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Aggressive Reader and Submissive Spectator: A Revision of Self-Redescription

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ABSTRACT

Both Richard Rorty and Siegfried Kracauer considered the question of self-redemption in an ideologically shelterless age; both thinkers realized that the spontaneous state of daily life is beguiling and that one needs to break out from it; and both sought to break the bond between Being and Thought. For Kracauer, redemption came from the strangeness of concrete physical reality presented by films. For Rorty, redemption stood for the strangeness of imaginative self-redescription achieved by reading books. Based on the analysis of Rorty's aggressive book reader and of Kracauer's submissive movie spectator, this article aims to answer the question: how can Kracauer's redemption of physical reality contribute to Rorty's self-redescription? Self-redescription paradoxically sustains the abstractness it fights against. The ironist's flippant attitude toward language leads to the nonchalant and traumatic attitude toward life. Kracauer's from-bottom-to-top approach to the redemption of physical reality can benefit Rorty's self-redescription in three concrete ways: as a possible description, as a possible method, and as a possible attitude to life. The theological core of Kracauer's redemption of physical reality enlightens Rorty's ironist through the desubjectivized stance: to encounter existence in its purity, free of personal subjectivity, and thereby to find a de-anthropocentric world-view.

KEYWORDS

Richard Rorty; Siegfried Kracauer; redemption; self-redescription; physical reality

What thrilled me so deeply was an ordinary suburban street, filled with lights and shadows which transfigured it. Several trees stood about, and there was in the foreground a puddle reflecting invisible house facades and a piece of the sky. Then a breeze moved the shadows, and the facades with the sky below began to waver. The trembling upper world in the dirty puddle—this image has never left me.

—Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*

Those Who Doubt and Those Who Wait

In his book *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Siegfried Kracauer points out that we live among the “ruins of ancient beliefs” and that man “in our society is ideologically shelterless.”¹ Kracauer discerns “three kinds of behaviour that are by and large possible” to deal with the break with tradition. The first behaviour is “that of

someone who is a skeptic as a matter of principle." This sort of person "decides out of inner truthfulness to turn his back on the absolute: his inability to believe becomes an unwillingness to believe" (135). Kracauer gives us the example of sociologist Max Weber, who no longer wants to believe, but instead aspires to the further "disenchantment of the world" (219). We can add Richard Rorty to this category, the neo-pragmatism philosopher famous for radical self-doubt and self-redescription.

Both Kracauer and Rorty fight abstractness with concreteness. Both realize that the spontaneous state of daily life is beguiling and that one needs to break out from it. For Rorty, abstractness stands for "Heideggerian-Derridean critiques of metaphysics, or Marxist-Foucauldian critiques of capitalism or of 'power,'" so he advises that we should "stick to questions about what works for particular purposes."² For Kracauer, abstractness mainly comes from the abstractions of ideology, especially the abstractions of modern science, which have affected our mode of perception: "Whether we know it or not, our way of thinking and our whole attitude toward reality are conditioned by the principles from which science proceeds" (*TF*, 292). For Rorty, redemption from abstractness occurs via self-redescription, using creative imagination to expand one's final vocabulary and thus to be liberated from "something capitalized: Being, Truth, History, Absolute Knowledge, or the Will to Power" (*CIS*, 107). Although Rorty was forty-two years younger than Kracauer, Kracauer foresaw his ironist: from his perspective, the self-redescription is not the cure but the symptom of the psychological effect of "the crisis of liberalism": "a sense of drift and of drift without limits or direction" (*TF*, 290); "Spirits/intellects of this sort . . . exhaust themselves demonstrating all imaginable determinations and relations."³ What Kracauer recommends is the third attitude—those who wait:

By committing oneself to waiting, one neither blocks one's path toward faith (like those who defiantly affirm the void) nor besieges this faith (like those whose yearning is so strong, it makes them lose all restraint). One waits, and one's waiting is a hesitant openness, albeit of a sort that is difficult to explain.⁴

