

BELOW THE SURFACE: SIEGFRIED KRACAUER'S 'TEST-FILM' PROJECT

Graeme Gilloch and Jaeho Kang

INTRODUCTION

This essay is part of a broader research project concerned with re-examining and re-assessing the numerous studies undertaken during the 1940s by members of the Frankfurt Institut für Sozialforschung (then in exile in New York) into prevailing forms of totalitarian propaganda, authoritarianism and anti-Semitism. Our specific focus here is *Below the Surface*, a 24-page screenplay dating from 1945 for a so-called test film of approximately 20 minute duration forming the centre piece of a social psychological experiment investigating the character, prevalence and intensity of anti-Semitism among particular American audiences. The screenplay itself, detailing the action and dialogue of the drama, and numerous accompanying memoranda, specifying the underlying principles and objectives of the project, are to be found today in the Max Horkheimer Nachlass of the Archivzentrum of the Stadt- und Universitätsbibliothek, Frankfurt am Main, and in the Siegfried Kracauer Nachlass in the Deutsche Literaturarchiv in Marbach am Neckar. The project was conceived in the context of the on-going Studies in Prejudice programme,¹ an extensive and productive collaboration beginning in the late 1930s between the Scientific Research Department of the American Jewish Committee and the Institut examining both social and individual features of anti-Semitism in America and involving empirical sociological and experimental psychological techniques. Max Horkheimer, who was a director both of the Institut and the Department, played the key facilitating role in the realisation of these studies and, with Samuel H. Flowerman, became general editor of a five-volume series of publications (1949-50), the most famous (or infamous) of which is *The Authoritarian Personality* by Theodor Adorno et al. The other volumes in the Series, along with a host of related studies in film propaganda techniques and other fragments on anti-Semitism, now receive precious little scholarly attention. Who today, for example, reads Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Gutermann's 1949 study of the rhetorical devices employed by American Fascist agitators, or Nathan Ackermann and Marie Jahoda's 1950 examination of anti-Semitism and emotional disorder?²

Such neglect is, of course, in marked contrast to the intellectual excitement and enthusiasm generated by the Frankfurt School's various writings on philosophy, aesthetics and contemporary culture. While this may be explicable partly in terms of the so-called cultural turn taken by social theory in recent years, there also seems to be a widespread and enduring perception of

1. In an interview from 1965/1966, Friedrich Pollock recalls the test film project in this context: 'Yes, at one point there was a talk about and consideration given to making a film in which the results of *The Authoritarian Personality* and such like could be shown in a story, but it was then dropped relatively soon'.

2. See Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Gutermann, *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator*, New York, 1949, and Nathan W. Ackermann and Marie Jahoda, *Anti-Semitism and Emotional Disorder: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, New York, 1950.

3. As Walter Benjamin himself pointed out in his study of German Baroque *Trauerspiel*, lesser and inferior works should be treated no differently from major ones and, indeed, these failures often manifest the fundamental structures and motifs of the particular literary idea with far greater clarity and precision. See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, John Osborne (trans), London, 1998, pp27-30.

the propaganda and prejudice studies as the least successful part of the Institut's work. Indeed, in many respects they appear to be characterised and compromised by precisely the kind of naïve methodology, empirical simplifications and pseudo-scientific experimental style that the Institut's leading members (Horkheimer, Adorno and Herbert Marcuse in particular) so despised in prevailing American sociology. They seem to lack much of the philosophical sophistication and complexity which make the writings of the Frankfurt School so demanding and provocative. However, this does not necessarily diminish their value and significance, both as historical documents and as sources of theoretical and critical insight.³

For us, taken together, the various studies in propaganda and prejudice from the mid 1940s should not be dismissed as mere financially expedient *Brotarbeit* reluctantly undertaken by impoverished exiles, nor discreetly passed-over as embarrassing flirtations with an American positivistic social science that was anathema to their own intellectual enterprise. Rather, for some Frankfurt School figures - Siegfried Kracauer and Löwenthal, for example - these studies constituted nothing less than essential and urgent intellectual contributions to the Allied war-effort and the desperate struggle of liberal democratic regimes against Fascism and National Socialism. These studies were part of a pioneering attempt to examine the social-psychological dimension of modern warfare, and in particular to understand the manipulative use of media (principally film) and cultural forms in the mobilisation of mass populations for the conduct of total war. In this sense, the studies in propaganda and prejudice were developments of, rather than departures from, longstanding intellectual trajectories: for Kracauer, a preoccupation with cinema and theories of film reception, for Löwenthal, an abiding concern with anti-Semitism and literature.

