

THE MASS ORNAMENT



WEIMAR ESSAYS



**SIEGFRIED
KRACAUER**

TRANSLATED, EDITED, AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY THOMAS Y. LEVIN

Siegfried Kracauer was one of the twentieth century's most brilliant cultural critics, a bold and prolific scholar, and an incisive theorist of film. In this volume his important early writings on modern society during the Weimar Republic make their long-awaited appearance in English.

This book is a celebration of the masses—their tastes, amusements, and everyday lives. Taking up the master themes of modernity, such as isolation and alienation, mass culture and urban experience, and the relation between the group and the individual, Kracauer explores a kaleidoscope of topics: shopping arcades, the cinema, bestsellers and their readers, photography, dance, hotel lobbies, Kafka, the Bible, and boredom. For Kracauer, the most revelatory facets of modern metropolitan life lie on the surface, in the ephemeral and the marginal. *The Mass Ornament* today remains a refreshing tribute to popular culture, and its impressively interdisciplinary essays continue to shed light not only on Kracauer's later work but also on the ideas of the Frankfurt School, the genealogy of film theory and cultural studies, Weimar cultural politics, and, not least, the exigencies of intellectual exile. This volume presents the full scope of his gifts as one of the most wide-ranging and penetrating interpreters of modern life.

"Known to the English-language public for the books he wrote after he reached America in 1941, most famously for *From Caligari to Hitler*, Siegfried Kracauer is best understood as a charter member of that extraordinary constellation of Weimar-era intellectuals which has been dubbed retroactively (and misleadingly) the Frankfurt School. This collection of Kracauer's early essays—like his friends Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, he began as an essayist-provocateur on a wide variety of social and cultural themes—does more than explain the origins of the eminent film critic and theorist. It includes some of his most original and important writing."

—Susan Sontag

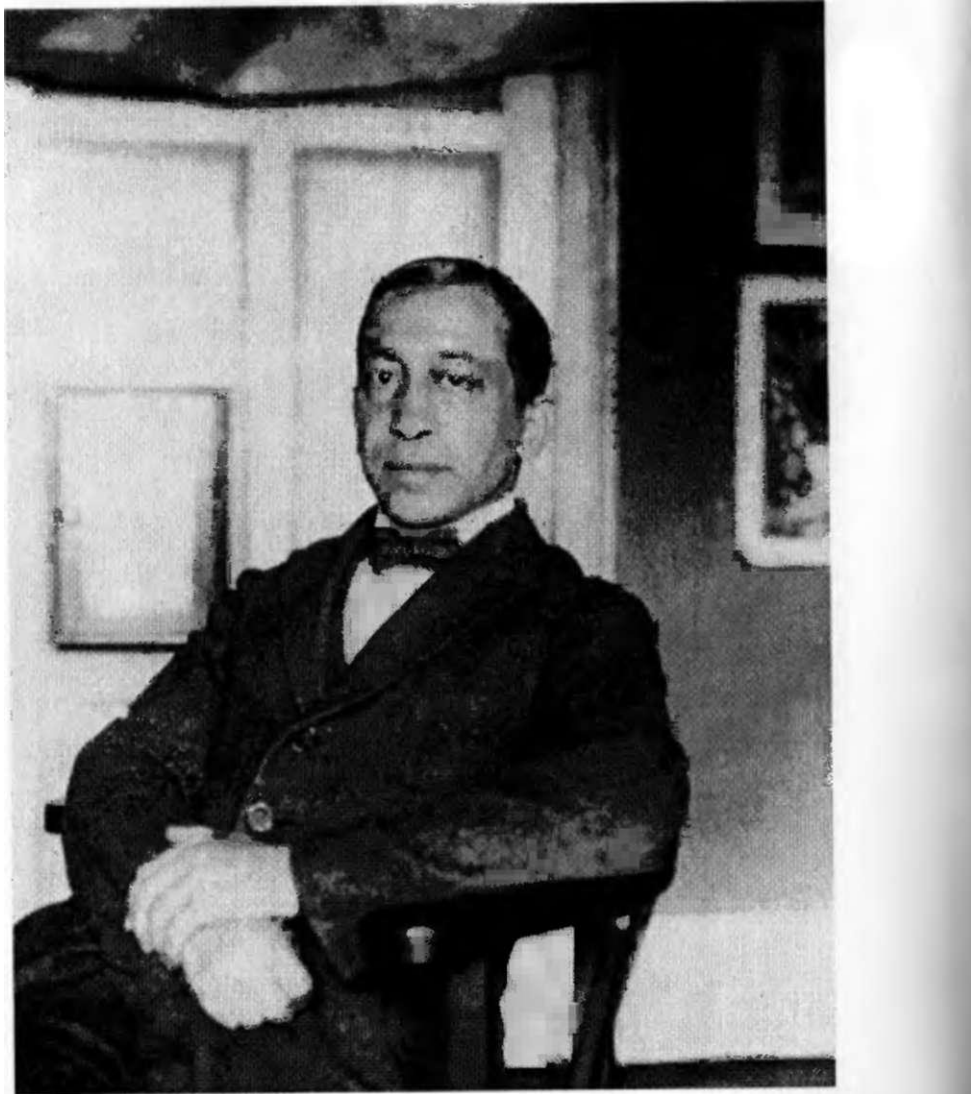
SIEGFRIED KRACAUER (1889-1966) was the author of *From Caligari to Hitler*, *Theory of Film*, and many other works on historical, sociological, and cultural topics. Thomas Y. Levin is Assistant Professor of German at Princeton University.

