In this paper I intend to argue that a shared concern with indeterminacy and the concrete links German film theory with avant-garde movements such as French surrealism. The paper will examine this relationship through an analysis of the film theory of Siegfried Kracauer, concentrating on Kracauer’s interpretation of surrealism, and developing a cinematic model which integrates elements of surrealism with Kracauerian phenomenology and naturalism. I will begin with a summary of Kracauer’s theory of reality and representation, and will then examine Kracauer’s position on surrealism. The paper will conclude by examining the issue of realism within surrealism, particularly in relation to the films of Buñuel, proposing a cinematic model which integrates surrealism, naturalism and phenomenology.

Kracauer’s theory of reality and representation

One characteristic feature of critical debates on the cinema taking place in Germany during the 1920s was a belief that the systemic structures which dominated the individual within modernity were deeply inscribed within language, and that visual experience constituted an alternative domain of potential freedom.¹ The visual was seen as embodying a primal mode of communication which predated the rise of modernity, and which offered the possibility of a
return to sensory experience. This critical discourse on the cinema was characterized by a concern for non-cognitive and irrationalist forms of expression, and by an emphasis on the concrete and immediate experience as means of ‘seeing’ the world through the veil of dominant ideologies.

These ideas had an important influence on Kracauer’s theory of film. Following Weber’s contention that the individual was disenchanted, Kracauer argued that the modern subject’s relationship to the world was a ‘distracted’ one. The concept of distraction employed by Kracauer amounted to the theorization of a form of visual and sensory experience of the modern environment, one in which an unfocused ‘distracted’ mode of being prevailed, leading to an impoverished and abstract encounter between the self and the world. Although originally a negative term, defined in opposition to the contemplative forms of concentration and more unified modes of experience associated with the high arts, the notion of distraction eventually took on more positive and radical connotations during the 1920s, becoming identified with non-bourgeois or proletarian modes of experience, and with alternatives to totalizing systems of rationality.

Similar dialectical conceptions of distraction can be found in Kracauer, where distraction is both the product of abstraction and the mode of cognition through which the mass public can understand and transform their own experiences. Distraction, as experienced through the film, constitutes a legitimate mode of aesthetic experience, corresponding to the ‘damaged condition of modernity’ as a ‘fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions’ and as a ‘montage of distractions’.

Kracauer employed the concept of distraction to develop a realist aesthetic based on a supposed structural correspondence between the distracted modern condition and the particular forms of indeterminate mimesis found in film and photography, and one of the foundations of Kracauer’s realism is this contention that both film form and the specific forms of spectatorship adopted within the film viewing experience correspond to the ‘condition of modernity’. There is, in other words, a correspondence between the ‘basic properties, affinities and identities’ of the film medium, and the underlying properties of modernity.

However, Kracauer not only argues that film is ‘realist’ in the above sense, but that it is also redemptive, in that it offers the possibility of transcending the abstraction inherent within modernity through its ability to disclose the sensuous and ephemeral aspects of reality. Kracauer argued that film came into being in order to fulfil two ‘originating principles’. The first of these was a need to represent the fragmentation and abstraction which was characteristic of the modern condition. The second was the need to transcend that abstraction and ‘redeem’ reality through the empirical attributes of the film image. The value of film, therefore, lay in its potential to
redirect the spectator’s attention to the ‘texture of life’ lost beneath the abstract discourses which regulate experience.  

Kracauer argued that mass culture had turned away from concrete experience and reason to produce a form of culture which he referred to as the ‘mass ornament’. By this he meant new mediums such as cinema, and events characterized by extensive ornamental configurations, such as military parades and sporting competitions. Here, according to Kracauer, the real world of the individual had become ‘desubstantiated’, and replaced by spectacle: the ‘functional but empty form of ritual’ and the ‘aesthetic reflex’ of the dominant social rationality. Similarly, visual display had become presentational, iconic and emblematic, rather than representational. Kracauer also argued that the mass ornament marked a return of mythic thought into western culture, and that modern myth was another ‘aesthetic reflex’ of instrumental rationality. Far from representing a radical alternative to instrumental rationality, contemporary forms of mythic thought were central to the legitimation of capitalism because, like instrumental rationality, they arrested the processes of liberating and enlightening reason.

Kracauer’s use of the ideas of distraction, abstraction and redemption was influenced by his reading of Kant. As already mentioned, Kracauer argued that mass culture was a culture of spectacle in which mythic thought and instrumental rationality distorted the operations of reason and the imagination, and there are clear similarities here with the Kantian model of the harmony of the faculties within aesthetic experience, where the role of the understanding is to regulate the imagination and cause it to seek order within nature. Kant argued that the aesthetic judgement arose from an interaction between the faculties of understanding and imagination, which represent law and freedom respectively. These two faculties come into a harmonious rapport during aesthetic contemplation and it is this which is the basis of aesthetic experience. The function of the object of aesthetic contemplation is, therefore, to engender a mode of mental activity which unites freedom and law into a transcendent, liberating totality.

