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**Dumb Abstraction: Semper, Kracauer, and the Superficial
Materialism of Architecture
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OTOPELA ABSTRAKCIJA:
SEMPER, KRACAUER
IN POVRŠINSKI
MATERIALIZEM
ARHITEKTURE

DUMB ABSTRACTION:
SEMPER, KRACAUER,
AND THE SUPERFICIAL
MATERIALIZM OF
ARCHITECTURE

Douglas Spencer

Gottfried Semper je v svoji knjigi *Štirje elementi arhitekture* iz leta 1851 arhitekturo opredelil kot umetnost oblačenja.¹ Navezujoč se na antropološke podmene o izvori arhitekture v obrteh pletenja in tkanja je s svojo teorijo oblačenja (*bekleidungstheorie*) predlagal, da bistvo arhitekture leži v zastiranjju podpornih in strukturnih elementov. Toda če je arhitektura v temelju praksa maskiranja, to za Semperja ni zato, ker bi bila umetnost prevare. Obravnava površine je osrednja skrb arhitekture zato, ker je prav to mesto, kjer preko vzorcev in oblik prevaja višje ideale, katerih vrednote presegajo njeno materialno podlago.

Semperjev idealizem je bil zoperstavljen sodobnim teorijam strukturalnega racionalizma v arhitekturi, katerega najvidnejši predstavnik je bil Viollet-le-Duc. V uvodnih pojasnilih k *Stilu v tehničnih in tektonskih umetnostih* Semper piše, da:

In his *The Four Elements of Architecture* of 1851 Gottfried Semper defined architecture as an art of dressing.¹ Drawing upon anthropological claims around the origins of architecture in the crafts of weaving and textiles, his *bekleidungstheorie* (theory of cladding or dressing) proposed that its essence lay in the masking of its supporting and structural elements. But if architecture is essentially a practice of masking, this is not, for Semper, because it is an art of deceit. The treatment of the surface is the principle concern of architecture because this is where it communicates, through its patterns and forms, higher ideals whose values transcend its material basis.

Semper's idealism was pitched against contemporary theories of structural rationalism in architecture, as espoused, most notably, by Viollet-le-Duc. In the 'Prolegomenon' to his *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts*

Te [materialistične] teorije so v skladu s splošnim praktičnim trendom našega časa in so podprte ter vzdrževane z velikimi gradbenimi podvigi, še posebej tistimi, ki jih poraja železniški sistem. Materialiste je na splošno mogoče kritizirati zato, ker so idejo preveč priklenili na materialno, ker zmotno verjamejo, da je zaloga arhitekturnih oblik determinirana samo s strukturalnimi in materialnimi pogoji.²

Danes so materialni pogoji arhitekturne produkcije omejili pozornost te produkcije na površino objektov. Njene konstrukcije preračunavata Arup in Buro Happold, njen urbani kontekst – naddeterminiran z imperativi varnosti in produktivnosti – programirata Cisco in Siemens, uporabo njenih interjerjev pa optimizirajo in orkestrirajo prostorski planerji. Kot opaža Benjamin H. Bratton, arhitektura sedaj sedi na 'osiromašeni veji', od koder 'svoje strokovno znanje osredotoča na obrisovanje kosti, ploskev in kož na ravni enote posameznega arhitekturnega ovoja, v upanju, da bi strelo globalnih sil ujela v steklenico programsko prilagodljive metalne flore.'³

Danes je arhitektura osredotočena na površino. Toda ta pozornost, vse prej, kot da bi bila motivirana s pripoznanjem, da je to resnično jedro njene prakse, sedaj služi kot zadnje pribežališče opravičevanja njene relevantnosti. Vse prej, kot da bi stremela k prevajanju transcendentnih idealov, se njena oblačila zdaj posledično zdijo osredotočena ne na maskiranje, temveč na legitimiranje materialnih pogojev, ki so njihova podlaga. Istočasno, in z istimi sredstvi, to vsaj implicitno priča o želji arhitekture, da bi izpadla še vedno relevantna, zavedajoča se teh pogojev in pomirjena z njimi. Če pomislimo, na primer, na izgled nedavno načrtovanih množičnih transportnih infrastruktur, lahko opazimo prevlado materialov, kot so jeklo, steklo in beton, surovih in neolepšanih, z izjemo njihovih včasih poliranih ali kromiranih površin. Omejene materialne palete so oblikovane kot vzorci mrež in rešetk, kot obloge fasad pa vsaki notranji površini pripišejo regularnost njihovih strogih geometrij. Zdi se, kot da bi bile kalkulatorske logike, ki določajo red urbanega prostora, nekako vgrajene v snov samo, napravljene za očitne, konkretne in podložne takojšnjemu razumevanju.

