

Siegfried Kracauer: Talk with Teddie (1960)¹

(1) *Concept of Utopia:*

I argued that he uses this concept in a purely formal way, as a borderline concept (Grenzbegriff) which at the end invariably emerges like a Deus ex Machina. In my opinion, I told him, Utopian thought makes sense only if it assumes the form of a vision or intuition with a definite content of a sort. T. was inclined to admit the justice of my argument. He says—of course, he would—that he will deal with the concept of Utopia in future, more systematic & elaborate works. His intention is then to show that the concept of utopia is a vanishing concept when besieged; it vanishes if you want to spell it out.

(2) *Dialectics vs. Ontology:*

Teddie is presently making notes for a course on this theme. Ontology will have nothing to laugh, he says.² To be more precise, he rejects any ontological stipulations in favor of an infinite dialectics which penetrates all concrete things & entities, and, taking its clue from what they may reveal, works its way through them in a process which has no goal outside the movement itself and no direction that could be stated in terms other than those immanent in that movement. I told Teddie that many of his articles concocted this way make me just dizzy; that I had often the feeling that other interpretations might be as conclusive as his or even more so; that his whole dialectics seemed inseparable from a certain arbitrariness to me; and that, in sum, my dizziness was presumably caused by the complete absence of content & direction in these series of material evaluations. I traced thus my dizziness to the fact that he seemingly deals in substances without, however, actually being attached to any substance. Hence the arbitrariness, the lack of orientation. I related this argument against his dialectics to my statement on the formality, the emptiness of his Utopian concept: indeed, if the movement he unchains gravitates toward an Utopian goal, it still remains unoriented throughout because the term “utopia,” as used by him, is nothing but a conceptual stopgap. Here Gretel [Adorno’s wife, Gretel Karplus] insisted that Teddie’s dialectics is like music. I answered: This is certainly true but is by no means an argument in favor of its philosophical validity.

Teddie’s response showed that he was wounded to the quick (though he is a skilled-enough debater not to show it). My objections, said he, reveal that I still cling to obsolete, ontological, habits of thought in requesting that something fixed must be given, postulated or desired. No sooner does one fall into this common error than the consequence is a ready-made “system” starting from the vision or postulate & passing above the concrete material of things and entities instead of through them. And he insisted that, contrary to ontological bias, the truth, as revealed through his immanent processing of concretions, is always “hovering” (schwebend). As for my reproach of dizziness, arbitrariness, etc., he declares that there is after all a definite outlook in his writing which, of course, is accessible only to those absorbing his production in its entirety. He demands, in fact, that the student should understand each meaning from the contexts of what he, Teddie, has written (and will write in the future). Then, Teddie seems to believe, the student cannot but experience the substance behind it all and

¹ Siegfried Kracauer, *Siegfried Kracauer's American Writings*, eds. Johannes von Moltke and Kristy Rawson, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 127-132. [JvM/KR] Notes on a conversation with Theodor W. Adorno at the Hotel Sonnenheim in Bergün (Switzerland) dated 12 August 1960. Ms. in DLA.

² [JvM/KR] “Die Ontologie wird nichts zu lachen haben,” meaning that ontology will be put on the defensive.

get the sense of direction that I am missing. [I could have answered him, but failed to do so, that, since his dialectics consists of an unending sequence of concrete moments and each moment is supposed to be interpreted in depth, the sum total of these moments is unattainable. Which means that the reader familiar with all of Teddie's writings will feel exactly as insecure & dizzy as one who has read only part of Teddie's output. The emphasis lying on the movement from moment to moment, more samples of the same, may increase the impression of the movement punctuated by "hovering" truths but are extremely unlikely to endow it with the substance it deliberately negates as sheer movement.]