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Girl-Kultur



Siegfried Kracauer, late 1920s

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Thomas Y. Levin

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For Theodor W. Adorno

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Translator's Note

This translation is based on the second edition of *Das Ornament der Masse: Essays* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), which, as the editor Karsten Witte explains in his afterword, is essentially identical to the first edition that Kracauer himself supervised in 1963. Aside from the correction of typographical errors and bibliographic data, the only substantive change made in the later, posthumous edition was the reinsertion of a number of passages that had figured in the original versions of the essays published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* but that Kracauer had for some reason excised from the 1963 edition. The translation follows Witte's philological lead and reinstates all passages, titles, emphases, and text breaks from the original publications, marking them as such in the notes. Indeed, as already suggested by the slightly modified subtitle *Weimar Essays*, the various editorial additions all attempt to compensate for the irreducible temporal and linguistic distance of the texts from their original historical and intellectual context. Thus, the annotations serve not only to articulate thorny or especially rich translatable moments and to provide bibliographic and filmographic data for cited works and passages, but also to elucidate the wide range of cultural references from the Weimar period that are embedded in Kracauer's prose. The constellation of photographs from the Weimar period is intended to have a similarly evocative function. The decision to include them was motivated by a comment Kracauer made upon rediscovering the early essays that would eventually make up *Das Ornament der Masse*. In a letter to Adorno on October 1, 1950, conveying the news of his find, Kracauer expressed the wish that these Weimar texts be published in a book-length collection "which could include drawings" (cited in *Marbacher Magazin* 47 [1988]: 110). The minimally intrusive location of the photographs between.

rather than within, the individual essays is meant to signal that their function is more emblematic than illustrative. All notes, except where specified otherwise, have been added by the translator.

. . .

"Reality is a construction": this oft-cited phrase from Kracauer's study *Die Angestellten* is equally true for the reality of a translation project such as this one. Among my many co-constructors, I would like to thank above all Lindsay Waters and Alison Kent of Harvard University Press for their generous encouragement and heroic editorial patience; Miriam Hansen, who introduced me to Kracauer during my graduate work at Yale and encouraged me to undertake this translation; Karsten Witte for his untiring assistance and friendship at every stage in this project; Eric Rentschler and Evi and Walter Levin for their careful readings and comments on the entire volume; Jerry Zaslove and the Institute for the Humanities at Simon Fraser University for their magnanimous support of translation reviews of a number of the essays by Michael Mundhenk; Ingrid Belke and the superb staff at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach am Neckar for their help during my research in the Kracauer papers over the years; the J. Paul Getty Foundation and the Princeton University Committee for Research in the Humanities for stipends that subsidized both research and production costs; and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), which sustained this project at various stages from its beginning to its completion. Among the many friends, colleagues, and fellow Kracauer scholars who were generous with comments, suggestions, and critiques, I would like to express particular gratitude to Edward Dimendberg, David Frisby, Karsten Harries, Anton Kaes, Thomas Keenan, Michael Kessler, Evonne Levy, Leyla Mayer, Klaus Michael, Inka Mulder-Bach, Gerhard Richter, D. N. Rodowick, Heide Schliipmann, Andreas Volk, and Judith Wechsler. Maria Ascher's meticulous and astute editorial scrutiny has been a pleasure and an enormous help, not least in ridding the translation of residual teutonicisms in both vocabulary and style. Although Kracauer's often poetic theoretical prose presents a special challenge to the translator, any infelicities that remain here are entirely my responsibility.

The Mass Ornament

The lines of life are various; they diverge and cease
Like footpaths and the mountains' utmost ends.
What we are here, elsewhere a God amends
With harmonies, eternal recompense, and peace.
—Holderlin, "To Zimmer"

1

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 judgments about itself. Since these judgments 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, provide 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.

2

In the domain of body culture, which also covers the illustrated newspapers, tastes have been quietly changing. The process began with the Tiller Girls.¹ These products of American distraction factories are no

longer individual girls, but indissoluble girl clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics. As they condense into figures in the revues, performances of the same geometric precision are taking place in what is always the same packed stadium, be it in Australia or India, not to mention America. The tiniest village, which they have not yet reached, learns about them through the weekly newsreels. One need only glance at the screen to learn that the ornaments are composed of thousands of bodies, sexless bodies in bathing suits. The regularity of their patterns is cheered by the masses, themselves arranged by the stands in tier upon ordered tier.

These extravagant spectacles, which are staged by many sorts of people and not just girls and stadium crowds, have long since become an established form. They have gained *international* stature and are the focus of aesthetic interest.

The bearer of the ornaments is the *mass* and not the people [Volk], for whenever the people form figures, the latter do not hover in midair but arise out of a community. A current of organic life surges from these communal groups—which share a common destiny—to their ornaments, endowing these ornaments with a magic force and burdening them with meaning to such an extent that they cannot be reduced to a pure assemblage of lines. Those who have withdrawn from the community and consider themselves to be unique personalities with their own individual souls also fail when it comes to forming these new patterns. Were they to take part in such a performance, the ornament would not transcend them. It would be a colorful composition that could not be worked out to its logical conclusion, since its points—like the prongs of a rake—would be implanted in the soul's intermediate strata, of which a residue would survive. The patterns seen in the stadiums and cabarets betray no such origins. They are composed of elements that are mere building blocks and nothing more. The construction of the edifice depends on the size of the stones and their number. It is the mass that is employed here. Only as parts of a mass, not as individuals who believe themselves to be formed from within, do people become fractions of a figure.

The ornament is an *end in itself*. Ballet likewise used to yield

ornaments, which arose in kaleidoscopic fashion. But even after discarding their ritual meaning, these remained the plastic expression of erotic life, an erotic life that both gave rise to them and determined their traits. The mass movements of the girls, by contrast, take place in a vacuum; they are a linear system that no longer has any erotic meaning but at best points to the locus of the erotic. Moreover, the meaning of the living star formations in the stadiums is not that of military exercises. No matter how regular the latter may turn out to be, that regularity was considered a means to an end; the parade march arose out of patriotic feelings and in turn aroused them in soldiers and subjects. The star formations, however, have no meaning beyond themselves, and the masses above whom they rise are not a moral unit like a company of soldiers. One cannot even describe the figures as the decorative frills of gymnastic discipline. Rather, the girl-units drill in order to produce an immense number of parallel lines, the goal being to train the broadest mass of people in order to create a pattern of undreamed-of dimensions. The end result is the ornament, whose closure is brought about by emptying all the substantial constructs of their contents.