Ali oblačenje sodobne arhitekturne površine pod temi spremenjenimi pogoji še vedno zavzema funkcijo maske? Če da, kaj je potem tisto, kar se oblači v post-postmoderne povratek arhitekture k abstrakciji in s kakšnimi nameni? Pomembnost takih vprašanj, in

Semper writes that:

These [materialist] theories are consistent with the general practical trend of our time, and are supported and sustained by the great building undertakings, especially those occasioned by the railway system. The materialists can be criticized in general for having fettered the idea too much to the material, for falsely believing that the store of architectural forms is determined solely by the structural and material conditions.²

Today the material conditions of architectural production have effectively confined its attentions to the surface of things. Its structures are engineered by Arup and Buro Happold, its urban context – overdetermined by the imperatives of security and productivity – programmed by Cisco and Siemens, the use of its interiors optimised and orchestrated by space planners. As Benjamin H. Bratton observes, architecture now resides on an 'impoverished perch' from which it 'concentrates expertise on the delineation of bones, surfaces, and skins at the unit level of individual architectural envelopes, hoping to capture the lightning of global forces into the bottle of programmable metallic flora.'³

Architecture's current focus on the surface, rather than motivated by a recognition of this being the true essence of its practice, is resorted to now as a last refuge for any continued relevance it might still want to claim for its practice. Rather than seeking to communicate transcendent ideals, its dressings now seem intent, as a consequence, not on masking but on legitimating the material conditions that underpin it. At the same time, and through the same means, this speaks, implicitly at least, of architecture's desire to appear still relevant, cognisant of and at ease with these conditions. If we consider, for instance, the appearance of recently designed mass transit infrastructures, we might note the preponderance of materials such as steel, glass and concrete, raw and unadorned, save for their sometimes polished or silvered surfaces. Restricted material palettes are patterned into grids, grilles and meshes; panelled across facades, inscribing every interior surface with the regularity of their austere geometries. It appears as if the calculative logics determining the order of urban space were somehow embedded in matter itself, made plain, concrete and amenable, as such, to immediate apprehension.

Does the dressing of the contemporary architectural surface, under these changed conditions, still assume the function of the

sredstev, s katerimi se jim lahko približamo, bi bilo mogoče podrobneje osvetliti z ovinkom preko razmišljanj Siegfrieda Kracauerja o metropolitanskem ornametu množic.

V začetnih odstavkih svojega eseja iz leta 1927 z naslovom 'Ornament množice', Siegfried Kracauer poudari pomembnost površinskega za prakso kritike. 'Mesto, ki ga neka doba zaseda v zgodovinskem procesu,' piše, 'je mogoče dojeti v veliko večji meri s pomočjo analiz izrazov, ki se nahajajo na ravni površine, kot iz sodb, ki jih ima ta doba o sami sebi.'⁴ Kracauer, kritik kulture, ki je ta esej napisal za *Frankfurter Zeitung*, je bil tesno povezan s Frankfurtško šolo in se je istočasno, tako kot njeni drugi člani, spopadal s kritično teoretizacijo množične kulture Weimarske Nemčije. Vizualni in 'površinski' izraz te kulture, je predlagal, predstavlja sodobne oblike ornamenta, ki ga uživajo 'mase' novega metropolisa. Specifično moderne oblike kulturne produkcije, ki jih je Kracauer označil kot ornamentne – film, fotografija, časopisi, arhitektura kinematografov – so interpretirani kot izrazi posebnih zgodovinskih pogojev. 'Množica in ne ljudje [Volk]', ustvarjena od in za industrijski kapitalizem, je producent in potrošnik ornamenta množice, simultano njen subjekt in objekt.⁵ Skozi interpretacijo navidezno površinskih izrazov množične kulture kot ornamenta, je trdil Kracauer, bi bilo mogoče doumeti nekaj bolj temeljnega o svetu iz katerega prihajajo, kakorkoli nezavedno že.