Instead of bringing in this pertinent argument, which did not occur to me at the moment, I resumed my objections from an entirely different angle. I compared Teddie's dialectics with a film made up exclusively of close-ups. Such a film is of course imaginable, I said, but the close-ups of which it consists would be completely undefined and, hence, puzzling rather than revealing, were they not, every now and then, interrupted with "establishing" shots relating them to the reality with which we are confronted after all and thus defining, however tentatively, their approximate position. Otherwise expressed, the radical immanence of the dialectical process will not do; some ontological fixations are needed to imbue it with significance and direction: I spoke of "ontologischen Würfeln" [ontological postulates] within this context and remarked that Hegel's dialectics moved toward, or implied, an ontological end. This was a bit careless of me, for Teddie, knowing that my lifelong aversion to Hegel had always prevented me from really studying him, immediately exploited the situation by saying that Hegel never committed the sin of orienting the dialectical process toward anything allegedly "objective" outside that process. But even though for Teddie Hegel is an infallible authority, it was quite obvious that my new attack came unexpected to him; all the more so since I supplemented it by the observation that a really meaningful dialectics would have to bring into play some ontological vision also. Thereupon he admitted that ontological elements might indeed be needed—but only in the form of hypostasized elements, not as eternal truths. Well, I replied, no one has spoken of eternal truths; rather, what is required is a dialectics between the endless, purely immanent movement—Teddie's procedure—and ontological stipulation outside it, a "Schau" which, itself, may, or should, not assume a definite character. Exploring further my advantage, I cited Benjamin against Teddie. Does not Benjamin, I continued, time and again feel himself bound by visions of partial ontological truths? And does he not orient his penetrations of concrete entities toward these messianic visions which are rich in content, as indeed Utopian ideas should be in order to carry meaning? Here I had Teddie trapped. True, he tamely criticized Benjamin for not being the perfect dialectician à la Hegel and Teddie himself (who invokes the Hegel of his making as a sort of protective cover & shield), but on the other hand he could not well deny Benjamin's strengths as an autonomous thinker and try to undermine his position. I ruthlessly hit Teddie some more by drawing a graph illustrating his, Benjamin's, and my own way of thinking.³

Both Benjamin and I coinciding in not accepting immanent dialectics, I subtly implied that we are engaged in terms of substances. We think under a sort of ontological compunction, Utopian or not, whereas Teddie is, indeed, free-hovering and does not feel any such compunction. At this point, I believe, Teddie was at the end of his rope. I am sure, however, he will not admit this to himself—nor will Gretel—but immediately manage to believe that all my thoughts are in reality his own, annex these thoughts, which he already considers his property, to his "system," and pass them off as the natural outgrowth of the latter. There is

³ [JvM/KR] The ms. includes a three-part drawing here that visualizes the relationship between an "ontological area" and thought for "Teddie" (Adorno), Benjamin, and Kracauer, respectively. The drawing is reproduced in Siegfried Kracauer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Briefwechsel: Der Riß der Welt geht auch durch mich* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2009), 736.

something paranoiac about him. You cannot upset Teddie; he grabs everything he is told, digests it and its consequences and then takes over in a spirit of superiority.