For Kracauer, redemption is via physical reality, "Nature in the raw" (*TF*, 6), "unstaged nature" (219), existence in its purity that is free of personal subjectivity. He repeatedly asserts that we cannot hope to embrace reality unless we penetrate to its deepest layers. Film, thanks to its photographic properties, has a specific ability to render physical reality visible:

Film, in other words, is uniquely equipped to record and reveal physical reality and, hence, gravitates toward it. Now there are different visible worlds. Take a stage performance or a painting: they too are real and can be perceived. But the only reality we are concerned with is actually existing physical reality—the transitory world we live in. (Physical reality will also be called "material reality," or "physical existence," or "actuality," or loosely just "nature." Another fitting term might be "camera-reality." (28)

This article aims to answer the question: how can Kracauer's redemption of physical reality contribute to Rorty's self-redescription?

Aggressive Reader and Submissive Spectator

The key point for Kracauer's redemption does not lie in the ability of films to reflect the objects, but their ability to reveal the strangeness of the objects, to defamiliarize: films

gravitate toward things that “stubbornly escape our attention in everyday life” (*TF*, 53) and “open up new, hitherto unsuspected dimensions of reality” (8). This inbuilt alienation effect suspends “every habitual relationship among the elements of nature.”⁵

Following Nietzsche, Rorty argues that we are simply clever animals whose primary need is to be made happier by the enlarging version of ourselves. As he writes in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, “The easiest way of doing that is to read books, and so ironists spend more of their time placing books than placing real live people” (80). Following Harold Bloom, Rorty thinks that only “reading fully establishes and augments an autonomous self” (“RE,” 243).⁶ Thus Rorty’s ironist has read more books and is “in a better position not to get trapped in the vocabulary of any single book” (80–81). What kind of books does Rorty refer to? They include “theology, philosophy, social theory, reformist political programs, and revolutionary manifestos,” “every book likely to provide candidates for a person’s final vocabulary” (81), and “every sort of book which might conceivably have a moral relevance” in the sense that it “might conceivably alter one’s sense of what is possible and important” (82). Among them, novels have the most redemptive power (107), for “the novel is the genre which gives us most help in grasping the variety of human life and the contingency of our own moral vocabulary” (“RE,” 249).

Surprisingly, Rorty does not mention movies at all. In his book *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, he only mentions “movie” once, and it is not for personal redemption, but for public “moral change and progress.”⁷ Rorty does not grant images any importance. This attitude can be seen in his rejection of Vladimir Nabokov’s view of images. Nabokov points out that “we realize that ‘goodness’ is something round and creamy, and beautifully flushed, something in a clean apron with warm bare arms that have nursed and comforted us,”⁸ because “everybody thinks in images and not in words.”⁹ Though Rorty admits that images are important, obviously he thinks words are more important:

I would argue that if you can’t use language, you can’t be conscious of inner images any more than of outer objects, ... Nabokov, of course, goes overboard when he claims that people without his special eidetic faculty lead simple and vulgar lives. There are lots of ways for a mind to be rich and interesting which do not involve imagery. (*CIS*, 154)

Rorty puts the above thoughts in footnotes, and these are his only elaboration about images. We may wonder why Rorty does not think movies or images constitute an alternative domain of potential freedom. Why does he completely ignore visual experience? I believe I have found the answer: because images are too stubborn and too solid for imaginative self-redescription.

Neo-pragmatism is first and foremost rhetorical. The ironist is someone who believes that “anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescriptioned” (*CIS*, 73), someone whose preferred slogans are “Everything is a social construction” and “All awareness is a linguistic affair.”¹⁰ Self-redescription is malleable and intellectual, while films are the opposite: as a medium of concrete experience, films (or at least, the raw footage of film) provide an incorruptible immediacy that avoids the mystifications of ideology or representation. As Gertrud Koch points out, Kracauer innately trusts that what is immune to redemption will dissipate when transformed into images; this assumption underlies his ontological notion of the visual, of the image as the “act of the redemption of physical reality.”¹¹ There is no difference between watching a film of a ball rolling down a hill and seeing an actual ball

rolling down a hill. There is no room for imagination in the visual realm of the concrete and immediate experience. By contrast, self-redescription requires a highly intellectual linguistic imagination: One concocted vocabulary relates to another, in the open, horizontal, and malleable linguistic universe. The key to understanding the distinction is Rorty's adherence to anti-representationalism: the linguistic practices should not be justified by what is represented; our thoughts and descriptions of things do not signify anything in nature, for "language is not a medium of representation. Rather, it is an exchange of marks and noises, carried out in order to achieve specific purposes. It cannot fail to represent accurately, for it never represents at all."¹²