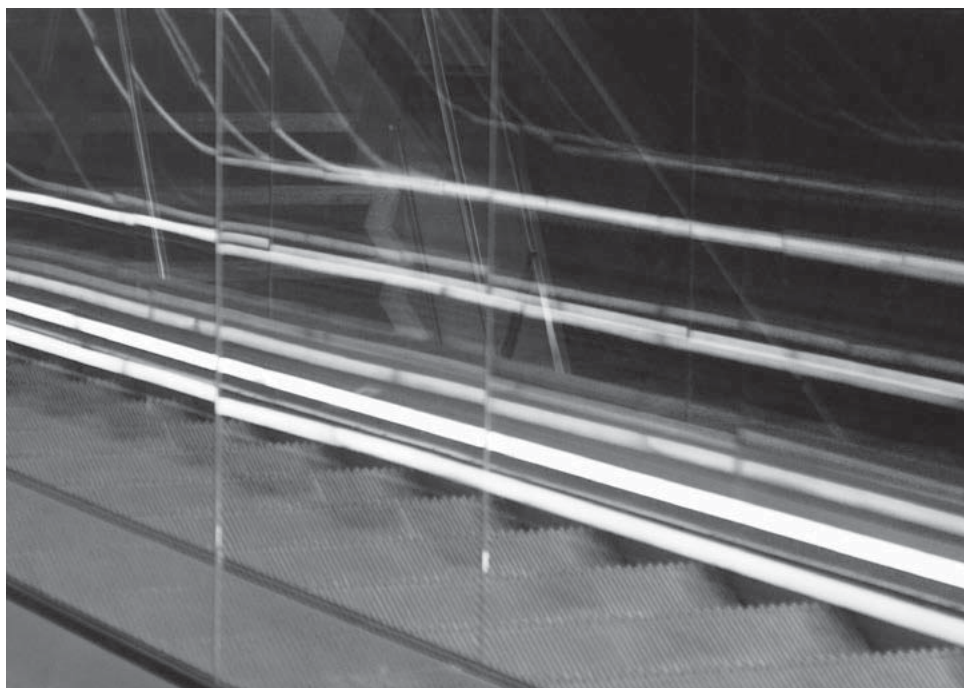
Tiller girls so za Kracauerja zgledni primer ornamenta množic. To žensko plesno

mask? If so, what might be being dressed up in architecture's post-postmodern return to abstraction, and to what ends? The significance of such questions, and the means to approach them, might be further illuminated via a detour through the thinking of Siegfried Kracauer on the metropolitan ornament of the masses.

In the opening passages of his 1927 essay 'The Mass Ornament', Siegfried Kracauer underlines the significance of the superficial to the practice of critique. 'The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process', he writes, 'can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its surface-level expressions than from that epoch's judgments about itself.'⁴ Kracauer, the cultural critic who wrote this essay for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, was a close associate of the Frankfurt School and was then engaged, like them, in the critical theorisation of the mass culture of Weimar Germany. The visual and 'surface-level' expressions of this culture, he proposed, constituted contemporary forms of ornament enjoyed by the 'masses' of the new metropolis. The specifically modern forms of cultural production classed by Kracauer as ornamental – film, photography, newspapers, the architecture of the cinema – are interpreted as the expressions of particular historical conditions. The 'mass and not the people [Volk]', as constructed by and for industrial capitalism, are the producers and consumers of the mass ornament, simultaneously its subject and its object.⁵ Through the interpretation of the seemingly superficial expressions of mass culture as ornament,