Although the masses give rise to the ornament, they are not involved in thinking it through. As linear as it may be, there is no line that extends from the small sections of the mass to the entire figure. The ornament resembles *aerial photographs* of landscapes and cities in that it does not emerge out of the interior of the given conditions, but rather appears above them. Actors likewise never grasp the stage setting in its totality, yet they consciously take part in its construction; and even in the case of ballet dancers, the figure is still subject to the influence of its performers. The more the coherence of the figure is relinquished in favor of mere linearity, the more distant it becomes from the immanent consciousness of those constituting it. Yet this does not lead to its being scrutinized by a more incisive gaze. In fact, nobody would notice the figure at all if the crowd of spectators, who have an aesthetic relation to the ornament and do not represent anyone, were not sitting in front of it.

The ornament, detached from its bearers, must be understood *rationaly*. It consists of lines and circles like those found in textbooks on Euclidean geometry, and also incorporates the elementary components of

physics, such as waves and spirals. Both the proliferations of organic forms and the emanations of spiritual life remain excluded. The Tiller Girls can no longer be reassembled into human beings after the fact. Their mass gymnastics are never performed by the fully preserved bodies, whose contortions defy rational understanding. Arms, thighs, and other segments are the smallest component parts of the composition.

The structure of the mass ornament reflects that of the entire contemporary situation. Since the principle of the *capitalist production process* does not arise purely out of nature, it must destroy the natural organisms that it regards either as means or as resistance. Community and personality perish when what is demanded is calculability; it is only as a tiny piece of the mass that the individual can clamber up charts and can service machines without any friction. A system oblivious to differences in form leads on its own to the blurring of national characteristics and to the production of worker masses that can be employed equally well at any point on the globe.—Like the mass ornament, the capitalist production process is an end in itself. The commodities that it spews forth are not actually produced to be possessed; rather, they are made for the sake of a profit that knows no limit. Its growth is tied to that of business. The producer does not labor for private gains whose benefits he can enjoy only to a limited extent (in America surplus profits are directed to spiritual shelters such as libraries and universities, which cultivate intellectuals whose later endeavors repay with interest the previously advanced capital). No: the producer labors in order to expand the business. Value is not produced for the sake of value. Though labor may well have once served to produce and consume values up to a certain point, these have now become side effects in the service of the production process. The activities subsumed by that process have divested themselves of their substantial contents.—The production process runs its secret course in public. Everyone does his or her task on the conveyor belt, performing a partial function without grasping the totality. Like the pattern in the stadium, the organization stands above the masses, a monstrous figure whose creator withdraws it from the eyes of its bearers, and barely even observes it himself.—It is conceived according to rational principles which the Taylor system merely pushes

to their ultimate conclusion. The hands in the factory correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girls. Going beyond manual capacities, psychotechnical aptitude tests attempt to calculate dispositions of the soul as well. The mass ornament is the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires.

Educated people—who are never entirely absent—have taken offense at the emergence of the Tiller Girls and the stadium images. They judge anything that entertains the crowd to be a distraction of that crowd. But despite what they think, the *aesthetic* pleasure gained from ornamental mass movements is *legitimate*. Such movements are in fact among the rare creations of the age that bestow form upon a given material. The masses organized in these movements come from offices and factories; the formal principle according to which they are molded determines them in reality as well. When significant components of reality become invisible in our world, art must make do with what is left, for an aesthetic presentation is all the more real the less it dispenses with the reality outside the aesthetic sphere. No matter how low one gauges the value of the mass ornament, its degree of reality is still higher than that of artistic productions which cultivate outdated noble sentiments in obsolete forms—even if it means nothing more than that.

The process of history is a battle between a weak and distant reason and the *forces of nature* that ruled over heaven and earth in the myths. After the twilight of the gods, the gods did not abdicate: the old nature within and outside man continues to assert itself. It gave rise to the great cultures of humanity, which must die like any creation of nature, and it serves as the ground for the superstructures of a *mythological* thinking which affirms nature in its omnipotence. Despite all the variations in the structure of such mythological thinking, which changes from epoch to epoch, it always respects the boundaries that nature has drawn. It acknowledges the organism as the ur-form; it is refracted in the formed quality of what exists; it yields to the workings of fate. It reflects the premises of nature in all spheres without rebelling against their exist-

ence. Organic sociology, which sets up the natural organism as the prototype for social organization, is no less mythological than nationalism, which knows no higher unity than the unison of the nation's fate.

Reason does not operate within the circle of natural life. Its concern is to introduce truth into the world. Its realm has already been intimated in genuine *fairy tales*, which are not stories about miracles but rather announcements of the miraculous advent of justice. There is profound historical significance in the fact that the *Thousand and One Nights* turned up precisely in the France of the Enlightenment and that eighteenth-century reason recognized the reason of the fairy tales as its equal. Even in the early days of history, mere nature was suspended in the fairy tale so that truth could prevail. Natural power is defeated by the powerlessness of the good; fidelity triumphs over the arts of sorcery.

In serving the breakthrough of truth, the historical process becomes a *process of demythologization* which effects a radical deconstruction of the positions that the natural continually reoccupied. The French Enlightenment is an important example of the struggle between reason and the mythological delusions that have invaded the domains of religion and politics. This struggle continues, and in the course of history it may be that nature, increasingly stripped of its magic, will become more and more pervious to reason.

4

The *capitalist epoch* is a stage in the process of demystification. The type of thinking that corresponds to the present economic system has, to an unprecedented degree, made possible the domination and use of nature as a self-contained entity. What is decisive here, however, is not the fact that this thinking provides a means to exploit nature; if human beings were merely exploiters of nature, then nature would have triumphed over nature. Rather, what is decisive is that this thinking fosters ever greater independence from natural conditions and thereby creates a space for the intervention of reason. It is the *rationality* of this thinking (which emanates to some extent from the reason of fairy tales) that accounts—though not exclusively—for the bourgeois revolutions of the

last one hundred fifty years, the revolutions that settled the score with the natural powers of the church (itself entangled in the affairs of its age), of the monarchy, and of the feudal system. The unstoppable decomposition of these and other mythological ties is reason's good fortune, since the fairy tale can become reality only on the ruins of the natural unities.

