

Hotels: On F.W. Murnau's »Der letzte Mann«

Murnaus film *Der Letzte Mann*¹ is usually read as a story about the anonymity, callousness, and superficiality of modern life. The protagonist, a hotel porter, takes great pride in his work and is diligent. Everyday he goes home from the hotel to his *Hinterhof* community, where he seems rooted and respected. That is, until one day he is deemed unfit to continue his job. One quick turn of the revolving doors and he is replaced, thus emphasizing his expendability. Seen in this light, the protagonist becomes »homeless« through the loss of his job and the subsequent alienation from his home community – a victim of modernity.

Another, and I would claim, more compelling reading is to see the protagonist as »homeless« from the very beginning. In order to explore this reading, we must first take a closer look at the relationship between homelessness and modernity. More specifically, we should examine the space of the hotel as one in which this relationship is enacted. During the 1920's and 30's, hotels became established as symbols of urban modernity in both Europe and the United States: »Hotels came to resemble cities in microcosm (...) The hotel was not just an airbrushed city; it also sold the city outside, the dirty city, a distinctly cosmopolitan self-image (...) The glamour that suffused these structures was derived from the fact that their patrons consumed a modern or »smart« view of metropolitan environment both disconnected and linked to the city the hotel served (...) grand hotels were often conceived as civic showcases meant to put the city on the larger map as economically and culturally viable.«²

Hotels are sites of wealth, glamour, spectacle and travel. They are often »civic showcases« into which we project our ideal city. Examining hotels and our attitudes towards them tells us much about the ways we view society and ourselves.

Siegfried Kracauer provides us with a less positive view of hotels, and consequently society, of the 1920's from the one given above. For Kracauer, modernity is defined by its transitory and rootless nature. In his essay *Die Hotelhalle*, written around the same time as Murnau's film was made, Kracauer compares and contrasts the hotel lobby to the space of the church. In a church, the »guests« are brought together by a common destiny that allows them to negotiate the tension between the irreality of our experienced world and the reality of the spiritual world. The hotel lobby, however, lacks this tension and the only thing connecting

the guests is emptiness and apathy towards any effort to seek what is beyond our experienced reality. In fact, the hotel does not even concern itself much with the outside world, thus exacerbating what Kracauer sees as the emptiness and transitory nature of modernity. In his view, the hotel lobby symbolizes the final consequence of a rationalized society, a sort of hyper-modernity. In a larger sense, however, Kracauer claims that the modern inability to desire the »real« relegates us all to the position of hotel guests, aimlessly entering and leaving the hotel lobby in a permanent state of »homelessness«.

It is not that Kracauer denies the glamour and spectacle of the hotel, but rather that he sees them as products of the lack of tension between our perceived reality and »true« reality. Kracauer's homelessness is the inability to recognize this tension, the inability to experience any sort of transcendence. Glamour and spectacle help constitute the surface of appearances that only partially hides the emptiness lurking underneath:

»Der Beruf löst sich hier ab von der Figur, und der Name geht unter im Raum, da nur die noch unbenannte Menge der ratio als Angriffspunkt dienen kann. In das Nichts, aus dem sie die Welt produzieren möchte, drückt sie auch die von ihr entindividualisierten Scheinindividuen herab, deren Inkognito keinen anderen Zweck mehr verfolgt als die bedeutungslose Bewegung in den Bahnen der Konvention.«³

This meaningless surface of appearances is illustrated in the film. The protagonist and his job as a porter are not connected in the eyes of the management or the guests. No one in the hotel really notices when he is replaced; there is no disruption in the hotel's ability to function smoothly. The workers in the hotel are playing the roles of their occupations. *Der Letzte Mann* emphasizes the performance aspect of the protagonist's work at the beginning of the film in a close-up of him caressing his moustache in a hand-held mirror. The protagonist is often shot from a slightly low side angle that emphasizes his inflated chest and hyper-erect posture. By exaggerating the angle, the camera suggests an ironic and critical attitude towards his performance.

The protagonist is by no means a hotel guest in the literal sense. Yet his world is influenced and in many ways shaped by his interpretation of the hotel with all of its privilege and glamour, and this interpretation has everything to do with his perception of the glamour of the physical hotel. He navigates the spaces of and between the literal hotel and the emptiness of the metaphorical one. Here we return to the protagonist's »homelessness«.

By seeing the protagonist in light of Kracauer, the relationship between the hotel and the space of the protagonist's home changes. The role the protagonist plays does not stop when he leaves the hotel: he continues to wear his uniform on his way home and places an inordinate amount of importance on being recognized in it. As he walks in through the lighted entrance to the *Hinterhof*, the white stripes and metal buttons of his jacket provide a striking contrast to the rest of his uniform, differentiating him from the drabness of his neighbors who are standing in

the dimly lighted courtyard. He salutes them and they »play« along, saluting him back. His uniform is displayed to the others in the community in the morning as his daughter cleans it. Even away from the hotel, his identity is dependent on his uniform. By bringing the hotel with him to the *Hinterhof*, he becomes one of Kracauer's guests, complacent in the irreality of the world and apathetic towards searching for what is beyond the surface, namely the »real«.