Nor were these projects insignificant for Adorno and Horkheimer. The propaganda and prejudice studies brought central issues in Critical Theory sharply into focus: the ideological character and totalitarian tendencies of mass culture; the fundamental failure of enlightenment and the descent into modern barbarism; and, the persistence and pervasiveness of deep-rooted forms of prejudice, irrationalism, and anti-Semitism. For them, totalitarian propaganda stripped away the spurious pretensions of culture industry products and the modern mythologies of consumer choice, pluralism, and individual taste to reveal the inherent logic of new forms of mass media and communication: domination, manipulation, the stultification of human intellectual faculties and the ultimate eradication of the individual subject.

Our central argument is that the projects on prejudice, propaganda and authoritarianism demonstrate a clear continuity with, and are primarily intelligible in terms of, those very cultural and aesthetic studies that have since eclipsed them. For example, we suggest here how *Below the Surface* can readily be understood in terms of Kracauer's then emerging theory of the complex relationship between the medium of film, the collective unconscious and latent political tendencies. In this sense, the notion of a 'test film' is

of special interest: the film not only tests audience reactions and discloses underlying prejudices, but also serves as a litmus test for Kracauer's film theory itself. The test film project, furthermore, suggests that Horkheimer and Adorno's perception of film was far more differentiated than is customarily understood under the rubric of their culture industry critique. True, film is a fundamental ideological instrument and propaganda weapon: film involves mythic spectacle and the deception of the masses. But at the same time, in the right hands, it can disenchant those masses and lay bare their hidden predispositions and susceptibilities.

In the studies on propaganda and prejudice, we see the principal exponents of Critical Theory engaged in the search for an appropriate and adequate critical method for the investigation of mass culture and communications, for an approach 'combining European ideas and American methods'⁴ into a sophisticated, powerful and empirically grounded historical materialist critique of modernity. And, importantly, this was to be a collaborative undertaking. For just about all of those connected with the Institut, both then and now, these studies constituted one of the main instances of co-operative endeavour; that is to say, of the Frankfurt School genuinely working together *as a School* in line with its own founding interdisciplinary spirit. The results of this shared enterprise should not be dismissed prematurely as abject failures, but rather recognised as initial moves in an essential and, indeed, enduring collective task.

THE TEST FILM PROJECT: TOWARDS A RECONSTRUCTION

The various versions of the screenplay and the related archive documents permit a fairly clear reconstruction of the general outlines of the project, though the precise sequence of drafts and memoranda is less easily specified. The intention was to devise and produce a short, narrative film which would be shown to selected audiences principally composed of college students. The audience members would then be asked to complete specially designed questionnaires⁵ and participate in follow-up discussion in small focus groups each led by a researcher. The questionnaires and group sessions were intended to bring to light any latent anti-Semitic sentiments or other prejudices held by respondents so that these could, in turn, be analysed in terms of form, content, degree and demographic distribution.

The idea of developing some kind of film experiment was first mooted by Horkheimer as early as 1941 in the *Studies in Philosophy and Social Sciences*. In February and March 1943, the film project was, as Wiggershaus notes, 'provisionally cancelled for financial reasons'⁶ only to be revived in 1945 under the title of *Below the Surface*. It is clear that the project preoccupied a number of the Institut's members and associates during the course of 1945 and early 1946. The test film appeared on the agenda for numerous meetings between Horkheimer and Adorno (based in Los Angeles) and Löwenthal and others (in New York). Of these others, Kracauer was almost certainly the most important

4. Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School*, Cambridge, 1994, p410.

5. In a Memorandum dated March 1945 some examples of possible questions are given: 'Which were the leading characters? Describe each one of them;' 'List each of these characters according to whom you liked best, next-best, a.s.o. until the one whom you disliked most, and give reason (sic) why'.