skupino, nastopajočo na kabaretnih revijah in turnejah po Ameriki in Evropi v dvajsetih letih, opiše kot 'ne več individualna dekleta, temveč kot neuničljive roje, katerih gibanja so demonstracija matematike.'⁶ Na odru in zaslonu strogo sinhroniziran in natančno koreografiran nastop skupine predstavlja kolektivni ornament, 'sestavljen iz tisočih teles, brezspolnih teles v kopalnih oblekah.'⁷ Geometrični vzorci, oblikovani iz te mase, odzvanjajo v dispoziciji njenega občinstva, 'samega razporejenega po tribuni v postrojnih vrstah'.⁸ V geometriji ornamenta množic 'ljudje postanejo delček figure'.⁹ Senzualnost in individualnost sta odsotni v ornamentu množic, trdi Kracauer, ker je le ta nezavedni površinski produkt tayloriziranega sistema 'znanstvenega upravljanja', katerega disciplini je bil industrijski tovarniški delavec takrat podvržen: 'Roke v tovarni se ujemajo z nogami *Tiller girls*. *Onkraj zmožnosti ročnega dela* poskušajo testi psihotehničnih sposobnosti izračunati tudi dispozicije duše. Ornament množic je estetski refleks racionalnosti, h kateri stremi prevladujoči ekonomski sistem'.¹⁰

V svoji kritiki ornamenta množic pa Kracauer vendarle kar ne zavrže te racionalnosti. Namesto tega skuša dialektično razviti njen videz notraj ornamenta množice. Evklidska geometrija 'linij in krogov', v katero so telesa množic ornamentalno postrojena, mora biti sama 'razumljena racionalno'.¹¹ Kracauer ne kliče po vrnitvi ideala *Gemeinschaft* (skupnosti) naproti metropolitanskemu redu *Gesellschaft* (družbe). Niti ne izraža kakršnekoli nostalgije po naravnem ali organskem, ki sta v metropolitanskem ornamentu odsotna.



argued Kracauer, some more fundamental knowledge about the world from which they emanated, however unconsciously, might be grasped

The 'Tiller Girls' are for Kracauer exemplary of the mass ornament. He describes this female dance troupe, performing at revues and touring America and Europe in the 1920s, as 'no longer individual girls, but indissoluble girl clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics.'⁶ On stage and screen the troupe's strictly synchronised and tightly choreographed performance constitutes a collective ornament 'composed of thousands of bodies, sexless bodies in bathing suits.'⁷ The geometric patterns formed from this mass are echoed in the disposition of its audience, 'themselves arranged by the stands in tier upon ordered tier.'⁸ In the geometry of the mass ornament 'people become fractions of a figure'.⁹ Sensuality and individuality are absent from the mass ornament, argues Kracauer, because it is the unconscious product, at the surface-level, of the Taylorised system of 'scientific management' to which discipline the industrial factory worker was then being subjected: 'The hands in the factory correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girls. Going beyond manual capacities, psychotechnical aptitude tests attempt to calculate dispositions of the soul as well. The mass ornament is the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires.'¹⁰

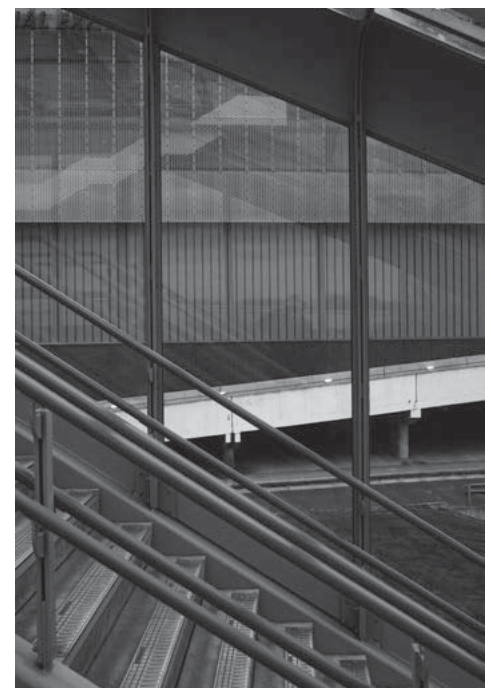
In his critique of the mass ornament, however, Kracauer does not reject this rationality

Namesto tega zavzame razsvetljensko perspektivo, v kateri je razum pojmovan kot glavni motor zgodovinskega in progresivnega procesa 'demitologizacije'. S te perspektive kapitalizem ni drugega kot 'stopnja' v tem procesu, toda stopnja, ki zdaj deluje kot zavora v nadaljnjem razvitju bistveno osvobajajočega projekta razuma, z namenom zadržanja lastne nadvlade.¹² Kapitalizmu je pravzaprav uspelo le v osnovanju 'zamegljene' oblike razuma, temelječe zgolj na ekonomski kalkulaciji; v omejeni obliki razuma, ki jo Kracauer imenuje 'Ratio'.¹³ Problem s kapitalizmom je torej ta, da 'racionalizira ne preveč, temveč premalo'.¹⁴