For the ironist, truth and accuracy are not the goal; the goal is to use the existing literary work as a possible source to create descriptions that have not existed before. The ironist is a specialist in language and a strong misreader good at hermeneutical extravagances. In his autobiography, Rorty offers an explanation of how the self-transformation happens:

I have spent my life rummaging through libraries, hoping to be bowled over—transformed—by some fiercely imaginative, utterly original book. Exalted by one such book, I would then come upon another, hard to reconcile with the first. Then I would try to bridge the gap between them, to find ways of restating what was said in each so as to allow for what was said in the other, to do what Gadamer calls "fusing horizons."¹³

By appropriating what is appealing and dismissing what he feels not at home with, Rorty remodels his conversation partners "into a shape which will serve his own purpose."¹⁴ That is why "[Richard] Bernstein finds Rorty guilty of fabricating a Nietzscheanized James or a Wittgensteinian Derrida or a Heideggerianized Dewey."¹⁵

In contrast to the aggressive reader, the movie spectator, according to Kracauer, can at any moment fall into a trance-like state that involves "not so much his power of reasoning as his visceral faculties" (*TF*, 159). He experiences the process of self-loss and "finds himself in a situation in which he cannot ask questions and grope for answers unless he is saturated physiologically" (309):

Trance-like immersion in a shot or a succession of shots may at any moment yield to daydreaming which increasingly disengages itself from the imagery occasioning it. Whenever this happens, the dreaming spectator, who originally concentrated on the psychological correspondences of an image striking his imagination more or less imperceptibly, moves on from them to notions beyond the orbit of the image— notions so remote from what the image itself implies that there would be no meaning in counting them among its correspondences proper. (166)

Kracauer reiterates that film addresses its viewer as a "corporeal-material being"; as Miriam Hansen explains, it seizes the "human being with skin and hair": "The material elements that present themselves in film directly stimulate the material layers of the human being: his nerves, his senses, his entire physiological substance"; "The 'ego' of the human being assigned to film is subject to permanent dissolution, is incessantly exploded by material phenomena."¹⁶ As a consequence, the spectator relinquishes her volition, dissipates her subjectivity, surrenders herself to the immediacy of the screen, and becomes a subject of the discourse rather than a free creator of meanings.

Fight Abstractness with Abstractness

What we have, then, are two opposed images: Rorty's aggressive book reader and Kracauer's submissive movie spectator. The former is masculine and self-autonomous, while the latter is masochistic and self-abandoned. From Kracauer's representationalist viewpoint, Rorty's ironist uses raw/real-life material to compose her self-redescription, in which "the real-life material disappears" (*TF*, 300); this usurpation is "nothing but a plagiarism of nature" (6). We can find similar comments Kracauer makes on the art of film: it is "reactionary because it symbolizes wholeness and thus pretends to the continued existence of beliefs which 'cover' physical reality in both senses of the word. The result is films which sustain the prevailing abstractness" (301). Kracauer prefers "plain films of fact—newsreels or purely factual documentaries" to art films and avant-garde films, because the former "are not even meant to be art, simply follow the realistic tendency," while the latter refer us "from the material dimension back to that of ideology" (301). Similarly, "artistically ambitious experimental films," "all the innumerable commercial films," and "feature films" can be put into the same category of art films and avant-garde films: the category Kracauer objects to (301).¹⁷

What Kracauer is against is what Rorty is for. For Kracauer, "the spectacle of an individual destiny" and "drama" is "not more than secondary importance," while for Rorty's ironist, "the spectacle of an individual destiny" and "drama" is all she looks for:

The sense of exaltation I am trying to describe is, instead, a result of reading books as wholes, of following plots through to the end, rather than with being rendered momentarily delirious by a startling poetic figure, a perfectly crafted couplet, or a splendidly balanced antithesis. ("RE," 261–62)

What lies behind "reading books as wholes" is a Davidsonian theory of metaphor as world-disclosure: there is no escape from metaphor; we should "face up to the contingency of the language we use" as metaphor destabilizes the distinction between true and false descriptions of reality; "intellectual and moral progress" should be viewed "as a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than of increasing understanding of how things really are" (*CIS*, 9).

From the viewpoint of Kracauer, Rorty's ironist is fighting abstractness with abstractness: she stands before nature, rather than in it; she uses nature for her own ends; failing to capture the vitality of concrete life, her ambitious narrative reflects and sustains the wholeness and the abstractness rather than addressing it. A paradox arises: According to Rorty, what worries an ironist is the possibility that she would be "only a copy or replica," accepting "somebody else's description of oneself," or executing "a previously prepared program" (*CIS*, 29, 28), but as Brad Frazier writes, "in an ironic twist, an ironist's excessive individuality and hyper-critical attitude eventually put her in the same predicament as that of a mindless conformist."¹⁸ Kierkegaard, reveals how the ironist ends up with social conformity: if the self is merely a reweaving web of beliefs and desires, if the lack of commitment to anything breeds "a prodigious multitude of possibilities, for a change, the ironist finds it proper to let fate and chance decide" (281–82). Eventually the ironist simply acquiesces to the social influences in her environment, and her reflective disengagement collapses into crude social conformity.¹⁹ Rorty aims not to solve but to dissolve the problem of abstractness, but paradoxically self-redescription itself becomes the abstractness. Even at his irreverent best,

as John Caputo notes, “Rorty still remains within a metaphysical conception of language.” And as Keith Topper points out, Rorty’s “alternative to foundationalism is in many ways every bit as aloof from the complexities of ongoing social and political issues as the foundationalist philosophy which he sought to replace.”²⁰

Fighting abstractness with abstractness can be traumatic. Rorty admits that for most people “redescription often humiliates” (89–90), but he does not realize that the purely intra-linguistic relations of self-redescription can be traumatic even for the ironist. With her anxiety of self-perfection, Rorty’s ironist always wants to be what she is not, and not to be what she is:

Ironists are afraid that they will get stuck in the vocabulary in which they were brought up if they only know the people in their own neighborhood, so they try to get acquainted with strange people (Alcibiades, Julien Sorel), strange families (the Karamazovs, the Casaubons), and strange communities (the Teutonic Knights, the Nuer, the mandarins of the Sung). (80)

Here, then, lies the difference: Kracauer tries to find the strangeness through the texture of daily life, while Rorty seeks strangeness in extraordinary people. As he states in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*: “For edifying discourse is supposed to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings”;²¹ Similarly, in *Achieving Our Country*, he writes: “sexual perversion, extreme cruelty, ludicrous obsession, and manic delusion” can be regarded as “the private poem of the pervert, the sadist, or the lunatic” and the “peculiar ideality” of events, which help us see that “there is more to this life than they ever imagined.”²²

Endlessly chasing after possible strangeness, the ironist habitually stands back from all the established conventions of society and culture. She is only an adopted child in a family, a guest in a community. Linguistic imagination or a blindfolded language game itself means a radical, violent separateness from the reality she inhabits, because exploring possible vocabularies always takes place against the background of the hard fact of actual existence, and only a radical, violent separateness can make a new final vocabulary possible. There is a relation between a flippant attitude to language and a nonchalant attitude toward life. Self-doubt makes the grass across the border always look greener. To embrace an imaginary projection, an ironist needs to isolate herself from the concrete context she is in. The ironist’s relationship to the world is distracted and detached. In this sense, the subjunctive self-redescription is psychologically destructive. Many scholars have noticed the dark side of the ironist. For example, John Pettegrew states that the “pure ironist” is “a caricature of nihilistic subjectivity”; William M. Curtis points out that Rorty’s ironist is “an intellectually restless, seemingly neurotic character. ... She feels impelled to challenge and transform her final vocabulary by perpetually seeking out and comparing it to, and reweaving it with, alternative final vocabularies.” Lacking continuity in her identity, as Kierkegaard argues, the ironist eventually becomes enslaved by the flux of her moods; she considers herself free, but ends up drudging along in the most frightful slavery.²³