6. Wiggershaus, *Frankfurt School*, op. cit., p356.

figure, particularly during the early stages of the project from around March to July 1945. In his notes, 'Project of a Test Film', he sketched the principal features of the film and made the decisive suggestion that the film be made in three different variants to be shown to different audiences. Whether he wrote the first version of the screenplay alone remains unclear: Kracauer himself simply refers to 'my cooperation in the writing of the script' in a letter to Horkheimer of 30 March 1945, but later claims rather more emphatically: 'I developed the first script of this "test film"'.⁷ Whether solely penned by Kracauer or not, the full first draft of screenplay was certainly completed at the latest by early 1945 and bore the provisional title 'The Accident. First Draft Screen Play' (a text of some 26 pages). In Kracauer's archive in Marbach, there are two versions of this text with minor textual differences. Both of these early drafts have handwritten corrections from Kracauer - indicative of his editorial responsibility at this stage at least - but are written without any of the variants Kracauer later proposed and developed.

In his letter to Horkheimer of 30 March 1945, Kracauer notes his continuing role in the development of the test film: 'I am confirming our agreement that I am to serve as your consultant with reference to the motion picture you are about to produce'. However, his work as consultant was rather more marginal than this suggests. His three page report dated 4 April 1945, 'Suggestions for the Dialogue', arrived too late it seems. Decisions had already been taken and plans were seemingly proceeding apace. In a letter from John Slawson, Executive vice-President of the American Jewish Committees dated 22 March 1945, there is a contract for Gilbert Gabriel and Major Bernard Vorhaus 'to write the screenplay of a motion picture tentatively called *The Accident* that the American Jewish Committee is about to make for scientific purposes' for a fee of \$1500. The deadline for the text was stipulated as 20 April 1945.

Whether this was an attempt to sideline Kracauer or a simple case of wires getting crossed is not clear. In any event, what seems to be the next version of the screenplay bears another title: *Below the Surface* (or as in Kracauer's Archive *Below the Surface Final Version* although this was in no sense a final version of the text) and Kracauer is almost certainly its author. Thereafter, in June 1945, a so-called Round Table Discussion, attended by Pollock, Adorno and others produced a document entitled 'Notes and Suggestions re Experimental Motion Picture'. It is probable that Adorno also wrote a subsequent 'Memorandum re: Below the Surface' (dated LA July 1945) in which there are a number of suggested changes to the text and other comments. In the Horkheimer archive in Frankfurt there is a fourth version of the script (comprising some 26 pages), in which some of the characters in the film are, for the first time, given actual names: in this version we are introduced, for example, to 'Private Henry Brown and his girl' and the African-American 'Walter Johnson'.

At the same time as these various memoranda were making their way from Los Angeles to New York and back, Horkheimer was on the lookout for a

director and a producer for the test film. In a letter of 19 June 1945, Alexander Hackenschmied informs Horkheimer regarding one particular meeting in this connection: 'This morning I had a talk with Mr Elia Kazan about the practical problems of your film-project. He recommended very strongly to make the film in Hollywood and also to look there for a writer'. Horkheimer and Adorno were also actively trying to interest Jack Warner (Warner Brothers Corporation) and the Hollywood film producer Eddie Golden in the project but without success. *Below the Surface* was still a subject of discussion in the spring of 1946 - there is a 'Memorandum on Experimental Movie Project' dated 18 April 1946 - but thereafter, in the absence of the necessary finance and with interest probably waning, it was finally abandoned. The film, of course, was never made. All that is left behind is a confusing paper trail of archive documents. And few have shown any subsequent interest in these. Although the idea of an 'experimental motion picture'⁸ is mentioned at various points in Wiggershaus's (1994) exhaustive history of the Frankfurt School and a 'test film'⁹ is noted in Gertrud Koch's (2000) brief intellectual biography of Kracauer, it is never named let alone considered in any detail. *Below the Surface*, Kracauer's unfilmed test film, has become an unread text.

BELOW THE SURFACE

Although there are a number of different draft versions of the screenplay, the setting and key events portrayed in *The Accident* and then subsequently in *Below the Surface* remain largely the same: It is a crowded rush hour subway car in New York. As the camera lingers on the faces of a number of typical passengers, a series of voice-overs disclose their everyday preoccupations. The carriage jolts suddenly and a woman encumbered by a large unwieldy vacuum cleaner is catapulted through the rear exit door. The train screeches to a halt. Saved by the rear guard-chain, the woman is dazed but unharmed - her vacuum cleaner though has fallen onto the live rail and has shorted it out. With the train at a standstill and in the half-light provided by the emergency lights, a scandalous accusation is made: The woman did not fall, she was pushed and the culprit was the man standing right next to her, a man who just happens to be (and here there are three variants in *Below the Surface*) Jewish or African-American or (in the control variant) an ordinary white American white-collar worker. The man protests his innocence, an argument ensues and the various passengers now start to take sides. It begins to turn nasty. There is a stand off. Then, suddenly the main lights flare on again and the train moves off. The woman, now recovered from her fall, gives the lie to the claims of the accusers - she insists that she simply tripped over her vacuum cleaner. They grudgingly back down. Calm is restored and the passengers continue their homeward journey.

