of this account, writing sixteen years after Sitte's death, had evidently incorporated the lessons of the Viennese planner into his own self-analysis: "I would remark that I have come to wonder if there is real art in many of the so-called 'improvements' in some of our cities, for, judging from the effect they produce on me, they constitute bad art."[7]

Sitte was, of course, ironically using the new psychology to "prove" an observation that had become commonplace in the aesthetic critique of urbanism since the brothers Goncourt had complained of the "American deserts" created by the cutting of the modern boulevards. But such a merging of aesthetic and psychological criteria in order to judge the qualities of modern urban space was, by the end of the 19th century, a serious preoccupation of philosophers and psychologists concerned with the apparently deleterious effects of scale, movement, and density on the population of the metropolis.

Spatial Estrangement

Writing in *The Philosophy of Money*, Georg Simmel saw such nervous diseases as pathological characteristics of modern cities; as David Frisby has observed, he staged the "sensitive and nervous modern person" in front of the backdrop of "jostling crowdedness and motley disorder," and argued that an inner psychological barrier, a *distance* was essential

6. Sitte 45.

7. "Vincent: Confessions of an Agoraphobic Victim," *American Journal of Psychology* 30 (1919): 297.

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for protection against despair and unbearable intrusion. The "pathological deformation of such an inner boundary and reserve," Simmel noted, "was called agoraphobia: the fear of coming into too close a contact with objects, a consequence of hyperaesthesia, for which every direct and energetic disturbance causes pain."[8] Simmel's diagnosis was at once spatial and mental: the real cause of the neurosis was not, as Westphal and Sitte had implied, solely spatial. Rather, he argued, it was a product of the rapid oscillation between two characteristic moods of urban life: the over-close identification with things, and, alternately, too great a distance from them. In both cases, as well as with the symptoms of agoraphobia, the question was spatial at root, the result of the open spaces of the city, those very large expanses in which the crowds of the metropolis find their "impulsiveness and enthusiasm."[9]

For Simmel, however, agoraphobia was only one of the new and profoundly disturbing illnesses to beset the inhabitant of the metropolis, exacerbated by its spatial and temporal conditions. In "Metropolis and Mental Life" ("Die Großstadt und das Geistesleben,"), he characterizes the "psychological foundation, upon which the metropolitan individuality is erected . . . the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli" as formed by the very space of the city:

> To the extent that the metropolis creates these psychological conditions — with every crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational, and social life — it creates in the sensory foundations of mental life, and in the degree of awareness necessitated by our organization as creatures dependent upon differences, a deep contrast with the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory-mental phase of small town and rural existence. Thereby the essentially intellectualistic character of the mental life of the metropolis becomes intelligible as over against that of the small town, which rests more on feelings and emotional relationships.[10]

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8. Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) 474.

9. Simmel, "Soziologie des Raumes," *Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft* 27 (1903) 27-71, ctd. in Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer, and Benjamin* (Cambridge: M.I.T., 1986) 77.

10. Simmel, "Die Großstadt und das Geistesleben," *Die Großstadt. Jahrbuch der Gehe-Stiftung* 9 (1903); trans. Edward A. Shils, *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1971) 325.

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Thus the metropolitan inhabitant will be visual and intellectual as opposed to the oral and emotional country-dweller; reason will take the place of emotion; the conscious will dominate the unconscious; habits will be adaptable and shifting, rather than rooted and apparently eternal; the impersonal will overtake the personal; and objective distance will replace subjective empathy.

What Simmel sees as the characteristic stance of "slight aversion, mutual strangeness and repulsion" of one to another, the attempt to display difference in a setting that promotes only leveling, leads to "the strangest eccentricities, to specifically metropolitan extravagances of self-distanciation, of caprice, of fastidiousness," those "forms of 'being different' — of making oneself noticeable," later to be noted by Benjamin in the figure of the dandy and the *flâneur*. Again, Simmel insists that

> the metropolis is the proper arena for this type of culture which has outgrown every personal element. Here in buildings and educational institutions, in the wonders and comforts of space-conquering technique, in the formations of social life and in the concrete institutions of the State is to be found such a tremendous richness of crystallizing, depersonalized cultural accomplishments that the personality can, so to speak, scarcely maintain itself in the face of it.[11]

Simmel identified a fundamental cause of these differences in the nature of metropolitan temporality, the speeded-up tempo of life itself and its regulation according to the standards of "punctuality, calculability, and exactness." But this shift in lived time took place in space, and it was through the reading of urban space that Simmel proposed to comprehend the relationships between individuals and groups in the *Großstadt*.

