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SIEGFRIED KRACAUER

**Sound-Image Film: On the Presentation in Frankfurt's
Gloria-Palast**

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The transition to sound often provoked reflections on the beginnings of film history—a mode of recollection enacted in the recursive structure of the following essay, which both begins and ends with invocations of memory. Siegfried Kracauer here reviews two of the earliest German sound films: Walter Ruttmann’s advertising film *Deutscher Rundfunk* (German Radio, also known as *Tönende Welle*) and Max Mack’s *Ein Tag Film* (A day of film); they premiered in Berlin in August and September 1928, respectively. Kracauer’s discussion of memory, Bergsonian *durée*, and the drive toward comprehensive representation extends arguments from his famous “Photography” essay from October 28, 1927.

The presentation of two talking films, which took place yesterday for the first time in Frankfurt, brought the early years of cinematography back to mind. Back then, when one saw strange poses and disjointed fragments portrayed, one did not sense the kind of development of which film art would one day be capable. It is likewise so today. After the featured experiments, no one can gauge, even approximately, what the sound-image film will mean to us again later, once the invention is technically perfected and aesthetically imbued.

Some news about the Tri-Ergon system has already found its way into the public.¹ To the layman, it seems like high wizardry. He is left bowing his head when he is shown the sound strip running next to the filmstrip, for the former, like a spectrum, consists of nothing but individual bars.² The narrow bar is, according to the experts’ judgment, a photo of sound waves, into which it is again reconverted. A transformation eleven times over is apparently necessary for the entire metamorphosis. Insiders will know exactly. At any rate, the esotericism of technology today already surpasses that of the Eleusinian mysteries.

It would be wrong to evaluate *Deutscher Rundfunk*, the sound-image film created by Walter Ruttmann with the Tri-Ergon system, as an artistic composition. It is an interesting, promising experiment and, considering the system’s current status, can be little more. All the same, one may object that it handles its task of reproducing as many sounds as possible in a pretty senseless way. Ruttmann gives glimpses into the major German broadcasting stations, illustrates some of their services, and seeks at the same time to cover the prominent characteristics of their regions. A collection that consists partially of audio picture-postcards recalls radio programs in its edifying colorfulness and, despite the resistance of the individual pieces to fusion, is assembled into an artificial unity. Ruttmann would have done better, much better, to leave the miscellany next to each other, without any transition, instead of subordinating it, as he did in the *Berlin* film,³ to a literary idea foreign to the images—an idea that does not possess the necessary cohesive force in an optical medium. There is unfortunately too much at the acoustic level, as well, and the composing is even worse: namely, that of Edmund Meisel, whose music accompanies the film for long stretches. In some regards, it reminds one of a conveyor belt and seems to have been manufactured by the kilometer. Its addition to the film is annoying above all because it is absolutely superfluous in a sound-image film; when, for instance, a waterfall appears on the screen, no one wants to hear music other than that of the rushing falls.

Excluding these errors, there remain short segments that, like a fairy tale, fill one with wonder. In them, fairy-tale dreams are also realized. A harbor with ships, and the sirens begin to blare; one sees and hears it all at once. In the station, a train rushes off, an old lady calls out “Auf Wiedersehen.” People speak as their lips move, the machines grate, and the sea lions snort and snarl. Life repeats itself in image and sound; whatever was comes up again and again.

The second film, *Ein Tag Film*, is a sketch with Paul Graetz in the main role. It contains a few scenes of moderate drollery in a film studio. Although the sound reproductions are still deficient in many ways, the one-act film confirms the feasibility of the new principle. In an aesthetic regard it is of course more dubious than the mosaic of the first film, since, by contrast, it does not primarily re-create spontaneous sounds but rather compels figures to speak who could also perform silently.

This is an added achievement, whose problematic nature consists in the fact that it expands the film narrative to a necessarily deficient copy of a theater piece. It would like to give the illusion of corporeality and at best achieves seemingly living waxworks. It seeks to envision an occurrence that has its real form only in three-dimensional fullness. But, as the Ruttman film shows, the possibilities of the sound-image film lie far more in the representation and forming of a reality that was heard through no earlier media—that reality that has never had a say on stage. To deliver the involuntary roar of the street for intervention in our world is reserved for the new technical system exactly as it had been reserved for previous film technology to make the life of lights and shadows accessible to our consciousness. It would be a futile ploy to simply repeat the existence [Dasein] that has already been handled aesthetically; the sound-image film will first obtain its actual significance when it renders accessible existence previously unknown, the sound and clamor around us that has never yet communicated with the visual impressions and has invariably escaped the senses.

Parenthetically:

The sound-image film is for now the last link in the chain of those powerful inventions that, with blind certainty and as if directed by a secret will, push toward the complete representation of human reality. Through the sound-image film, it would be possible, in principle, to wrest life in its totality from transience and to consign it to the eternity of the image. Of course, not life as such but only the side of life that presents itself in space. It is associated with the measurable, the chronological time that Bergson separates from nonmeasurable time, which cannot be illustrated in space and in which, to put it plainly, our experiences [Erlebnisse] fall.⁴ Proust wants to evoke their contents, and only them, when he embarks on the search for lost time.

The human reality preserved in the sound-image film corresponds so little to that intended by Proust that the two are more mutually exclusive than complementary. Not *one* of the occurrences belonging to the time of experience [Erlebniszeit] allows itself to be filmed, and no film is able to place such an occurrence in the order of the time of experience. It almost appears as if people lose their nonillustratable, intensive lives to the extent that they are able to capture the extensive spatial life. If that were so, technology would have prevailed over people, and the three-dimensional person would have fully converged with the person on-screen. Man will be lord over technology only when he preserves the life that appears not to the lens of the camera, but to memory alone.

Notes

1. On the Tri-Ergon system, see note 1 in Jhering, "The Acoustic Film," no. 248.

2. Kracauer invokes *Sprossenschrift*, an optical means of recording sound that was developed by the Austrian inventor Heinrich Stefan Peschka. The sound is registered on the filmstrip as horizontal bars of varying lengths and shades of gray.

3. Kracauer had reviewed *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* one year earlier, on November 17, 1927.

4. In works such as "Time and Free Will" (1889) and *Creative Evolution* (1907), Henri Bergson had distinguished between a measurable, spatially represented time and a felt, experienced time or duration (*durée*). Bergson's philosophy of time was important for many modernist writers and artists, including Marcel Proust.