However, the *Ratio* of the capitalist economic system is not reason itself but a murky reason. Once past a certain point, it abandons the truth in which it participates. *It does not encompass man.* The operation of the production process is not regulated according to man's needs, and man does not serve as the foundation for the structure of the socioeconomic organization. Indeed, at no point whatsoever is the system founded on the basis of man. "The basis of man": this does not mean that capitalist thinking should cultivate man as a historically produced form such that it ought to allow him to go unchallenged as a personality and should satisfy the demands made by his nature. The adherents of this position reproach capitalism's rationalism for raping man, and yearn for the return of a community that would be capable of preserving the allegedly human element much better than capitalism. Leaving aside the stultifying effect of such regressive stances, they fail to grasp capitalism's core defect: it rationalizes not too much but rather *too little*. The thinking promoted by capitalism resists culminating in that reason which arises from the basis of man.

The current site of capitalist thinking is marked by *abstractness*. The predominance of this abstractness today establishes a spiritual space that encompasses all expression. The objection raised against this abstract mode of thought—that it is incapable of grasping the actual substance of life and therefore must give way to concrete observation of phenomena—does indeed identify the limits of abstraction. As an objection it is premature, however, when it is raised in favor of that false mythological concreteness whose aim is organism and form. A return to this sort of concreteness would sacrifice the already acquired capacity for abstraction, but without overcoming abstractness. The latter is the expression of a rationality grown obdurate. Determinations of meaning rendered as abstract generalities—such as determinations in the eco-

conomic, social, political, or moral domain—do not give reason what rightfully belongs to reason. Such determinations fail to consider the empirical; one could draw any utilitarian application whatsoever from these abstractions devoid of content. Only behind the barrier of these abstractions can one find the individual rational insights that correspond to the particularity of the given situation. Despite the substantiality one can demand of them, such insights are "concrete" only in a derivative sense; in any case they are not "concrete" in the vulgar sense, which uses the term to substantiate points of view entangled in natural life.—The abstractness of contemporary thinking is thus *ambivalent*. From the perspective of the mythological doctrines, in which nature naively asserts itself, the process of abstraction—as employed, for example, by the natural sciences—is a gain in rationality which detracts from the resplendence of the things of nature. From the perspective of reason, the same process of abstraction appears to be determined by nature; it gets lost in an empty formalism under whose guise the natural is accorded free rein because it does not let through the insights of reason which could strike at the natural. The prevailing abstractness reveals that the process of demythologization has not come to an end.

Present-day thinking is confronted with the question as to whether it should open itself up to reason or continue to push on against it without opening up at all. It cannot transgress its self-imposed boundaries without fundamentally changing the economic system that constitutes its infrastructure; the continued existence of the latter entails the continued existence of present-day thinking. In other words, the unchecked development of the capitalist system fosters the unchecked growth of abstract thinking (or forces it to become bogged down in a false concreteness). The more abstractness consolidates itself, however, the more man is left behind, *ungoverned* by reason. If his thought midway takes a detour into the abstract, thereby preventing the true contents of knowledge from breaking through, man will once again be rendered subject to the forces of nature. Instead of suppressing these forces, this thinking that has lost its way provokes their rebellion itself by disregarding the very reason that alone could confront such forces and make them submit. It is merely a consequence of the unhampered expansion

of capitalism's power that the dark forces of nature continue to rebel ever more threateningly, thereby preventing the advent of the man of reason.

5

Like abstractness, the *mass ornament* is ambivalent. On the one hand its rationality reduces the natural in a manner that does not allow man to wither away, but that, on the contrary, were it only carried through to the end, would reveal man's most essential element in all its purity. Precisely because the bearer of the ornament does not appear as a total personality—that is, as a harmonious union of nature and "spirit" in which the former is emphasized too much and the latter too little—he becomes transparent to the man determined by reason. The human figure enlisted in the mass ornament has begun the *exodus* from lush organic splendor and the constitution of individuality toward the realm of anonymity to which it relinquishes itself when it stands in truth and when the knowledge radiating from the basis of man dissolves the contours of visible natural form. In the mass ornament nature is deprived of its substance, and it is just this that points to a condition in which the only elements of nature capable of surviving are those that do not resist illumination through reason. Thus, in old Chinese landscape paintings the trees, ponds, and mountains are rendered only as sparse ornamental signs drawn in ink. The organic center has been removed and the remaining unconnected parts are composed according to laws that are not those of nature but laws given by a knowledge of truth, which, as always, is a function of its time. Similarly, it is only remnants of the complex of man that enter into the mass ornament. They are selected and combined in the aesthetic medium according to a principle which represents form-bursting reason in a purer way than those other principles that preserve man as an organic unity.

Viewed from the perspective of reason, the mass ornament reveals itself as a *mythological cult* that is masquerading in the garb of abstraction. Compared to the concrete immediacy of other corporeal presentations, the ornament's conformity to reason is thus an illusion. In

reality the ornament is the crass manifestation of inferior nature. The latter can flourish all the more freely, the more decisively capitalist *Ratio* is cut off from reason and bypasses man as it vanishes into the void of the abstract. In spite of the rationality of the mass pattern, such patterns simultaneously give rise to the natural in its impenetrability. Certainly man as an organic being has disappeared from these ornaments, but that does not suffice to bring man's basis to the fore; on the contrary, the remaining little mass particle cuts itself off from this basis just as any general formal concept does. Admittedly, it is the legs of the Tiller Girls that swing in perfect parallel, not the natural unity of their bodies, and it is also true that the thousands of people in the stadium form one single star. But this star does not shine, and the legs of the Tiller Girls are an abstract designation of their bodies. Reason speaks wherever it disintegrates the organic unity and rips open the natural surface (no matter how cultivated the latter may be); it dissects the human form here only so that the undistorted truth can fashion man anew. But reason has not penetrated the mass ornament; its patterns are *mute*. The *Ratio* that gives rise to the ornament is strong enough to invoke the mass and to expunge all life from the figures constituting it. It is too weak to find the human beings within the mass and to render the figures in the ornament transparent to knowledge. Because this *Ratio* flees from reason and takes refuge in the abstract, uncontrolled nature proliferates under the guise of rational expression and uses abstract signs to display itself. It can no longer transform itself into powerful symbolic forms, as it could among primitive peoples and in the era of religious cults. This power of a language of signs has withdrawn from the mass ornament under the influence of the same rationality that keeps its muteness from bursting open. Thus, bare nature manifests itself in the mass ornament—the very nature that also resists the expression and apprehension of its own meaning. It is the *rational and empty form* of the cult, devoid of any explicit meaning, that appears in the mass ornament. As such, it proves to be a relapse into mythology of an order so great that one can hardly imagine its being exceeded, a relapse which, in turn, again betrays the degree to which capitalist *Ratio* is closed off from reason.