From Bottom to Top

Kracauer wants to seize reality and shake hands with it, while Rorty just wants to touch reality with his fingertips; Kracauer tries to find the strangeness of nature in the raw,

while Rorty tries to find strangeness in extraordinary people; Kracauer wants to enter into the texture of everyday life, paying attention to unrevealed dimensions, while Rorty just wants to get out of the current situation, creating a brand new vocabulary. The movie addict displays infinite absolute positivity, while the book addict signals infinite absolute negativity. One focuses on material nature devoid of value, while the other focuses on the immaterial realm of ideas, feelings and words. One engages; the other disengages. One discovers; the other creates. One believes; the other doubts. Returning to our initial question: in what way can Kracauer's physical reality benefit Rorty's self-redescription? The answer is from bottom to top: start with the objects that constitute the physical world rather than with an idea to be projected into shapeless matter (*TF*, 309). To be more specific, Kracauer's from-bottom-to-top approach of *Theory of Film* can benefit Rorty's self-redescription in three concrete ways:

(1) As a possible description: the part and parcel of various dimensions of life and its small random moments redeem this world from its dormant state, which can be an alternative final vocabulary for the ironist.

(2) As a possible method: the materialistically minded cinema proceeds from "below" to "above," renders visible what we did not or perhaps even could not see before its advent. It is guided film rather than books, "ideas no longer on highways leading through the void but on paths that wind through the thicket of things" (309). Thus the ironist engages with the breathing world and to embrace life in its fullness, embraces the concrete density of the thing itself, and enjoys "moments within everybody's reach, moments as common as birth and death, or a smile, or 'the ripple of the leaves stirred by the wind'" (303).

(3) As a possible attitude to life: the redemption of physical reality stands for de-subjectivity, a "sensuous and immediate" contact with life (170), and an intimate relation to one's habitat. The film here is not a method but just a useful tool for this change. Films, especially documentary films, have the power of deepening and rendering more intimate "our relation to this Earth which is our Habitat: this power peculiar to the cinema seems to be literally redeeming" (304).

The first two ways are plausible for Rorty, for he does not completely ignore physical reality:

Anything from the sound of a word through the color of a leaf to the feel of a piece of skin can, as Freud showed us, serve to dramatize and crystallize a human being's sense of self-identity. ... Any seemingly random constellation of such things can set the tone of a life. Any such constellation can set up an unconditional commandment to whose service a life may be devoted—a commandment no less unconditional because it may be intelligible to, at most, only one person. (*CIS*, 37)

We can identify the sensualist aesthetics in the above paragraph. Among the three examples Rorty lists, "the color of a leaf" points to a concrete visible physical existence; "the sound of a word" and "the feel of a piece of skin" belong to the sensuous and ephemeral aspects of reality. The key word here is not "unconditional commandment" but "self-identity": the "seemingly random constellation of such things" serves the ironist's evolving needs, desires, and concerns. We can conclude that it is not difficult for Rorty's ironist to adopt Kracauer's from-bottom-to-top as a possible description or as a possible method. What is difficult for the ironist to adopt is the third way—from-

bottom-to-top as an attitude to life. The difficulty lies in de-subjectivity. The structure of self-redescription is determined by the innermost needs of the autonomous self, rather than the innermost being of the world. “Thus I willed it” is her motto: her criterion for resolving doubts and her criterion of private perfection is the autonomous self; she wants to be able to sum up her life in her own terms (97). It is not easy for Rorty’s ironist, who has to “have something to have doubts about, something from which to be alienated” (88), to stop doubting, and stop regarding the self as the measure of all things.