(3) *Ideology and Sociology:*

The formality and possessiveness (or greed) of Teddie's mind flagrantly show in the way he relates the ideological to the sociological dimension. In all his articles or books he invariably traces the aesthetic or conceptual characteristics of some entity—a poem, a philosophical viewpoint, or the like—to the social situation from which that entity (historically) arises, but does so in a manner which unmistakably reveals his complete unconcern for the material nature of society, past or present, and for the means of improving our social condition. His sociological concepts are much too wide to be able to characterize any social reality; they are just leftovers, never revised, from his Marxist past. This applies in particular to his term “bürgerlich” [bourgeois] which he constantly uses. Ontological thinking, ideology-formation, etc.—all this he lays to the “bürgerliche” Warengesellschaft [commodity society], which he makes also responsible for the “Verdinglichung” [reification] of specific values, abstractness in our approach to the world, unjustified relativism, and the loss of substance in general. I asked him to define his concept of “bürgerlich.” He said it goes beyond capitalism proper, covering the “Tauschgesellschaft” [exchange society] with its exchange of goods. It goes without saying that my defense of ontology caused him to call me “bürgerlich.” By the same token he, on some other occasion, declared that Aristotle's *Politeia*, with its emphasis on moderation, the middle way, etc., resulted from bourgeois mentality (!). What are the counterconcepts, I further asked. The feudal society, the primitive horde, and so [on], he answered. Whereupon I gave him to understand that his concept of “bürgerlich” [bourgeois] is much too wide to define the social forces which may account for this or that intellectual or artistic phenomenon. (Is not, for instance, the Renaissance contemporary with the merchant society of the Italian city states? Hauser⁴ is much more circumspect and empirical than Teddie, gross as he often is.) Incidentally, when discussing the relations between ideological events and social developments, I pointed out that it would be an urgent task for research to find out how the intellectual and social life of a given period are actually connected with each other. What are the channels, if any, that lead from a work of art to the social circumstances under which it was created? What counts now is to prove or disprove the widespread tacit assumption of the unity of any historical period. Without realizing that he proceeds from this assumption, Teddie contended that he was in complete agreement with me and had already dealt with the issue I raised in one of his essays. To repeat it, he grabs everything. In order to prove [to] him how alienated he is from all real substance, intellectual or social, he pretends to penetrate and set moving. I then told him bluntly: You curse the “bürgerliche Gesellschaft” [bourgeois society], reject Communism, frown down on the Social Democracy, etc.: what do you suggest, for God's sake, should be done in terms of social changes, other institutions? His (pitiable) answer was: I know, and say, what is bad; is this not enough? In sum, all that exists, exists only to be devoured in the dialectic process which Teddie keeps going on and on because of his lack of substance, of vision. To Teddie, dialectics is a means of maintaining his superiority over all imaginable opinions, viewpoints, trends, happenings, by dissolving, condemning or again rescuing them, as he pleases. Thus he establishes himself as the master controller of a world he has never absorbed.⁵ For had he absorbed at least segments of it, his dialectics would come to a stop, somewhere. As matters stand, it reflects, viewed sociologically, a world void of beliefs and attachments. The strange thing is, that in spite of its

⁴ [JvM/KR] The reference is presumably to the Hungarian-German art historian Arnold Hauser (1892–1978), author of *The Social History of Art* (New York: Knopf, 1951).

⁵ [JvM/KR] Crossed out in ms.: “experienced.”

emptiness, Teddie's output appears to be concrete and substantial. This semblance of fullness probably results from his aesthetic sensitivity. No doubt he has insight into aesthetic structure, aesthetic values; and he knows how to formulate his predominantly aesthetic experiences. This is a great asset. But all his undeniable finesse in this respect is, alas, used in such a way that it results in sheer adornments of an otherwise hollow and insubstantial dialectics. The aesthetic concretions at which he arrives do not really enter into action; they are in the nature of trimmings; they produce a glitter which conceals, to the uninitiated, the estrangement from substance of the philosophy in which they are incorporated.

During our sociological discussion I told Teddie that Soviet Russia would in the long run be faced with the same problems which bear down on Western democracy: the problem of ideological shallowness. Indeed, who guarantees that the liberal creed, which is at the bottom of Marx's doctrine, is right in assuming that once equality is achieved in all areas, true culture begins? Teddie conceded that this is problematic indeed. Yet, he added, he does not suppose that I believe culture to be possible only under constraint. Certainly not, I answered. He held that my theory may never be put to test because oppression will continue indefinitely, which means that his radicalism is too lofty to take gradual improvements etc. into account. It is easy to be so radical. Significantly he also rejects Marx to the extent that his dialectics is controlled by an ontological vision.

APPENDIX (AUG. 24, ZURICH)

It is by no means said, I said, that the liberalism—or Marx, for that matter—is right in contending that true culture begins once all constraint, economic or otherwise, is abolished. Teddie: Of course, there are problems involved. But you will not say, Friedel, that culture rests upon suppression. I replied: Certainly not. Whereupon Teddie: Well, I do not believe that your assumption will ever be put to test. Suppression of men by men is likely to continue on & on. In other words, Teddie is Marxist to the extent that he identifies the rise of the "classless society" as the end of prehistory & the beginning of history proper.