The role that the mass ornament plays in *social life* confirms that

it is the spurious progeny of bare nature. The intellectually privileged who, while unwilling to recognize it, are an appendage of the prevailing economic system have not even perceived the mass ornament as a sign of this system. They disavow the phenomenon in order to continue seeking edification at art events that have remained untouched by the reality present in the stadium patterns. The masses who so spontaneously adopted these patterns are superior to their detractors among the educated class to the extent that they at least roughly acknowledge the undisguised facts. The same rationality that controls the bearers of the patterns in real life also governs their submersion in the corporeal, allowing them thereby to immortalize current reality. These days, there is not only *one* Walter Stolzinger singing prize songs that glorify body culture.³ It is easy to see through the ideology of such songs, even if the term "body culture" does indeed justifiably combine two words that belong together by virtue of their respective meanings. The unlimited importance ascribed to the physical cannot be derived from the limited value it deserves. Such importance can be explained only by the alliance that organized physical education maintains with the establishment, in some cases unbeknownst to its front-line supporters. Physical training expropriates people's energy, while the production and mindless consumption of the ornamental patterns divert them from the imperative to change the reigning order. Reason can gain entrance only with difficulty when the masses it ought to pervade yield to sensations afforded by the godless mythological cult. The latter's social meaning is equivalent to that of the Roman *circus games*, which were sponsored by those in power.

6

Among the various attempts to reach a higher sphere, many have been willing to relinquish once again the rationality and level of reality attained by the mass ornament. The bodily exertions in the field of *rhythmic gymnastics*, for example, have aims that go beyond those of personal hygiene—namely, the expression of spruced-up states of the soul—to which instructors of body culture often add world views. These

practices, whose impossible aesthetics can be ignored entirely, seek to recapture just what the mass ornament had happily left behind: the organic connection of nature with something the all too modest temperament takes to be soul or spirit—that is, exalting the body by assigning it meanings which emanate from it and may indeed be spiritual but which do not contain the slightest trace of reason. Whereas the mass ornament presents mute nature without any superstructure whatsoever, rhythmic gymnastics, according to its own account, goes further and expropriates the higher mythological levels, thereby strengthening nature's dominance all the more. It is just one example among many other equally hopeless attempts to reach a higher life from out of mass existence. Most of these depend in a genuinely romantic way on forms and contents that have long since succumbed to the somewhat justified critique of capitalist *Ratio*. In their desire to once again give man a link to nature that is more solid than the one he has today, they discover the connection to the higher sphere, not by appealing to a still unrealized reason in this world but by retreating into mythological structures of meaning. Their fate is *irreality*, for when even a glimmer of reason shines through at some point in the world, even the most sublime entity that tries to shield itself from it must perish. Enterprises that ignore our historical context and attempt to reconstruct a form of state, a community, a mode of artistic creation that depends upon a type of man who has already been impugned by contemporary thinking—a type of man who by all rights no longer exists—such enterprises do not transcend the mass ornament's empty and superficial shallowness but flee from its reality. The process leads directly through the center of the mass ornament, not away from it. It can move forward only when thinking circumscribes nature and produces man as he is constituted by reason. Then society will change. Then, too, the mass ornament will fade away and human life itself will adopt the traits of that ornament into which it develops, through its confrontation with truth, in fairy tales.

The Hotel Lobby

The community of the higher realms that is fixated upon God is secure in the knowledge that as an oriented community—both in time and for all eternity—it lives within the law and beyond the law, occupying the perpetually untenable middle ground between the natural and the supernatural. It not only presents itself in this paradoxical situation but also experiences and names it as well. In spheres of lesser reality, consciousness of existence and of the authentic conditions dwindles away in the existential stream, and clouded sense becomes lost in the labyrinth of distorted events whose distortion it no longer perceives.

The *aesthetic* rendering of such a life bereft of reality, a life that has lost the power of self-observation, may be able to restore to it a sort of language; for even if the artist does not force all that has become mute and illusory directly up into reality, he does express his directed self by giving form to this life. The more life is submerged, the more it needs the artwork, which unseals its withdrawnness and puts its pieces back in place in such a way that these, which were lying strewn about, become organized in a meaningful way. The unity of the aesthetic construct, the manner in which it distributes the emphases and consolidates the event, gives a voice to the inexpressive world, gives meaning to the themes broached within it. Just what these themes mean, however, must still be brought out through translation and depends to no small extent on the level of reality evinced by their creator. Thus, while in the higher spheres the artist confirms a reality that grasps itself, in the lower regions his work becomes a harbinger of a manifold that utterly lacks any revelatory word. His tasks multiply in proportion to the world's loss

of reality, and the cocoon-like spirit [*Geist*] that lacks access to reality ultimately imposes upon him the role of educator, of the observer who not only sees but also prophetically foresees and makes connections. Although this overloading of the aesthetic may well accord the artist a mistaken position, it is understandable, because the life that remains untouched by authentic things recognizes that it has been captured in the mirror of the artistic construct, and thereby gains consciousness, albeit negative, of its distance from reality and of its illusory status. For no matter how insignificant the existential power that gives rise to the artistic formation may be, it always infuses the muddled material with intentions that help it become transparent.