The showing of this film in conjunction with questionnaires and focus-group style discussion was intended to elicit deep-rooted unconscious dispositions and reactions. Subsequent analysis would, it was thought, lead

8. Wiggershaus, *Frankfurt School*, op. cit., p378.

9. Gertrud Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer: An Introduction*, Princeton NJ, 2000, p92.

to the construction of some kind of social scientific scale or index used to check and measure the degree of prejudice in prevailing American society. Kracauer suggests the following basic hypothesis: 'A person determined by an anti-Semitic outlook will introduce a relation of cause and effect between two unrelated parts of a situation ... The crucial question is whether the person introduces the causal relation where it does not exist. If he does, this can only be on the basis of an antisemitic orientation ... If this hypothesis is correct, then the reaction to the film indicates the presence or absence of an antisemitic orientation in the given situation. The validity of this inference can eventually be checked against the correspondence between the reactions to the film and other data, such as interviews and attitude scales' (March 1945).

In this context, it is clear that the chosen title, *Below the Surface*, has at least three levels of meanings. Firstly, it is to be understood literally - the drama unfolds in a New York subway car, that is to say, physically below the surface of the metropolis. Secondly, we see in the events of the test film how the contradictory emotions and hidden prejudices of the various film characters manifest themselves at a moment of crisis. The use of voice-over techniques to reveal their thoughts at the very beginning of the test film (and at its conclusion) might be seen as the clearest example of this, but this device actually only discloses the most banal and commonplace themes. It is, rather, by presenting contradictory utterances and clear-cut discrepancies between words and deeds that the film really allows us to penetrate below the surface of its characters. For example, the musings of one character read as follows:

WOMAN IN FUR COAT: 'I'm no snob. I like people all - like this, mixed together. Even colored people ... No gratitude Negroes ... no loyalty. The minute you treat them like equals - you just can't do it' (p2).

Thirdly, and this is clearly the most important task of the test film project, '[the] latent prejudice' ('Notes' March 1945) of members of the audience is to be brought to the surface: 'true feelings may come to the surface when he [the viewer] sees members of minorities in action' (Memorandum 1946, p2).

Kracauer here sees the need for the film to mask its own intentions in order to gain access to what lies below the surface,¹⁰ that is to say, to the human unconscious as the fundamental well-spring of our emotions and reactions. Below the surface, then, deep in the unconscious of the modern enlightened subject, lurk the powerful forces of irrationalism and primitive instinctual drives.

The concept of the surface has a particular significance for Kracauer in his earlier work on mass culture in Weimar Germany. His famous 1927 study of the Tiller Girls, 'The Mass Ornament', for example, explicitly privileges the surface as the key locus for the identification and critical interpretation of cultural phenomena and the collective unconscious. The essay begins:

10. Kracauer notes: 'Audience reactions are significant only if they are expressed spontaneously, involuntarily. The purpose of this test film must be veiled' ('Project of a Test Film').

The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch's judgements about itself. Since these judgements are expressions of the tendencies of a particular era, they do not offer conclusive testimony about its overall constitution. The surface-level expressions, however, by virtue of their unconscious nature, provides unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things. Conversely, knowledge of this state of things depends on the interpretation of these surface-level expressions. The fundamental substance of an epoch and its unheeded impulses illuminate each other reciprocally.¹¹

Popular dance troupes, variety acts, café pianists, trashy detective stories, hotel lobbies, shopping arcades, seedy bars, umbrellas - all these minutiae and marginalia of everyday existence are such 'surface-level expressions' providing clues to the 'spiritual homelessness'¹² that characterises so much of modern metropolitan life. Above all, for Kracauer, it is the new media of film that has a special connection with, and privileged access to, this domain of the unconscious. *Below the Surface*, it should be remembered, was conceived against the background of Kracauer's ongoing research for his major study of German film history *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), an analysis predicated on the view that film gives expression to and satisfies the fundamental desires, fantasies and aspirations of mass audiences - in the case of German audiences in the Weimar period, their secret craving for authority and order. Kracauer writes:

What films reflect are not so much explicit credos as psychological dispositions - those deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness. Of course, popular magazines and broadcasts, bestsellers, ads, fashions in language and other sedimentary products of a people's cultural life also yield valuable information about predominant attitudes, widespread inner tendencies. But the medium of the screen exceeds these sources in inclusiveness.¹³

In the *Caligari* study, as in the later *Theory of Film* (1960), Kracauer sees film as a kind of dream image or rebus of the collective unconscious. Film articulates, envisions and appeals to the inner psychic life of a particular people at a particular historical moment. In the test film project, Kracauer utilises this insight and in a way reverses the direction of flow. Film is no longer just an *expression* of the unconscious, but rather becomes an instrument with which to engage and elicit its elusive contents.

But this is not all and it is here perhaps that *Below the Surface* becomes most interesting for contemporary theorists. If one accepts that the test film project was conceived according to the theoretical principles Kracauer was developing in *From Caligari to Hitler*, then an intriguing possibility presents

11. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament. Weimar Essays*, Cambridge MA, Harvard UP, 1995, p75.

12. See Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses. Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*, London, 1998, p88.

13. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, Princeton NJ, 1947, p6.

itself. For Kracauer, film not only addresses itself to the unconscious urges and wishes of the audience. Rather it is also a medium which bears witness to the collective unconscious of those engaged in its production. For him, film is a distinctive cultural product in that it always involves the creativity and expertise of a number of differently skilled collaborators - actors, directors, studio technicians, editors, producers and so forth. Film is never the work of a solitary individual artist but instead always the output of collective labour; and hence serves as the expression of a collective, social mentality. It is a shared vision which, in the dark space of the cinema, engages with the expectations and aspirations of its audience. Kracauer writes:

Films are never the product of individual ... Since any film production unit embodies a mixture of heterogeneous interests and inclinations, teamwork in this field tends to exclude arbitrary handling of screen material, suppressing individual peculiarities in favour of traits common to many people.¹⁴

14. Kracauer, *Caligari*, p5.

15. Kracauer, *Caligari*, p7.

Films are, Kracauer contends, ‘visible hieroglyphs’¹⁵ which, once deciphered, disclosed the sensibility of both their producers and consumers, film makers and spectators. And this brings us to our central thesis: following Kracauer’s argument, would it be legitimate to see *Below the Surface* as the manifestation of the collective unconscious of those who brought it into being, that is, of the members of the Frankfurt School themselves? Does the proposed film manifest that which lay below the surface of the ‘dialectical imagination’? For us, *Below the Surface* is precisely a fantasy or, to be more precise, a fantasia of Critical Theory in that here we see a series of motifs, concepts and figures found in other writings of the Frankfurt School brought together in an imaginative configuration and cinematic form.

FIGURES AND MOTIFS OF CRITICAL THEORY

The scenes and events portrayed in the test film are constructed as fragments culled from the life of the modern metropolitan cityscape. The various anonymous figures (notwithstanding the fourth version of the screenplay) are conceived as simple types, who conduct themselves in a manner reminiscent of Georg Simmel’s disinterested, *blasé* personality. The passengers in the car observe, Kracauer notes, ‘that curt constrained politeness of the subway code’ (p7). As the film opens, we find each of them immersed in their own private thoughts and interests, indifferent to one another, avoiding contact, concerned only to escape the company of strangers and longing to be ‘at home’. They are typical modern figures for Kracauer: crowded together and yet alone, marking time in transit, occupying a space that is neither here nor there, waiting in an indefinite in-between. They are figures of boredom, alienation and ‘spiritual homelessness’. The WOMAN IN FUR COAT is again exemplary here when Kracauer describes her as ‘much enjoying her

lack of enjoyment.’ (p2)

The characters are intended to be thoroughly ordinary and representative figures and come to serve as ciphers for the presentation of particular viewpoints. For us, however, they are far from being unremarkable. On the one hand, they seem to be ridiculous stereotypes and caricatures. Surely only writers of the Frankfurt School could provide descriptions like the following:

TOUGH GUY: ‘He is a huge, surly brute, Prussian type.’ (p3)

CLUBFOOT PEDDLAR: ‘his face a mix of piety, truculence and dormant fanaticism.’ (p7)

WOMAN WITH A VACUUM CLEANER: ‘She is a mousey, puritanical little woman, middle-aged, middle-class, clutching her too-big burden with an air of frustration’ (p1).

