



# Ornaments of the Metropolis: Siegfried Kracauer and Modern Urban Culture (MIT Press)

*Henrik Reeh*

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For Siegfried Kracauer, the urban ornament was not just an aspect of design; it was the medium through which city dwellers interpreted the metropolis itself. In *Ornaments of the Metropolis*, Henrik Reeh traces variations on the theme of the ornament in Kracauer's writings on urbanism, from his early journalism in Germany between the wars to his "sociobiography" of Jacques Offenbach in Paris. Kracauer (1889-1966), often associated with the Frankfurt School and the intellectual milieu of Walter Benjamin, is best known for his writings on cinema and the philosophy of history. Reeh examines Kracauer's lesser-known early work, much of it written for the trendsetting newspaper *Frankfurter Zeitung* in the 1920s and early 1930s, and analyzes Kracauer's continuing reflections on modern urban life, through the pivotal idea of ornament. Kracauer deciphers the subjective experience of the city by viewing fragments of the city as dynamic ornaments; an employment exchange, a day shelter for the homeless, a movie theater, and an amusement park become urban microcosms.

Reeh focuses on three substantial works written by Kracauer before his emigration to the United States in 1940. In the early autobiographical novel *Ginster, Written by Himself*, a young architect finds aesthetic pleasure in the ornamental forms that are largely unused in the profession of the time. The collection *Streets of Berlin and Elsewhere*, with many essays from Kracauer's years in Berlin, documents the subjectiveness of urban life. Finally, *Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of His Time* shows how the superficial -- in a sense, ornamental -- milieu of the operetta evolved into a critical force during the Second Empire. Reeh argues that Kracauer's novel, essays, and historiography all suggest ways in which the subjective can reappropriate urban life. The book also includes a series of photographs by the author that reflect the ornamental experience of the metropolis in Paris, Frankfurt, and other cities.

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