Without being an artwork, the *detective novel* still shows civilized society its own face in a purer way than society is usually accustomed to seeing it. In the detective novel, proponents of that society and their functions give an account of themselves and divulge their hidden significance. But the detective novel can coerce the self-shrouding world into revealing itself in this manner only because it is created by a consciousness that is not circumscribed by that world. Sustained by this consciousness, the detective novel really thinks through to the end the society dominated by autonomous *Ratio*—a society that exists only as a concept—and develops the initial moments it proposes in such a way that the idea is fully realized in actions and figures. Once the stylization of the one-dimensional unreality has been completed, the detective novel integrates the individual elements—now adequate to the constitutive presuppositions—into a self-contained coherence of meaning, an integration it effects through the power of its existentiality, the latter transformed not into critique and exigency but into principles of aesthetic composition. It is only this entwinement into a unity that really makes possible the interpretation of the presented findings. For, like the philosophical system, the aesthetic organism aims at a totality that remains veiled to the proponents of civilized society, a totality that in some way disfigures the entirety of experienced reality and thereby enables one to see it afresh. Thus, the true meaning of these findings can be found only in the way in which they combine into an aesthetic totality. This is the minimum achievement of the artistic entity: to

construct a whole out of the blindly scattered elements of a disintegrated world—a whole that, even if it seems only to mirror this world, nevertheless does capture it in its wholeness and thereby allows for the projection of its elements onto real conditions. The fact that the structure of the life presented in the detective novel is so typical indicates that the consciousness producing it is not an individual, coincidental one; at the same time, it shows that what has been singled out are the seemingly metaphysical characteristics. Just as the detective discovers the secret that people have concealed, the detective novel discloses in the aesthetic medium the secret of a society bereft of reality, as well as the secret of its insubstantial marionettes. The composition of the detective novel transforms an ungraspable life into a translatable analogue of actual reality.

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In the *house of God*, which presupposes an already extant community, the congregation accomplishes the task of making connections. Once the members of the congregation have abandoned the relation on which the place is founded, the house of God retains only a decorative significance. Even if it sinks into oblivion, civilized society at the height of its development still maintains privileged sites that testify to its own nonexistence, just as the house of God testifies to the existence of the community united in reality. Admittedly society is unaware of this, for it cannot see beyond its own sphere; only the aesthetic construct, whose form renders the manifold as a projection, makes it possible to demonstrate this correspondence. The typical characteristics of the *hotel lobby*, which appears repeatedly in detective novels, indicate that it is conceived as the inverted image of the house of God. It is a negative church, and can be transformed into a church so long as one observes the conditions that govern the different spheres.

In both places people appear there as *guests*. But whereas the house of God is dedicated to the service of the one whom people have gone there to encounter, the hotel lobby accommodates all who go there to meet no one. It is the setting for those who neither seek nor find the one who is always sought, and who are therefore guests in space as such—a space that encompasses them and has no function other than to encom-

pass them. The impersonal nothing represented by the hotel manager here occupies the position of the unknown one in whose name the church congregation gathers. And whereas the congregation invokes the name and dedicates itself to the service in order to fulfill the relation, the people dispersed in the lobby accept their host's incognito without question. Lacking any and all relation, they drip down into the vacuum with the same necessity that compels those striving in and for reality to lift themselves out of the nowhere toward their destination.

The congregation, which gathers in the house of God for prayer and worship, outgrows the imperfection of communal life in order not to overcome it but to bear it in mind and to reinsert it constantly into the tension. Its gathering is a *collectedness* and a unification of this directed life of the community, which belongs to two realms: the realm covered by law and the realm beyond law. At the site of the church—but of course not only here—these separate currents encounter each other; the law is broached here without being breached, and the paradoxical split is accorded legitimacy by the sporadic suspension of its languid continuity. Through the edification of the congregation, the community is always reconstructing itself, and this elevation above the everyday prevents the everyday itself from going under. The fact that such a returning of the community to its point of origin must submit to spatial and temporal limitations, that it steers away from worldly community, and that it is brought about through special celebrations—this is only a sign of man's dubious position between above and below, one that constantly forces him to establish on his own what is given or what has been conquered in the tension.

Since the determining characteristic of the lower region is its lack of tension, the togetherness in the hotel lobby has no meaning. While here, too, people certainly do become detached from everyday life, this detachment does not lead the community to assure itself of its existence as a congregation. Instead it merely displaces people from the unreality of the daily hustle and bustle to a place where they would encounter the void only if they were more than just reference points. The lobby,' in which people find themselves *vis-a-vis de rien*² is a mere gap that does not even serve a purpose dictated by *Ratio* (like the conference room of

a corporation), a purpose which at the very least could mask the directive that had been perceived in the relation. But if a sojourn in a hotel offers neither a perspective on nor an escape from the everyday, it does provide a groundless distance from it which can be exploited, if at all, *aesthetically*—the aesthetic being understood here as a category of the nonexistent type of person, the residue of that positive aesthetic which makes it possible to put this nonexistence into relief in the detective novel. The person sitting around idly is overcome by a disinterested satisfaction in the contemplation of a world creating itself, whose purposiveness is felt without being associated with any representation of a purpose. The Kantian definition of the beautiful is instantiated here in a way that takes seriously its isolation of the aesthetic and its lack of content. For in the emptied-out individuals of the detective novel—who, as rationally constructed complexes, are comparable to the transcendental subject—the aesthetic faculty is indeed detached from the existential stream of the total person. It is reduced to an unreal, purely formal relation that manifests the same indifference to the self as it does to matter. Kant himself was able to overlook this horrible last-minute sprint of the transcendental subject, since he still believed there was a seamless transition from the transcendental to the preformed subject-object world. The fact that he does not completely give up the total person even in the aesthetic realm is confirmed by his definition of the "sublime," which takes the ethical into account and thereby attempts to reassemble the remaining pieces of the fractured whole. In the hotel lobby, admittedly, the aesthetic—lacking all qualities of sublimity—is presented without any regard for these upward-striving intentions, and the formula *purposiveness without purpose* also exhausts its content. Just as the lobby is the space that does not refer beyond itself, the aesthetic condition corresponding to it constitutes itself as its own limit. It is forbidden to go beyond this limit, so long as the tension that would propel the breakthrough is repressed and the marionettes of *Ratio*—who are not human beings—isolate themselves from their bustling activity. But the aesthetic that has become an end in itself pulls up its own roots; it obscures the higher level toward which it should refer and signifies only its own emptiness, which, according to the literal meaning of the

Kantian definition, is a mere relation of faculties. It rises above a meaningless formal harmony only when it is in the service of something, when instead of making claims to autonomy it inserts itself into the tension that does not concern it in particular. If human beings orient themselves beyond the form, then a kind of beauty may also mature that is a fulfilled beauty, because it is the consequence and not the aim—but where beauty is chosen as an aim without further consequences, all that remains is its empty shell. Both the hotel lobby and the house of God respond to the aesthetic sense that articulates its legitimate demands in them. But whereas in the latter the beautiful employs a language with which it also testifies against itself, in the former it is involuted in its muteness, incapable of finding the other. In tasteful lounge chairs a civilization intent on rationalization comes to an end, whereas the decorations of the church pews are born from the tension that accords them a revelatory meaning. As a result, the chorales that are the expression of the divine service turn into medleys whose strains encourage pure triviality, and devotion congeals into erotic desire that roams about without an object.