“Thus I willed it” makes the ironist dance with different shadowy ideologies and abstractions and never really live free of them. In Susan Sontag’s words, to self-redescribe is “to impoverish, to deplete the world. . . . The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have.”²⁴ Kracauer is similarly suspicious of any notion of conceptual mediation.²⁵ In his critique of Theodor Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*, Kracauer speaks of an “unfettered dialectic which eliminates ontology altogether”: The concept of Utopia is used by Adorno in a purely formal way that gets rid of all concrete things and entities; the radical immanence of the dialectical process arbitrarily rejects any ontological stipulation; some ontological fixations are needed to imbue it with significance and direction.²⁶ We can regard Kracauer’s reserve toward Adorno’s version of dialectical thought as the critique of Rorty’s rejection of any ontological stipulation: Rorty’s unfettered self-redescription eliminates all ontologies; the redemption of self-redescription only makes sense if it assumes the form of a vision or intuition with a definite content of a sort; the radical immanence of self-redescription should be balanced by some ontological fixations and bearings. The solution is to change the attitude toward life: less arbitrariness and capriciousness, more peace and humbleness.

De-Subjectivity and Holding onto Being

One question remains: can the ironist adopt Kracauer’s redemption of physical reality without its theological core?²⁷ As Hansen points out, during the early 1920s, Kracauer attempted to theorize the cinema from a historico-philosophical perspective informed by radical Jewish messianism and Gnosticism.²⁸ Kracauer vacillates between phenomenological concretism and theology; the notion of the “redemption of physical reality” is shaped by a notion of creation; Kracauer continually gives the camera the perspective of a divine eye.²⁹ Those who wait are waiting for the Messiah’s arrival—Kracauer prefers a paradoxical trope: it is always possible and yet completely inaccessible (*TF*, 25). In the meanwhile, Kracauer knows full well that after the fall of religion there is no simple way back, no straightforward volte-face (20). We need film as a medium to redeem us:

Does the spectator ever succeed in exhausting the objects he contemplates? There is no end to his wanderings. Sometimes, though, it may seem to him that, after having probed a thousand possibilities, he is listening, with all his senses strained, to a confused murmur. Images begin to sound, and the sounds are again images. When this indeterminate murmur—the murmur of existence—reaches him, he may be nearest to the unattainable goal. (165)

Returning once again to the question: can we use Kracauer’s redemption of physical reality without its theological core? The answer is yes. Regardless of the theological core,

Kracauer's redemption of physical reality stands for a humble stance, de-subjectivity, and a correction of the ironist's aggression. In his posthumous essay "The Fire of Life," Rorty suggests that when he was younger he should "have spent more time with verse" over prose:

I now wish that I had spent somewhat more of my life with verse. This is not because I fear having missed out on truths that are incapable of statement in prose. There are no such truths; there is nothing about death that Swinburne and Landor knew but Epicurus and Heidegger failed to grasp. Rather, it is because I would have lived more fully if I had been able to rattle off more old chestnuts—just as I would have if I had made more close friends.³⁰

Poetry not only provided comfort on his deathbed but also made him reflect that he would have lived more fully had he enriched his vocabulary with more "old chestnuts." We can draw a bold conclusion that what Rorty really longed for was the "unstaged nature," because the uniqueness of poetry is its power to touch the deepest layers of our being. In his 1946 essay "What Are Poets For?" Heidegger notes that poetry's non-intellectualism presents the external world in its purity, without the human abstractions of science and ideology. Terming pure existence 'Being', Heidegger argues that man's intellect and its subjectivity, purposeful self-assertion, calculation "deliberately and completely blocks his path, already obstructed, into the Open"; "The higher its consciousness, the more the conscious being is excluded from the world." Poetry reveals Being in a non-intellectual manner, enabling us to access Being and to move from the "logic of calculating reason" towards "the logic of the heart."³¹ Rorty's unconditional self-assertion makes over the world purposefully according to the frame of mind of man's command. In contrast, plants and animals do not partake in purposeful self-assertion; they instead receive what is given by nature, "so that, in such numbness, they never strive for anything that might oppose them. The beings that exist in this way are, in Heidegger's words, in 'dim delight'."³²