In the last section of his *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* [*Sociology. Studies of the Forms of Societalization* [Leipzig, 1908]), entitled "Der Raum und die räumlichen Ordnungen der Gesellschaft" ("Space and the Spatial Organization of Society"), Simmel outlines his theory of spatial reading. Overturning a century of belief in the formative character of space, he asserted: "What creates the characteristic phenomena of neighborliness or strangeness is not spatial proximity or spatial distance but *a specific psychological content*."[12]

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11. Simmel, "Die Großstadt" 338.
12. Simmel, *Soziologie*, chap. 9, cited in Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Social Theory of Georg Simmel* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1925) 144.

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Space as the *expression* of social conditions is, then, open to the sociological gaze, as he noted in his excursus on "The Stranger": "Spatial relations are only the condition, on the one hand, and the symbol, on the other, of human relations."[13]

As effects of human activities, spaces are thus important indications of social processes, of the interaction of human beings conceived of and experienced as *space-filling*. The space between individuals, conceived as *empty space*, becomes immediately filled and animated by the reciprocal relations between individuals. In this way a concept such as "between" becomes both a spatial and a functional concept. As Nicholas Spykman has noted, Simmel's understanding of the functional reciprocity between two individuals was itself spatial, located between the two points in space occupied by the elements or individuals themselves: "it manifests itself in space, and the spatial form becomes therefore characteristic of the reciprocity as a whole."[14]

Simmel elaborates this notion by examining the mutual concepts of spatial exclusivity and spatial nonexclusivity. Some social forms, such as the state, manifest themselves in a unique and localized space that excludes the possibility of other forms inhabiting the same space. Other institutions, such as the church, are not so dependent upon locational fixity, allowing for the possibility of other churches operating on the same territory. Such an analysis provided Simmel with the means of characterizing social elements on a scale from socially exclusive to supraspatial.

In this context, the nature of sociological boundaries becomes important, the boundaries that define the limits of such territorial groupings; spatial unities may be identified that are framed by borders coincident with the locations of particular social groups. The spatial expression of sociological and functional unity alike, these borders were conceived by Simmel as intersecting social space like a network of imaginary boundary lines. As summarized by Spykman, Simmel's argument runs thus:

> This border line has for the group a significance similar to that which a frame has for a picture. It fulfills the double function of separating it from the outside world and of closing it within itself. The frame announces that within the border line is a world subject to

13. Simmel, "The Stranger," *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans, ed., intro. Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1950) 402.

14. Spykman 145.

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> its own norms entirely divorced from the world outside. It symbolizes the self-sufficiency of the picture. A group is similarly characterized as an internal unity if its spatial extension is conceived of as bordered by a boundary line. On the other hand, the functional unity resulting from the reciprocities between the elements finds its spatial expression in that surrounding frame.[15]

Such frames or sociological boundaries, as they shift and change, are then indicative of the character of social relationships at any moment between, say, parents and children, members and nonmembers of clubs, diplomats and their host countries, states and their territory. A city like Venice, for example, circumscribed by an extremely narrow frame, finds release through its wide-flung expansion of trade and conquest. Whether or not a specific social group is tied to a fixed location then becomes important in analyzing the difference between nomadic and sedentary peoples, the operations of mobile as opposed to fixed capital, the relation between those who are truly "homeless" and those who are rooted in a "home." "Home" then emerges less as a concept of property than as a social and psychological locality that expresses the unity of the group and that also strengthens and preserves it. Simmel gives the example of the "men's house" in tribal communities, which is both expression and objectification of one group formation in the tribe.

Out of this understanding of the spatial dimensions of social order, Simmel goes on to construct a theory of estrangement that is closely tied to the space of metropolis. Defining the place and role of individuals in society as seen in their spatial relations of proximity and distance, Simmel treats a number of characteristic "types" — the poor, the adventurer, the stranger — as indicative of the power of space to determine role. Of these, the last, the stranger, is most exemplary. If, Simmel states, wandering equals the *liberation* from every given point in space and is hence the conceptual opposite of *fixation*, then the sociological form of the stranger combines these two characteristics in one: that is, the stranger is not the "wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow but the person who comes today and stays tomorrow." Fixed within a particular spatial group, the stranger is one who has not belonged from the beginning. "In the stranger," Simmel concludes, "are organized the unity of nearness and remoteness of every human relation," in such a way that in relation to the stranger, "distance means that he who is close by is far,

15. Spykman 147.

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and strangeness means that he who also is far is actually near."[16] Here Simmel anticipates Freud's reflections on that form of estrangement known as the uncanny, where relations of the familiar and the unfamiliar — *heimlich* and *unheimlich* — become ambiguous and merge with one another. Simmel, the epitome of the stranger, cultivated, urban, and Jewish, who was for this reason excluded from the normal academic career of his contemporaries Weber and Dilthey, thus defines the role of being at once strange and estranged in the money economy of capitalism.