On some level, the protagonist is aware of the performative aspect of his identity. After celebrating his daughter's wedding, the protagonist has a drunken vision. As he hallucinates, the spaces of the hotel and the *Hinterhof* conflate and the protagonist literally performs in front of the hotel guests, the inhabitants of his building, and the workers in the hotel. He proves his strength to them all by easily lifting a heavy piece of luggage as the others watch and applaud. When he struggles with the luggage in front of the hotel, the camera is at a high angle to emphasize the protagonist's helplessness and the overwhelming nature of the task. In contrast, this scene is shot from the back at eye-level, reminiscent of the scenes with his virile replacement, thus focusing on the protagonist's strength. His one desperate desire is to prove his worthiness to continue his role as a porter and he realizes that his performance is for those in the *Hinterhof* as well as those in the hotel. A life without this role is unimaginable for him. His entire body language changes when the uniform is taken away from him – he no longer cares about his posture, his moustache, or hiding the ailments of old age. The effect of his body language is reinforced by the camera focusing on his shamed hunched back rather than his proud inflated chest.

This utter dependence on the protagonist's role as a porter simultaneously supports and complicates Kracauer's views on modernity. Kracauer discusses the relationship between the hotel guests and their appearances:

»Als bloßes Außen aber entschwinden sie sich selber und drücken ihr Nichtsein durch die schlecht-ästhetische Bejahung der zwischen ihnen gesetzten Fremde aus. Die Darbietung der Oberfläche ist ihnen ein Reiz, der Hauch des Exotischen durchfröstelt sie angenehm.«⁴

In order to avoid confronting the emptiness of their existence, Kracauer's hotel guests take on the masks of various roles they can play. The pleasure aspect of this role-playing is not to be underestimated; it is central to the continuing apathy towards one's lack of an interior. It can be seen in Murnau's film in the great care that both the workers in the hotel and the guests take in playing their roles correctly.

With the use of words such as »Reiz« and »angenehm durchfröstelt« Kracauer's description implies that these roles are merely for one's entertainment, and can be put on and discarded at will. Yet as can be seen by the protagonist, there is the element of pleasure in role-playing, but little of this playful nonchalance. He cannot simply move on to a new role when he loses his job as porter. The reason for this inability has to do with the fact that the players are not as devoid of individuality as Kracauer might lead us to believe. Or perhaps more aptly put, from the outside perspective the role and the player are unrelated (»Der Beruf löst sich hier ab von der

Figur...«) which is why the protagonist can be replaced so easily. This is not the case from the perspective of the protagonist himself. He may not have been able to choose his role, but he chooses how he carries it out. Within the hotel he plays his role much as is expected of him, and is rewarded by the fact that neither the management nor the guests pay all too much attention to him. It is his behavior outside of the hotel in which he simultaneously reinforces and attempts to redefine the role he is to play: He is not asked to wear his uniform home. He is not forced to parade home nor to put on military airs with his erect posture and saluting. Once the protagonist has left the confines of the hotel in which he has little freedom in defining his role, he can create a new one for himself that borrows from the glamour of the hotel, but is very much his own creation. Since he needs a space in which to »perform« this role, the *Hinterhof* plays a crucial role in his identity. The hotel and the *Hinterhof* are, however, inextricably linked. As can be seen through the course of the film, the protagonist's inability to keep the two spaces separate has profound consequences in terms of his identity and »homelessness«.

My further exploration of the protagonist's »travelling« in / through / between / the *Hinterhof* and hotel will take three directions. The first is a more in-depth examination of the points that I have outlined above, particularly the protagonist's limited agency in negotiating the two spaces and how this effects his »homelessness« in Kracauer's sense of the word. The second direction is to place the hotel and *Hinterhof* in the context of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*. Just as it is impossible to speak of which space is »really« the protagonist's »home«, one cannot simply say that the *Hinterhof* represents *Gemeinschaft* and the hotel *Gesellschaft*. A closer look at the way the two spaces interact will help locate *Der Letzte Mann*, both in its socio-historical and philosophical context. Finally, I will examine how more recent contributions to discourses of displacement, in particular those of James Clifford⁵ and Karen Caplan⁶, can shed new light on homelessness as the »modern condition«.

Notes

¹ I am currently working on notions of homelessness within the context of space and identity during the Weimar period. My project will contribute to the Vienna BTW conference which explores spaces of modernity. BTW consists of members affiliated with the University of California at Berkeley, Universität Tübingen and Universität Wien working together towards an interdisciplinary understanding of various issues. My particular project focuses on F.W. Murnau's 1924 film *Der Letzte Mann* and Siegfried Kracauer's essay of the same time period, *Die Hotelhalle*. I will argue that a close look at the film complicates Kracauer's metaphysical definition of displacement and »homelessness.« An examination of the relationship between the spaces of the hotel and the *Hinterhof* in the film will help us understand the ways in which Kracauer's ideas on »homelessness« are negotiated.

- ² Marc Katz, *The Hotel Kracauer*, in: *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 11, n. 2 (1999), 134-152, esp. 137 seq.
- ³ Siegfried Kracauer, *Die Hotelhalle*, in: id., *Das Ornament der Masse*; Frankfurt am Main 1977, 157-186, esp. 167 seq.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 168.
- ⁵ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, Mass. 1997.
- ⁶ Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*, Durham 1996.