Rorty's hunger for poetry can be interpreted as the hunger for life: the pulse of life, the flow of life, the base of life, the overwhelming abundance of life, the contingency of life. This is less about "contingency of selfhood" (*CIS*, 23) and more about the contingency of sensuous and immediate experience—the negligence of the daily routines and rhythms which poetry has the ability to redeem. What Rorty needed to change is the detached attitude to life: not developing alternatives with self-doubt, but trying to hold onto Being in a positive way. We might not agree with Kracauer that films are the only way to help us discover the marvels of everyday life, but we should agree with his method: stop putting the self in the first place and go to the deepest layers and relate to Being in a non-metaphysical way. This stance is especially important for the ironist who, as Rorty says, "forgets about Being and thinks that beings are all there are" (113). In Sontag's words, holding onto being means "experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are."³³ It does not matter whether we choose cinema or poetry. What matters is the attitude: getting rid of overpowering self-doubt. Kracauer's fundamental insight in *Theory of Film* is an attitude to life: self-effacement begets self-expansion which begets a de-subjectivized view of the world. Thus we are "not only to appreciate our given material environment but to extend it in all directions. They virtually make the world our home" (304).

Conclusion

Things are always already mediated by ideology, and only the deepest layer can be merely a sensual entity and remove all self-doubt. The redemption of physical reality is an anti-symbolic and anti-hermeneutic relation to things, while self-redescription is the opposite: it is a highly symbolic and hermeneutic relation “to other human beings.”³⁴ The question is: Once she moves beyond subjectivity, is the ironist still the ironist? Perhaps not. The core of Rorty’s ironist is a “radical and continuing doubt” (CIS, 73), and her self-redescription “will always be a project rather than a result, a project which life does not last long enough to complete” (40).

In Rorty’s eyes, connecting with the deepest level embodies a yearning for the unshaped and the primitive, which is both a realistic romanticism and a prescriptive ontology. The being or the raw material of reality becomes larger-than-self, and replaces subjectivity with a naturalistic metaphysics of presence. I doubt Rorty would adopt my revision, for he thinks that “there is nothing that we can rely on but ourselves and our fellow human beings.”³⁵ For Rorty’s ironist who avoids every kind of metaphysics, the redemption of physical reality cannot be an attitude, but can only be an alternative final vocabulary or a possible method. Or, we should interpret the ironist as the one who dares not to change her core identities. Had Rorty lived longer, he might have revised his theory about the ironist to make it less traumatic: the ironist stops pursuing self-perfection, stops privileging language over life, stops being the sort of person who she is not yet but hopefully some day will become. Like Proust’s Marcel in *Remembrance of Things Past*, maybe one day, the ironist will finally come to understand that “the true life, the only life really lived—is literature”³⁶ and focus on the immanence of daily life with “dim delight.”

Notes

1. Kracauer, *Theory of Film (TF)*, 291, 288; hereafter page references are cited in the text.
2. Rorty, “Redemption from Egotism” (“RE”), 244; Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (CIS)*, 148; hereafter page references to these two sources are cited in the text.
3. Kracauer, “Those Who Wait,” 136.
4. *Ibid.*, 138. The second behaviour is that of “the short-circuit people” (138): human beings who “maintain their ground only artificially and thanks to involuntary *self-deception*”; “It is more a will to faith than a lingering within faith, more a rash interpretation than an accomplished fact” (137).
5. Hasen, “‘With Skin and Hair,’” 456.
6. In *How to Read and Why*, Harold Bloom points out that “The ultimate answer to the question ‘Why read?’ is that only deep, constant reading fully establishes and augments an autonomous self” (195). Citing this sentence at the beginning of “Redemption from Egotism,” Rorty states: “Bloom’s thesis about how to attain this sort of autonomy chimes with my claim that the replacement of religion and philosophy by literature is a change for the better” (244).
7. The one time Rorty mentions movies in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* is for their role in changing public morality: “That is why the novel, the movie, and the TV program have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principal vehicles of moral change and progress” (xvi). Later he completely forgets movies: “The actual role of novels, poems, plays, paintings, statues, and buildings in the social movements of the last century and a half has given it [the Romantic claim that art had replaced religion and philosophy] still greater plausibility” (3). We can imagine that even Rorty considers the

movie a useful tool for self-redescription, yet what he has in mind is the feature film, which is what Kracauer objects to.

8. Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, 375.
9. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 14.
10. Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 48.
11. Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 111.
12. Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 50.
13. Rorty, *Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, 3.
14. Rorty, "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism," 131.
15. Llanera, "Richard Rorty and the Concept of Redemption," 112–13.
16. Hansen, "'With Skin and Hair,'" 459.
17. Kracauer admits in *Theory of Film*, that the distinction is not strict, for "A face on the screen may attract us as a singular manifestation of fear or happiness regardless of the events which motivate its expression. A street serving as a background to some quarrel or love affair may rush to the fore and produce an intoxicating effect" (303).
18. Frazier, "Kierkegaard on the Problems of Pure Irony," 434.
19. *Ibid.*, 444. For example, radical self-redescription sustains the prevailing unconstrained neoliberal permissiveness: One may enjoy whatever it may be to satisfy one's needs and to achieve full self-realization and self-fulfillment.
20. Caputo, "Thought of Being," 673; Topper, *Disorder of Political Inquiry*, 964.
21. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 360;
22. Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, 38, 133.
23. Pettegrew, *Pragmatist's Progress*, 108; Curtis, *Defending Rorty*, 95; Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony*, 284.
24. Sontag, "Against Interpretation," 7.
25. Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 108.
26. *Ibid.*, 201.
27. There is a distinctly theological component in Kracauer's redemption of physical reality. His from bottom to top approach, as Koch writes in *Siegfried Kracauer: An Introduction*, is based on Jewish theology according to which the transposition in perspective caused by "disfigurement" must be made good in the sense that the bend in a spoon seen in a glass of water can be mended not by touching the spoon, but simply by waiting for the water to flow away. The idea of redemption is deeply bound up with anamnestic solidarity, the dedicated commemoration of the dead, together with whom we wait for the day when the Messiah will come, the day when justice will be done to the dead (106).
28. Hansen, "'With Skin and Hair,'" 443.
29. Koch, *Siegfried Kracauer*, 105.
30. Rorty, "The Fire of Life," 520–21.
31. Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?" 116, 106.
32. *Ibid.*, 106.
33. Sontag, "Against Interpretation," 13.
34. Rorty, "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre," 478. Rorty and Kracauer hold opposite views. Whereas Rorty emphasizes thought and language, in which words, uprooted from their bond to physical reality and to history, have only internal relationships with other words, Kracauer emphasizes physical reality, which excludes all subjective participation and linguistic creation and traps man in a sphere of physical reality. Regardless of their differences, what they share is a radicalness and weightlessness: both break the bond between Being and thought, and both favour a self-enclosed system. Kracauer stands for an alternative to Heidegger and Dewey for whom the bond of Being and thought cannot be broken. Heidegger, as he writes in *Basic Writings*, holds that man is always and already borne by Being, bonded to Being, held by Being, sustained by Being, and thought belongs essentially to Being (238–39). Dewey, as Friedman explains in "Dewey's Naturalistic Metaphysics," replaces the mind-matter dualism with experience, for nature is capable of generating values and meanings through human endeavors that draw on nature, including "religion, art, and science" (56).

35. Bernstein, "Richard Rorty's Deep Humanism," 22. Rorty regards Heidegger's notion of the language of Being as a vestigial nostalgia for metaphysics. As Rorty points out in "Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth": "I agree with Hook and Carnap, against Heidegger and Tillich, that the word "Being" is more trouble than it is worth. I would be happy if Heidegger had never employed it and if Tillich had never picked it up from Heidegger. But I do not think that the word 'Being' was essential to the thought of either" (71).
36. Schulenberg, "From Redescription to Writing," 385.

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