The *equality* of those who pray is likewise reflected in distorted form in the hotel lobby. When a congregation forms, the differences between people disappear, because these beings all have one and the same destiny, arid because, in the encounter with the spirit that determines this destiny, anything that does not determine that spirit simply ceases to exist—namely, the limit of necessity, posited by man, and the separation, which is the work of nature. The provisional status of communal life is experienced as such in the house of God, and so the sinner enters into the "we" in the same way as does the upright person whose assurance is here disturbed. This—the fact that everything human is oriented toward its own contingency—is what creates the equality of the contingent. The great pales next to the small, and good and evil remain suspended when the congregation relates itself to that which no scale can measure. Such a relativization of qualities does not lead to their confusion but instead elevates them to the status of reality, since the relation to the last things demands that the penultimate things be convulsed without being destroyed. This equality is positive and essential,

not a reduction and foreground; it is the fulfillment of what has been differentiated, which must renounce its independent singular existence in order to save what is most singular. This singularity is awaited and sought in the house of God. Relegated to the shadows so long as merely human limits are imposed, it throws its own shadow over those distinctions when man approaches the absolute limit.

In the hotel lobby, equality is based not on a relation to God but on a relation to the nothing. Here, in the space of unrelatedness, the change of environments does not leave purposive activity behind, but brackets it for the sake of a freedom that can refer only to itself and therefore sinks into relaxation and indifference. In the house of God, human differences diminish in the face of their provisionality, exposed by a seriousness that dissipates the certainty of all that is definitive. By contrast, an aimless lounging, to which no call is addressed, leads to the mere play that elevates the unserious everyday to the level of the serious. Simmel's definition of society as a "play form of sociation" is entirely legitimate, but does not get beyond mere description. What is presented in the hotel lobby is the formal similarity of the figures, an equivalence that signifies not fulfillment but evacuation. Removed from the hustle and bustle, one does gain some distance from the distinctions of "actual" life, but without being subjected to a new determination that would circumscribe from above the sphere of validity for these determinations. And it is in this way that a person can vanish into an undetermined void, helplessly reduced to a "member of society as such" who stands superfluously off to the side and, when playing, intoxicates himself. This invalidation of togetherness, itself already unreal, thus does not lead up toward reality but is more of a sliding down into the doubly unreal mixture of the undifferentiated atoms from which the world of appearance is constructed. Whereas in the house of God a creature emerges which sees itself as a supporter of the community, in the hotel lobby what emerges is the inessential foundation at the basis of rational socialization. It approaches the nothing and takes shape by analogy with the abstract and formal *universal concepts* through which thinking that has escaped from the tension believes it can grasp the world. These abstractions are inverted images of the universal concepts conceived within the

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relation; they rob the ungraspable given of its possible content, instead of raising it to the level of reality by relating it to the higher determinations. They are irrelevant to the oriented and total person who, the world in hand, meets them halfway; rather, they are posited by the transcendental subject, which allows them to become part of the powerlessness into which that transcendental subject degenerates as a result of its claim to be creator of the world. Even if free-floating *Ratio*—dimly aware of its limitation—does acknowledge the concepts of God, freedom, and immortality, what it discovers are not the homonymic existential concepts, and the categorical imperative is surely no substitute for a commandment that arises out of an ethical resolution. Nevertheless, the weaving of these concepts into a system confirms that people do not want to abandon the reality that has been lost; yet, of course, they will not get hold of it precisely because they are seeking it by means of a kind of thinking which has repudiated all attachment to that reality. The desolation of *Ratio* is complete only when it removes its mask and hurls itself into the void of random abstractions that no longer mimic higher determinations, and when it renounces seductive consonances and desires itself even as a concept. The only immediacy it then retains is the now openly acknowledged nothing, in which, grasping upward from below, it tries to ground the reality to which it no longer has access. Just as God becomes, for the person situated in the tension, the beginning and end of all creation, so too does the intellect that has become totally self-absorbed create the appearance of a plenitude of figures from zero. It thinks it can wrench the world from this meaningless universal, which is situated closest to that zero and distinguishes itself from it only to the extent necessary in order to deduct a something. But the world is world only when it is interpreted by a universal that has been really experienced. The intellect reduces the relations that permeate the manifold to the common denominator of the concept of energy, which is separated merely by a thin layer from the zero. Or it robs historical events of their paradoxical nature and, having leveled them out, grasps them as progress in one-dimensional time. Or, seemingly betraying itself, it elevates irrational "life" to the dignified status of an entity in order to recover itself, in its delimitation, from the now

liberated residue of the totality of human being, and in order to traverse the realms across their entire expanse. If one takes as one's basis these extreme reductions of the real, then (as Simmel's philosophy of life confirms) one can obtain a distorted image of the discoveries made in the upper spheres—an image that is no less comprehensive than the one provided by the insistence of the words "God" and "spirit." But even less ambiguously than the abusive employment of categories that have become incomprehensible, it is the deployment of empty abstractions that announces the actual position of a thinking that has slipped out of the tension. The visitors in the hotel lobby, who allow the individual to disappear behind the peripheral equality of social masks, correspond to the exhausted terms that coerce differences out of the uniformity of the zero. Here, the visitors suspend the undetermined special being—which, in the house of God, gives way to that invisible equality of beings standing before God (out of which it both renews and determines itself)—by devolving into tuxedos. And the triviality of their conversation, haphazardly aimed at utterly insignificant objects so that one might encounter oneself in their exteriority, is only the obverse of prayer, directing downward what they idly circumvent.