But estrangement is not confined to the strangers in the metropolis. For Simmel, the very nature of social relations forces distance and thus alienation, for reasons of everyday functioning and self-defense. Distance is first and foremost a product of the omnipotence of sight in the city; as opposed to the knowledge of individuals based on intimacy and oral communication in a small community, metropolitan connections are rapid, glancing, ocular:

> Social life in the large city as compared with the towns shows a great preponderance of occasions to *see* rather than to *hear* people. . . . Before the appearance of omnibuses, railroads and streetcars in the nineteenth century, men were not is a situation where for periods of minutes or hours they could or must look at each other without talking to one another.
> The greater perplexity which characterizes the person who only sees, as contrasted to the one who only hears, brings us to problems of the emotions of modern life; the lack of orientation in the collective life, the sense of utter lonesomeness, and the feeling that the individual is surrounded on all sides by closed doors.[17]

Here the agoraphobia of the public realm becomes transformed into its natural complement, claustrophobia, now no longer confined to the private realm: the metropolitan dweller is equally a prisoner of both.

The Hotel Lobby

Of all Simmel's students and followers, it was Siegfried Kracauer who, himself an architect, most profoundly absorbed the lessons of

16. Simmel, "The Stranger" 402.
17. Simmel, "Sociology of the Senses [Exkurs über die Soziologie der Sinnen]," *Soziologie* 646-51; *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, eds. Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1921) 360.

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spatial sociology and especially of the analysis of spatial formations applied to the understanding of estrangement. From his student experience in Berlin in 1907, when he had attended Simmel's lecture on "The Problem of Style in Art," taking detailed notes, to the completion of his still unpublished monograph on Simmel in 1917, Kracauer found in Simmel a methodological guide to the present. And while, as we shall see, his architectural designs between 1916 and 1918 were by no means infused with a direct sociological "distance," certainly when recounted in the context of the autobiographical *Ginster*, they took on the character of moments in a slow development toward what Ernst Bloch would recognize as the personality of "the detached hero concerned about nothing and entirely without pathos."[18]

Thus, the celebrated Military Memorial Cemetery, designed in Frankfurt in 1916, was, in Kracauer's recollection, a moment of transition between a reliance on traditional models — the cemetery of Genoa and the cathedral of Milan — with their implications of mystery and the labyrinthine picturesque, toward an ironic and distanced vision of the character appropriate to modernity, and a modernity deeply implicated in the forms of war:

> To hide the tombs like Easter eggs, this project seemed too soft for these times of general war. Such times called for a cemetery where their horror would be reflected. In place of using sketches he had developed until then, Ginster . . . elaborated a system of a cemetery that was similar to a project of military organization.

Hence Ginster designed the "scientifically lined up," rectilinear tombs set at right angles along allées lined up by geometrically cut foliage, surrounding a funerary monument that took the form of an elevated cube with a stepped-back quasipyramidal top that served to display the names of the dead: "during these years of war, the key word for the ruling classes," so Kracauer observed, "was simplicity." His cemetery would follow the precepts of the military strategist Hay: "Victory is a question of organization." Accordingly, "his cemetery also fulfilled Hay's requirements in that it prevented any sort of secrecy."[19]

Similarly, the homely "prettiness" of the *Siedlung* at Osnabrück, designed in November 1918, with its "little detached houses and gardens

18. Siegfried Kracauer, *Ginster. Von ihm selbst geschrieben* (1928; Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1973).

19. Kracauer, *Ginster* 106.

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with pitched roofs," seemed to "Ginster-Kracauer" to be premature at the very least: in the present conditions of war, he observed, "they would inevitably be destroyed," and if not, these pretty houses would become the objects of destruction in a new war, attaching the workers to their defense. Kracauer concluded: "Certainly one could not house workers in holes, but it would be perhaps more suitable to place tombstones in the gardens."[20] Similar transformations from symbolism to rationalism were to be traced in the projects of the Swiss architect Hannes Meyer for *Siedlungen* and cemeteries between 1919 and 1923: the Freidorf Housing estate near Basel, 1919-21, with its "Palladian," almost neoclassical layout, albeit with pitched roofs; and the project for the central cemetery in Basel, 1923, which seems to echo the contemporary interest in the "revolutionary" architecture of the late 18th century, apparently to mirror the projects of Kracauer, even though Meyer's later move toward the "new objectivity" would have been condemned by Kracauer.