One pities the poor prospective actors who would have had to embody such figures. And, one wonders, moreover, how it is possible that the members of the Institut, among the most provocative and insightful of twentieth-century intellectuals, could combine to produce such a facile, absurd rogue’s gallery and crude, banal storyline. There is an adage which says that a camel is a horse designed by a committee and *Below the Surface*, a product of numerous committee meetings and memoranda, is indeed the veritable camel of Critical Theory.

At the same time, one can see embodied in the *dramatis personae* many of the concepts and motifs of Critical Theory in what amounts to a kind of self-parody. The characters themselves are simply bearers of ideas and representatives of particular political and ideological standpoints.

It is, for example, noticeable how the figure of the white-collar worker serves as an exemplary urbanite, a vision which wholly accords with Kracauer’s pioneering 1929 ethnography of Berlin’s ‘salaried masses’ *Die Angestellten*. The opening shots of the film appropriately comprise images of office workers leaving their place of work and streaming towards the subway. It is no coincidence that the control variant of the screen-play substitutes a white-collar worker for the accused Jew or African-American. The office worker, the commuter, is a figure of banal respectability against whom one can display minimal or no prejudice. He is the neutral background figure, the modern metropolitan man without qualities, ‘the average American’, ‘Joe Public’ the typical New Yorker.

Nor is it a coincidence that the character of the OLD WOMAN, who scarcely figures at all in the screenplay for *The Accident*, comes to play a much more central role in *Below the Surface*. As the avid reader of horoscopes - ‘Something’s gonna happen. The stars said so for today. Folks can make fun of it, but astrology explains a lot of things’ (p3) - she serves as the representative of superstitiousness and fatalism. ‘The stars don’t lie!’ (p13) - this is her continual refrain. It is significant, of course, that as a figure of

irrationalism, the OLD WOMAN is among the first and the most forceful of the accusers. Mythic thinking and prejudice are inextricably interwoven in her. She is no innocent bystander. One cannot but think that her elevation in the screenplay for *Below the Surface* from mere extra to key supporting role is indebted to Adorno's research interest in the astrology column of the LA Times - his 'The Stars Down to Earth' project.

The principal representative of prejudice in the film is, of course, the most virulent accuser - the bitter CLUB-FOOT PEDDLER. It is he who first tries to '[to] introduce a relation of cause and effect between two unrelated parts of a situation' - 'Well, *somebody* did it!' (p11), he exclaims. He, too, is a figure of primitive and irrational thinking - 'We don't have to see what we know' (p11). He is, first and foremost, a peddler of lies, deploying a number of rhetorical devices typical of the petty propagandist: He seeks to de-individualise and characterise the Jew as an enemy - 'always pushing in first, always grabbing the profits!' (p8), 'Him and his kind, they glory in it - they're always pushing' (p17). He seeks to promulgate a conspiracy theory - 'It's time people woke up to a lot of things going on in this country!' (p8) - according to which he is a victim of a malevolent and omnipotent other. He calls for action, seeks restitution, demands justice: 'There's times when us plain, decent God-lovin' Christians - us white Americans - has got to take the law into our own hands and clean things up. Come on!' (p18).

The PEDDLER is clearly recognisable as a prototype of Löwenthal's Fascist agitator. He is a 'prophet of deceit', a 'cheer-leader in reverse', as Löwenthal puts it. Indeed, one finds an echo of *Below the Surface* in Löwenthal and Guterman's book four years later:

In a crowded New York bus a woman complained loudly that she was choking, that she was pushed and squeezed by other passengers and added that 'something should be done about it'. (A typical inarticulate complaint). A second passenger observed: 'Yes, it's terrible. The bus company should assign more buses to this route. If we did something about it, we might get results. (The solution of a reformer or revolutionary. The inarticulate expression of the complainant is translated in to an objective issue - in this case 'the faulty organisation of the transportation services that can be remedied by appropriate collective action'). But then a third passenger angrily declared: 'This has nothing to do with the bus company. It's all those foreigners who don't even speak good English. They should be sent back where they came from'. (The solution of the agitator who translates the original complaint not into an issue for action against an established authority, but into the theme of the vicious foreigner).¹⁶

