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FROM CALIGARI TO RAGING BULL

Redeeming Physical Reality

By Richard Blake, S.J.

After 14 years on the staff of *America*, my transition to education as a mid-life career switch involved entering an alien culture. After all, my last experience in an undergraduate classroom had been as a student in 1964. Naïve as I was, I certainly knew that by 1985 Jesuits no longer wore cassocks, capes and birettas to class, that students had replaced jackets and ties with jeans and tee shirts, and a majority of the students in an art department would be women. What I didn't anticipate, but probably should have, was the extent of the fragmentation among academic disciplines.

This observation surely provokes a hearty hohum from veteran educators who have served on endless committees to restructure the core curriculum and devise team-taught courses to enable students to "integrate" their learning experience. Without doubt, many of these efforts have yielded the desired results. Still we face twin perils in undergraduate education: for faculty, excellence is often measured by specialization that brings professional peer recognition; and for many, if not most students, excellence means specialized preparation for a career. Achieving some sort of humanistic integration of many fields, a once unquestioned objective of a liberal arts education, takes work these days, a lot of hard, frustrating work with students and faculty who have very different expectations of the goals of the educational process.

My attraction to the relational, rather than specialist character of the subject was surely one of the factors that initially led me into film studies. Still in its infancy in the 1960s, it had not yet developed much specialization of its own. The journals were still intelligible to ordinary, curious readers. One of

the significant figures of that time was Siegfried Kracauer, whose work *Theory of Film*, first published in 1960, bore the intriguing subtitle, *The Redemption of Physical Reality*. Of itself, the title embodies a stark paradox. Film is the most ethereal of art forms, mere patterns of light and shadow projected on a reflecting screen, yet it is the most wedded to the physical surfaces of things as they are found in nature. Note, his book appeared long before computer generated imaging scrambled the mix between reality and artifice inextricably.

The Kracauer biography reveals a great deal about the development of his ideas and the breadth of his interests. His own doctoral dissertation at the Berlin Polytechnic was a historical study of decorative ironwork in Germany. He also attended Wroclaw University to pursue rabbinic studies. Since few positions for Jewish art historians with theological interests were available in Germany during those years, he tried his hand at architecture and wrote a study of detective novels. Eventually, he became an editor for *Frankfurter Zeitung*, where he was able to observe and comment on the social issues tearing Germany apart during those years. He became a secondary, or even peripheral figure in the Frankfurt school, during the years when Theodor Adorno and his associates were exploring the relationships between social science and philosophy. Fleeing Hitler, he came to Columbia University, where he joined the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, which was then pioneering scientific research into public opinion.

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All these interests eventually coalesced around film. After doing research on Nazi newsreels during the war, in 1947 he published *From Caligari to Hitler*, his detailed study of the reciprocal relationship between the German people and their films. This study goes far beyond Nazi propaganda and includes a survey of the films that Germans created for popular entertainment dating back to the silent era. He concludes that symptoms of the sickness that erupted in the 1930s were evident in the very earliest German silent films, if only critics knew how to look at them.

In subsequent years, Kracauer turned to more basic elements of film as an art form. Film makers, like photographers, create an artistic vision of the object in front of the lens, but at the same time they cannot separate their art from the actual thing, as would, say, a painter, poet or composer. By transforming the object into art, the artist reveals the object's inner nature, and thus "redeems"

*Mere patterns of light
and shadow projected on
a reflecting screen.*

the physical world from its own brute materiality. In the hands of a skillful artist or scurrilous propagandist, physical surfaces can be used to reveal meanings deliberately chosen by image engineers. In other words, the surfaces we see are actually more than meets the eye, or less, depending on the intentions of the artist.

Kracauer's rather arcane reflections hold enormous

implications for education. Today's students have grown up in a culture of images, or so we tell ourselves when we worry about their apparent alienation from print culture. That fact should not lead to a hasty conclusion that they have developed the skills or wisdom to understand them. Much less can we presume that they make the necessary connection between surfaces and meanings, or that they realize the extent to which manipulation of physical surfaces both reflects and shapes their culture.

Marshal McLuhan, the media maven of the 1960's, used to say that a fish would be the least likely being to understand water. Water is just part of its environment, like oxygen for animals. Similarly, a generation that has spent a lifetime swimming in an ocean of images would be hard pressed to understand them. The images are simply there. McLuhan's famous aphorism, The medium is the message, might have its correlate for Kracauer's readers: Surfaces hold meaning, but it is often a meaning that is carefully shaped for a desired effect. We have to think about the connections between the outside and the inside. In many instances they are not readily evident.

Advertisers and politicians have proved themselves skilled manipulators of images, and a substantial body of literature on the subject has developed over the last sixty years or more. What more can be said about a president in a flight suit on the deck of an aircraft carrier, or an ersatz cowboy whose bow-legged saunter sells jeans to paunchy accountants posing as weekend wranglers?

Kracauer's level of abstraction opens the way to a reflection on a more all-encompassing interrogation of interaction between physical surfaces and underlying realities. It's important to go beyond the negative perception of surfaces as somehow manipulating and distorting the "unvarnished" truth, as the cliché would have it. Instead it prods us on to find connections between all the varied realms of our experience and study. How do surfaces reveal the "dearest freshness deep down things"?

Surfaces "redeem" physical reality. They reveal as much as they



The award-winning Montante Cultural Center at Canisius College, serves as the college's cultural center and performing arts facility.



St. Joseph Chapel, built in 1909 and now completely renovated, stands as Spring Hill College's centerpiece, located in the Rydex Commons.

conceal, if only we could discern their meanings accurately. The task demands much more than a "Media and Society" course added to the core. It involves developing a habit of mind that embraces every element of our environment and continually asks what these surfaces say to us: the look of campus buildings, the design of our classrooms, the way our faculty and students dress. To cite a trivial example: in a more class conscious society in the nineteenth century, ladies wore bonnets and carried parasols to prevent the sun from discoloring their skin. To have a tan or freckles would indicate that they had to be outdoors in the sun, a characteristic of the working class. Today, in a more egalitarian universe, a sun tan is marketed as a sign of beauty. It indicates not only good health but even prosperity, since it indicates that one has the leisure for outdoor recreation. As a result, during spring break students travel across continents in search of a sun tan, even at the risk of premature aging and skin cancer. Social behavior shapes the image, and then the image in turn shapes behavior.

Surely more substantial reflections will occur. Universities allot considerable resources to enhance the appearance and thus the atmosphere of the campus. Of course, one could read Aristotle in a bus station or a ball park, but the ambiance undoubtedly enhances the experience

of learning. Through attention to landscaping, architecture and sculpture, the university presents itself as valuing the nobler elements of our nature, which in turn it invites its students to cultivate.

Catholic universities have a unique, although arguably not exclusive, purchase on linking the physical to the spiritual. Catholic liturgies engage the senses as avenues into religious experience. Jesuit universities, which have the influence of St. Ignatius as a key element of their heritage strive to communicate a contemplative vision, that is, the ability to see God's activity in all created things. In a culture of obsolescence and disposability, this represents a formidable challenge.

*Surfaces "redeem"
physical reality.*

At the end of his masterpiece, *Raging Bull* (1980) Martin Scorsese uses a sentence from John's Gospel to summarize both the redemption of his main character and to pay tribute to his most influential film teacher Haig Manoogian: "All I know is this: I was blind but now I can see." What a great tribute to a film teacher. What a great tribute to any university. ■