Kracauer's account of his self-distancing from architectural practice seems to have been accompanied by a growing awareness of the distancing powers of architectural space itself, or rather, by an awareness of the potential of space to act as a powerful emblem of social estrangement. Kracauer in 1919 had characterized his essay on Simmel as an "existential topography," comparing it to those of Simmel himself. In his subsequent writings the concept of an inhabited topography was extended literally, with the aid of Simmel's sociology, to the spaces of modern life: the hotel lobby, which became the focus of another essay on the detective novel in 1922-25; the "pleasure barracks" of the cafés and music halls, described in his study on the white collar workers of 1930, with their despondent counterparts, the unemployment exchanges; and the boulevards or "homes for the homeless," which form the setting of his life of Offenbach published in 1937. Of these, the hotel lobby (*Hotelhalle*), seen by Kracauer as the paradigmatic space of the modern detective novel, and thus as epitomizing the conditions of modern life in their anonymity and fragmentation, is perhaps the most Simmelian in its formulation. Kracauer compares the modern hotel lobby to the traditional church — the one a shelter for the transient and disconnected, the other for the community of the faithful. Using Simmel's categories of spatial description, Kracauer elaborates the

20. Kracauer, *Ginster* 197.

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distinction between what he terms *erfüllter Raum*, or the "inhabited space" of *Verknüpfung* (communion), and the void or empty space of physics, the abstract sciences, and of course of the *ratio*, or rationalized modern life. Shut out of the religiously bonded community, the modern urban dweller can rely only on spaces "which bear witness to his nonexistence." Detached from everyday life, individual atoms with no connection save their absolute anonymity, the hotel guests are scattered like atoms in a void, confronted with "nothing" (*vis-à-vis de rien*); stranded in their armchairs, the guests can do no more than find a "disinterested pleasure in contemplating the world." In this way, "the civilization which tends toward rationalization loses itself in the elegant club chair," in the ultimate space of indifference. The silence of the setting again parodies that of the church. Kracauer quotes Thomas Mann from *Death in Venice*: "In this room there reigned a religious silence which is one of the distinctive marks of grand hotels. The waiters serve with muffled steps. One hardly hears the noise of a cup or teapot, or a whispered word." Kracauer continues:

> Rudiments of individuals slide in the nirvana of relaxation, faces are lost behind the newspaper, and the uninterrupted artificial light illumines only mannequins. It is a coming and going of unknowns who are changed into empty forms by forgetting their passwords, and who parade, imperceptible, like Chinese shadows. If they had an interiority, it would have no windows.

The privileged site of the detective novel, the mystery of the lobby, is no longer religious but base, a mystery among the masks; Kracauer cites the detective novel by Sven Elvestad, *Der Tod kehrt ins Hotel ein* (*Death Enters the Hotel*): "One sees thus once again that a grand hotel is a world apart, and this world resembles the rest of the big world. The clients wander here in their light and carefree summer life, without suspecting what strange mysteries evolve among them."[21] The "pseudo-individuals" that are guests spread themselves like molecules in "a spatial desert without limits," never destined to come together, even when compressed within the *Großstadt*. Their only link, he writes, is indifferent enough — what he calls, suggestively, the strategic grand

21. Kracauer, "Die Hotelhalle," *Das Ornament der Masse* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1963) 157-70, esp. 168, 169. This is an excerpted chapter from *Der Detektiv-Roman [1922-1925]*, publ. in Kracauer, *Schriften* I (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1971).

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routes of convention. Elsewhere he will speak ubiquitously of these "spaces of passage" as "highways through the void" or, more precisely, as "boulevards for the homeless."

Some twenty years later, Kracauer was in New York, writing his analysis of the filmic history that, in technique and substance, had in his eyes given rise to the birth of the Nazi propaganda film. One of these films, depicting the visit of Hitler and his architect Speer to the conquered city of Paris, seemed uncannily to fulfill Sitte's original prophecy that agoraphobia would become the modern disease par excellence:

> The Führer is visiting the conquered European capital — but is he really its guest? Paris is as quiet as a grave. . . . While he inspects Paris, Paris itself shuts its eyes and withdraws. The touching site of this deserted ghost city that once pulsed with feverish life mirrors the vacuum at the core of the Nazi system. Nazi propaganda built up a pseudo-reality iridescent with many colors, but at the same time it emptied Paris, the sanctuary of civilization. These colors scarcely veiled its own emptiness.[22]

In this vision of a vast, empty Paris, and in the very image of the "void" behind the propaganda, we sense the destiny of metropolitan modernism in general, as it ineluctably transformed the traditional city into Kracauer's nightmare of rationalism triumphant: a gigantic hotel atrium.

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22. Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947) 307.

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