Ornament množice, 'estetski refleksi' kapitalistične zamegljene in zaprte oblike racionalnosti, preprečuje dostop razumu. Njegovi onemeli vzorci v svojih abstrakcijah zakrivajo resnični potencial racionalnosti, ki bi si jo množice sicer lahko prilastile kot instrument emancipacije.¹⁵ V tezi, ki napoveduje tisto, ki sta jo razvila Adorno in Horkheimer v *Dialektiki razsvetljenstva*, Kracauer zagovarja, da se razum zaradi omejene oblike, v kakršni ga izrablja kapitalizem, vrača k mitičnemu. 'Gledano z gledišča razuma,' piše, 'ornament množice razkriva sebe kot *mitološki kult*, ki se je našemil v nošo abstrakcije'.¹⁶ Abstrakcije ornamenta množice so maska, s katero se racionalno kaže množicam kot sredstvo distrakcije od in tolažba za njihovo delo pod kapitalizmom: 'Fizično treniranje ljudi razlasti njihove energije, medtem ko jih produkcija in brezglava potrošnja ornamentalnih vzorcev odvrta od imperativa, da bi spremenili vladajoči red'.¹⁷

outright. Instead he seeks to unravel its appearance within the mass ornament dialectically. The Euclidean geometry of 'lines and circles' into which the bodies of the masses are ornamentally configured must itself be 'understood *rationally*'.¹¹ Kracauer does not call for a return to the ideal of *Gemeinschaft* (community) as against the metropolitan order of the *Gesellschaft* (society). Nor does he express any nostalgia for the natural or the organic now absent from the metropolitan ornament. He adheres, instead, to an Enlightenment perspective in which reason is considered the essential motor of a historical and progressive process of 'demythologisation'. From this perspective capitalism is but a 'stage' in that process, but one that acts now as a brake on the further unfolding of an essentially liberatory project of reason so as to retain its own dominance.¹² In fact, capitalism has succeeded only in constituting a 'murky' form of reason based solely upon economic calculation; a limited form of reason identified by Kracauer as 'Ratio'.¹³ The problem with capitalism, then, is that 'it rationalizes not too much, but rather *too little*'.¹⁴

The mass ornament, the 'aesthetic reflex' of capitalism's murky and closed form of rationality, bars access to reason. Its muted patterns conceal, in their abstractions, the true potential of a rationality that the masses might otherwise appropriate as an instrument of emancipation.¹⁵ In an argument that prefigures that developed by Adorno and Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Kracauer argues that reason, because of the limited form in which it is