The observance of *silence*, no less obligatory in the hotel lobby than in the house of God, indicates that in both places people consider themselves essentially as equals. In "Death in Venice" Thomas Mann formulates this as follows: "A solemn stillness reigned in the room, of the sort that is the pride of all large hotels. The attentive waiters moved about on noiseless feet. A rattling of the tea service, a half-whispered word was all that one could hear." The contentless solemnity of this conventionally imposed silence does not arise out of mutual courtesy, of the sort one encounters everywhere, but rather serves to eliminate differences. It is a silence that abstracts from the differentiating word and compels one downward into the equality of the encounter with the nothing, an equality that a voice resounding through space would disturb. In the house of God, by contrast, silence signifies the individual collecting himself as firmly directed self, and the word addressed to human beings is effaced solely in order to release another word, which, whether uttered or not, sits in judgment over human beings.

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Since what counts here is not the dialogue of those who speak, the members of the congregation are anonymous. They outgrow their names because the very empirical being which these names designate disappears in prayer; thus, they do not know one another as particular beings whose multiply determined existences enmesh them in the world. If the proper name reveals its bearer, it also separates him from those whose names have been called; it simultaneously discloses and obscures, and it is with good reason that lovers want to destroy it, as if it were the final wall separating them. It is only the relinquishing of the name—which abolishes the semisolidarity of the intermediate spheres—that allows for the extensive solidarity of those who step out of the bright obscurity of reciprocal contact and into the night and the light of the higher mystery. Now that they do not know who the person closest to them is, their neighbor becomes the closest, for out of his disintegrating appearance arises a creation whose traits are also theirs. It is true that only those who stand before God are sufficiently estranged from one another to discover they are brothers; only they are exposed to such an extent that they can love one another without knowing one another and without using names. At the limit of the human they rid themselves of their naming, so that the word might be bestowed upon them—a word that strikes them more directly than any human law. And in the seclusion to which such a relativization of form generally pushes them, they inquire about their form. Having been initiated into the mystery that provides the name, and having become transparent to one another in their relation to God, they enter into the "we" signifying a commonality of creatures that suspends and grounds all those distinctions and associations adhering to the proper name.

This limit case "we" of those who have dispossessed themselves of themselves—a "we" that is realized vicariously in the house of God due to human limitations—is transformed in the hotel lobby into the isolation of anonymous atoms. Here profession is detached from the person and the name gets lost in the space, since only the still unnamed crowd can serve *Ratio* as a point of attack. It reduces to the level of the nothing—out of which it wants to produce the world—even those pseudo-individuals it has deprived of individuality, since their ano-

nymity no longer serves any purpose other than meaningless movement along the paths of convention. But if the meaning of this anonymity becomes nothing more than the representation of the insignificance of (his beginning, the depiction of formal regularities, then it does not foster the solidarity of those liberated from the constraints of the name; instead, it deprives those encountering one another of the possibility of association that the name could have offered them. Remnants of individuals slip into the nirvana of relaxation, faces disappear behind newspapers, and the artificial continuous light illuminates nothing but mannequins. It is the coming and going of unfamiliar people who have become empty forms because they have lost their password, and who now file by as ungraspable flat ghosts. If they possessed an interior, it would have no windows at all, and they would perish aware of their endless abandonment, instead of knowing of their homeland as the congregation does. But as pure exterior, they escape themselves and express their nonbeing through the false aesthetic affirmation of the estrangement that has been installed between them. The presentation of the surface strikes them as an attraction; the tinge of exoticism gives them a pleasurable shudder. Indeed, in order to confirm the distance whose definitive character attracts them, they allow themselves to be bounced off a proximity that they themselves have conjured up: their monological fantasy attaches designations to the masks, designations that use the person facing them as a toy. And the fleeting exchange of glances which creates the possibility of exchange is acknowledged only because the illusion of that possibility confirms the reality of the distance. Just as in the house of God, here too namelessness unveils the meaning of naming; but whereas in the house of God it is an awaiting within the tension that reveals the preliminariness of names, in the hotel lobby it is a retreat into the unquestioned groundlessness that the intellect transforms into the names' site of origin. But where the call that unifies into the "we" is not heard, those that have fled the form are irrevocably isolated.

In the congregation the entire community comes into being, for the immediate relation to the suprallegal *mystery* inaugurates the paradox of (he law that can be suspended in the actuality of the relation to God.

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That law is a penultimate term that withdraws when the connection occurs that humbles the self-assured and comforts those in danger. The tensionless people in the hotel lobby also represent the entire society, but not because transcendence here raises them up to its level; rather, this is because the hustle and bustle of immanence is still hidden. Instead of guiding people beyond themselves, the mystery slips between the masks; instead of penetrating the shells of the human, it is the veil that surrounds everything human; instead of confronting man with the question of the provisional, it paralyzes the questioning that gives access to the realm of provisionality. In his ail-too contemplative detective novel *Der Tod kehrt im Hotel ein* (Death Enters the Hotel), Sven Elvestad writes: "Once again it is confirmed that a large hotel is a world unto itself and that this world is like the rest of the large world. The guests here roam about in their light-hearted, careless summer existence without suspecting anything of the strange mysteries circulating among them." "Strange mysteries": the phrase is ironically ambiguous. On the one hand, it refers quite generally to the disguised quality of lived existence as such; on the other, it refers to the higher mystery that finds distorted expression in the illegal activities that threaten safety. The clandestine character of all legal and illegal activities—to which the expression initially and immediately refers—indicates that in the hotel lobby the pseudo-life that is unfolding in pure immanence is being pushed back toward its undifferentiated origin. Were the mystery to come out of its shell, mere possibility would disappear in the fact: by detaching the illegal from the nothing, the Something would have appeared. The hotel management therefore thoughtfully conceals from its guests the real events which could put an end to the false aesthetic situation shrouding that nothing. Just as the formerly experienced higher mystery pushes those oriented toward it across the midpoint, whose limit is defined by the law, so does the mystery—which is the distortion of the higher ground and as such the utmost abstraction of the dangers that disrupt immanent life—relegate one to the lapsed neutrality of the meaningless beginning from which the pseudo-middle arises. It hinders the outbreak of differentiations in the service of emancipated *Ratio*, which strengthens its victory over the Something in the

hotel lobby by helping the conventions take the upper hand. These are so worn out that the activity taking place in their name is at the same time an activity of dissimulation—an activity that serves as protection for legal life just as much as for illegal life, because as the empty form of all possible societies it is not oriented toward any particular thing but remains content with itself in its insignificance.