16. Löwenthal and Guterman, *Prophets of Deceit*, pp8-9.

It is interesting to note in this context how events portrayed in *Below the Surface* also seem to mirror the key incident in Joseph Roth's *Rebellion* (1924) in which the central character, the wounded war veteran, Andreas Pum, reduced to eking out a living as a street musician and peddler, becomes embroiled in

a bitter argument with a well-heeled bourgeois figure, Herr Arnold, as they try to board a crowded tram-car at the same time, a dispute which escalates until Pum is eventually arrested and jailed. Roth was at the time, it should be remembered, the Vienna correspondent (and soon to be Paris correspondent), for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and there is a correspondence between Kracauer and Roth held in the Marbach Archive. It is not inconceivable that Kracauer had in mind this episode from Roth's story when he first came to sketch the plot for the test film.

Of the other occupants of the subway car the figure of the INTELLECTUAL is also of particular interest for us. With his facile preoccupation with 'objectivity' and his concomitant disparaging of 'intellectual theory' (p5), this character is nothing other than a wicked parody of the American empirical social scientist. This intellectual is, in fact, nothing of the sort - indeed, he is the very antithesis of the thinker; he is the anti-intellectual *par excellence*. 'There are problems,' he pontificates, 'too important to be understood by the mind alone' (p5). It is no wonder that he feels himself at home only among "Doers"! - businessmen and other red-blooded men of action' (p4). He is a representative of pseudo-intellectual servility, an advocate of the 'authoritarian personality' - 'Face it, gentlemen, we need strong leaders - doers, like Henry Ford' (p21), - and, an apologist for anti-Semitism. Ironically his 'objectivity' serves as his all-too-transparent excuse for inaction when called upon to intervene in the escalating dispute. As Kracauer notes, this was to be a key part of the test film: in Hypothesis 11 we read: 'anti-Semitism is connected with anti-intellectualism in the sense of "sophistication"'.

The dramatic action culminates in the confrontation between two heroes of the proletariat, the two burly SHIPYARD WORKERS, and the irrational and superstitious forces embodied by the lumpenproletarian figure of the PEDDLER and his cronies. At this moment of tension, the main lights in the subway car are suddenly restored: 'Long-shot of the mob frozen into an ugly, sustained tableau. The antagonists still stand immobile, hate-bound' (p19).

One cannot read this without being reminded of Walter Benjamin's writings on Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre. Benjamin is preoccupied by the way in which Brecht uses interruption to halt the flow of dramatic events and thereby reveal particular prevailing conditions and circumstances, above all, contemporary political situations. This moment of interruption is understood by Benjamin as one of illumination, discovery and recognition, in which the collective consciousness of the audience is transformed and their sensitivity to class distinctions and oppression is heightened. In his first version of *What is Epic Theatre* (unpublished in Benjamin's life time, first published in 1966), Benjamin writes: 'The thing that is revealed as though by lightning in the "condition" represented on the stage - as a copy of human gestures, actions and

17. Walter Benjamin,
Understanding Brecht,
Anna Bostock
(trans), London,
1998, p12.

words - is an immanently dialectical attitude. The condition which epic theatre reveals is the dialectic at a standstill'.¹⁷ We suggest that the confrontation between the workers and the sinister peddler is a cinematic envisioning of the struggle between the powers of modern reason and liberation and those of enduring prejudice and hate. In this sense, it is nothing less than the dialectic of enlightenment that finds representation in this moment of the dialectic at a standstill. The restoration of light in the subway car is a moment of literal and metaphorical enlightenment. The riddle is solved, truth is revealed and prejudice exposed. In this way, *Below the Surface* is not just an experiment, but rather is a piece of didactic film-making, an urgent political intervention. The Frankfurt School's Critical Theory of modern mass culture here begins to transform itself into a critical cultural practice which seeks to interrogate rather than merely investigate its audience. Film in the image of Critical Theory, film in the service of profane illumination and ideology critique - this is how Kracauer saw his test film project. And if this is the case, then something quite remarkable is happening below the surface.