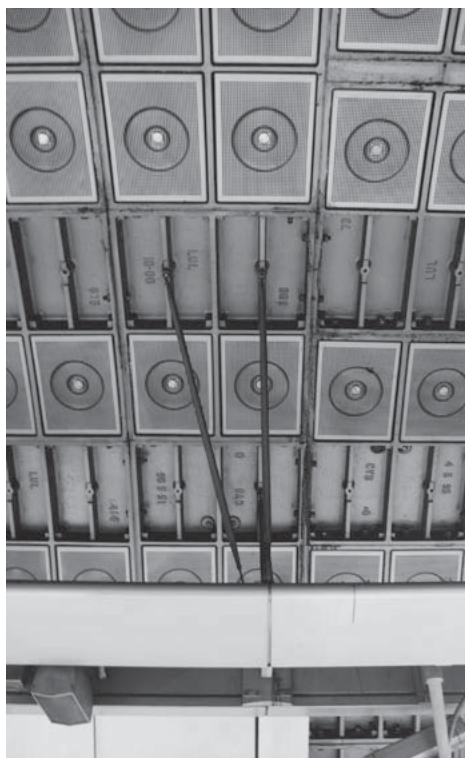


Če se opremljeni s Kracauerjevimi analizami zdaj vrnemo k vprašanju abstrakcij sodobne arhitekturne površine, se bo morda zdelo, da smo nanj pravzaprav že odgovorili. Mogoče smo znova sredi maškarade, ki odvrta od pravega potenciala racionalnega s tem, da nas slepi s svojimi zgolj formalnimi in geometričnimi abstrakcijami. Toda Kracauerjeva doba ni naša, vsaj povsem ne. Seveda kakršnakoli racionalnost, še vedno pripisana kapitalizmu, v najboljšem primeru ostaja zamegljena. Kljub temu pa domet kalkulantske logike, kakršno vzpostavlja *Ratio*, zdaj sega krepko onstran meja, ki so bile načrtane v začetku dvajsetega stoletja. *Le malo zdaj uhaja integrativnim metrikam* masovnih podatkovnih baz, natančnemu interpretativnemu nadzoru mašinske inteligence ali performativni optimizaciji vsega zamisljivega, čemur vse prejšnje služi kot inštrument. Navsezadnje je to položaj, ki mu arhitekturni parametricizem prisega svojo zvestobo v upanju, da si bo zagotovil nadaljnjo relevantnost svoje discipline. Morda lahko pripomnimo še, da je Kracauerjeva kritika distrakcije in prikriivanja, enačena z delom masovnega ornamenta, utemeljena na dozdevno neizbežni možnosti revolucionarne samo-transformacije zavesti množic v dvajsetih letih dvajsetega stoletja. V post-politični dobi globaliziranega neoliberalizma se ta možnost zdi še posebej oddaljena. Z drugimi besedami, daleč od tega, da bi bilo jasno, h kakšnim dejanskim alternativam glede na obstoječe stanje naj bi bilo kogarkoli zdaj mogoče zmotiti. Namesto zakrivanja sodobnik ornamenta množice teži

employed by capitalism, reverts to the mythic. 'Viewed from the perspective of reason', he writes, 'the mass ornament reveals itself as a *mythological cult* that is masquerading in the garb of abstraction.'¹⁶ The abstractions of the mass ornament are a mask in which the rational appears to the masses as means of distraction from and consolation for their labour under capitalism: 'Physical training expropriates people's energy, while the production and mindless consumption of the ornamental patterns divert them from the imperative to change the reigning order.'¹⁷

Returning to the question of the abstractions of the contemporary architectural surface, equipped now with Kracauer's analyses, this might appear already answered. We are, perhaps, again in the presence of a masquerade that distracts from the real potential of the rational by dazzling us with its merely formal and geometric abstractions. But Kracauer's epoch is not ours, exactly. Certainly whatever rationality might still be ascribed to capitalism remains murky, at best. The reach of the calculative logic of *Ratio*, however, now extends far beyond the limits by which it was circumscribed in the early twentieth century. Little now escapes the integrative metrics of big data, the interpretive scrutiny of a machinic intelligence, or the performative optimisation of everything imaginable for which these are the instruments. This, after all, is the condition to which architectural Parametricism pledges its allegiance in hope of securing the ongoing relevance of

k temu, da bi okrepil tisto, kar preprosto je. Če je Semper transcendentno vlogo pripisal oblačenju arhitekture, njenemu zakrivanju materialne podpore, da bi predstavila ideal skozi svoje krojene oblike, se zdi, da arhitekturna površina zdaj vztraja na svoji materialnosti. Ob prisotnosti takih površin je pogosto nejasno, ali gledamo nek reprezentativen približek materialnemu redu, ki tvori podlago oblačila, ali pa če tisto, kar vidimo, preprosto je *materialna struktura sama*. V vsakem primeru je namen *potopiti subjekt v okolje, ki se upira govoriti o čemerkoli drugem kot o svoji lastni neposredni materialni* substanci. To je arhitektura otopele abstrakcije, ne spektakla ali distrakcije. V eseju z naslovom 'Kult distrakcije', prav tako napisanem v dvajsetih letih, Kracauer opiše nova berlinska kina kot 'optične pravljicne dežele'.¹⁸ 'Površinski blišč' kino palač gre z roko v roki z reflektorji, orkestrom in filmskim programom, da bi zgradile *Gestamtkunstwerk, ki 'napada vse čute'*.¹⁹ Ta izkušnja distrakcije služi kompenzaciji množic za prenašanje živčne napetosti metropolisa, ki podpira populacijo štirih milijonov. Namesto, da bi jih napad na njihove čute odbijal, množice uživajo v čarih ornamenta. Površinski efekti, piše, 'pribijejo pozornost gledalcev na periferno, zato da ne bi potonili v brezno'.²⁰ Današnji površinski izrazi bodo veliko verjetneje povzročili subjektovo otopelost, v glavnem brez potrebe po kakršnihkoli kompenzacijskih pogojih izkušnje. Arhitektura masovnega potnega prometa ne absorbira ali nagrajuje poudarjene pozornosti doživljanja. Namesto tega tvori kontinuirano in nenehno



the discipline. It might also be noted that Kracauer's critique of distraction and concealment, as identified with the work of the mass ornament, is premised on the seemingly imminent possibility of the revolutionary self-transformation of the consciousness of the masses in the 1920s. This possibility, in the post-political era of globalised neoliberalism, however, seems especially remote. It is far from clear, that is, from what real alternatives to things as they are anyone need now be distracted. Rather than concealing, the contemporary counterpart to the mass ornament tends to reinforce that what simply *is*.

Where Semper assigned a transcendent role to the dressing of architecture, concealing its material support so as to present the ideal through its patterned forms, the architectural surface now appears to insist on its materiality. In the presence of such surfaces it is often unclear as to whether one is looking at some representative approximation of the material order that underlies the dressing, or whether what we see simply *is* the material structure itself. In any case the effect is to immerse the subject within an environment that refuses to speak of anything other than its own immediately material substance. This is an architecture of dumb abstraction, not of spectacle or distraction. Writing in another essay of the 1920s, 'Cult of Distraction', Kracauer describes the new cinemas of Berlin as 'optical fairylands'.¹⁸ The 'surface splendour' of the picture palaces join with the

pomirjevalno ozadje, okoljsko konsistentnost, skozi katero subjekt prehaja nevznemirjen in neganjen.

Natančne geometrije in prazne površine sodobnega ornameta množic namigujejo na snov, ki je pobotana s kalkulacijo. To je vse, kar sedaj obstaja za arhitekturo, ki je pobotana z afirmacijo te resnice. Toda zato, ker je premeščena iz središča stvari in prepuščena zgolj tretmaju površine, ne more drugega kot zgolj *reprezentirati* neke resnice, ki je sama dejansko ne zmore utelesiti. To je sodobna maska arhitekture. Njen materializem je ideal, čigar omejen domet skozi svojo izkušnjo zatopljenosti v okolje prav tako vabi subjekta, da se vda v usodo. ■

Julij 2016, Aylesbury

Prevedel Nejc Lebar

spotlights, the orchestra and the programme of films to form a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that 'assaults all the senses'.¹⁹ This experience of distraction serves to compensate the masses for enduring the nervous tensions of a metropolis sustaining a population of 4 million. Rather than repelled by the assault on their senses the masses revel in the charms of the ornament. The surface effects, he writes, 'rivet the viewers' attention to the peripheral, so that they will not sink into the abyss'.²⁰ Today's surface-level expressions are more likely to numb the subject to the experience of the metropolis at source, largely obviating the need for any compensatory conditions of experience. The architecture of mass transit does not absorb or reward sustained attention. Instead it forms a continuous, and continuously reassuring backdrop, an environmental consistency through which the subject passes undisturbed and unmoved. The precise geometries and blank surfaces of the contemporary mass ornament suggest matter reconciled with calculation. This is all that exists now for an architecture reconciled to the affirmation of this truth. But, displaced from the centre of things, left only to the treatment of the surface, it cannot help but merely *represent* a truth that it cannot itself actually embody. This is the contemporary mask of architecture. Its materialism is an ideal, the limited scope of which it also invites the subject, through the experience of environmental immersion, to resign itself. ■

July 2016, Aylesbury



- 1 Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave & Wolfgang Herrmann, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- 2 Ibid. str. 190.
- 3 Benjamin H. Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*, Cambridge, MA, and London, England: MIT Press, 2015, str. 161.
- 4 Siegfried Kracauer, 'The Mass Ornament', v *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, prev. Thomas Y. Levin, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, str. 75.
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