Unlike the judgement of reason the aesthetic judgement is impressionistic and non-conceptual, it gives rise to feelings rather than knowledge, and is rich in connotations. Consequently, the object of aesthetic contemplation must also have the potential to stimulate a profusion of meanings in the mind of the perceiving subject, and Kant argued that this potential could be found most clearly in nature, which ‘quickens’ the interaction between the imagination and understanding. This is the basis of Kant’s concept of naturschöne or ‘natural beauty’ which had a central influence on Kracauer’s ideas, and is most apparent in his claim that redemption could be realized through an engagement with ‘physical reality’.

Kracauer argues that, through a scrutiny of the concrete, a form of
autonomous unstructured spectatorship can be attained. As with Kant this also involves a search for patterns of meaning, so that critical judgement is also called upon. Through this return to the concrete, the regulative power of the understanding, which has been diminished within mass culture, is restored, and the imagination and understanding are brought into a healthy rapport. For Kant, the contemplation of natural objects was the best source of aesthetic experience, and it is the unstaged, the found, the fortuitous, and that which is devoid of human intentionality which is prioritized in the idea of natural beauty.\footnote{Kracauer, Theory of Film, pp. 69-70.} Similarly, for Kracauer, film has affinities with aspects of the concrete, natural world such as ‘unstaged reality’, ‘chance’, ‘the fortuitous’, ‘the indeterminate’, ‘the flow of life’ and ‘endlessness’.

Another influence which Kracauer drew upon in developing his conception of reality was the phenomenology of Husserl, and, in particular, Husserl’s conception of the \textit{lebenswelt}.

Husserl argued that the objectifying abstract discourses of science obscured the more transient and subjective meanings generated within experience. It is this phenomenological world which constitutes the \textit{lebenswelt}, and Husserl argued for a need to return to this - “the world in which we live intuitively, together with its real entities”\footnote{Husserl, The Crisis of European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology (Evanston: University of Illinois Press, 1970), p. 156.} - not in order to surrender to its ‘apparent incomprehensibility’, but to examine its structure.\footnote{Ibid., p. 139.}

Kracauer’s ideas were strongly influenced by the emphasis on the concrete and the transient within Husserl’s phenomenology, and this led him to develop a theory of film in which the film image would preserve what he called the ‘anonymous state of reality’.

Kracauer defined human reality in two ways. On the one hand, there were the systems of abstract conceptual reason which, although essential, had come to dominate modern life. On the other hand, there was the ‘base’ of life, consisting of the ‘poignant’ and ‘precious’ qualities of the objects of everyday experience; an experiential and psychological domain consisting of desires, needs, events and relationships. Kracauer referred to it as a ‘multitude of interpenetrating and counterinfluencing objects and relationships’, and as a ‘complexity of satisfactions, discords, wants and pursuits which often lie below the conceptual and the conscious’.

Kracauer argued that film was a privileged medium, generated by the condition of the \textit{lebenswelt} within modernity in order to ‘redeem’ the base of life for the modern subject. Such a redemption was possible because of the existence of structural correspondences or ‘affinities’ between the \textit{lebenswelt}, with its transient and \textit{indeterminate structure}, and the suggestive \textit{indeterminacy} of the film image. Underlying the empirical content of the film image are its ‘basic principles and structures’, just as, underlying the phenomenological surface of the \textit{lebenswelt} are basic structures and principles; for Kracauer, the basic principles and affinities of film as
a medium equate structurally with those underlying the *lebenswelt*. This is the basis of his realism.

The third major influence on Kracauer’s conception of reality was the theory of the unconscious. Kracauer conceived the *lebenswelt* as a domain of experience in which repressed desire often emerged as symptoms. *From Caligari to Hitler*, in particular, is an attempt to decipher such repressed desire. In this book, Kracauer argues that films can embody psychological dispositions which ‘extend below’ the dimension of consciousness. However, because film cannot represent the unconscious as such, underlying psychological dispositions are made manifest as ‘visible hieroglyphs’ of the ‘unseen dynamics of human relations’.

The analysis of the cinema in *From Caligari to Hitler* is premised upon the assumption that the German cinema embodies the ‘inner life of the nation’ and the ‘German soul’, but Kracauer’s preoccupation with national identity here is untypical, and a reflection of the widespread interest in the question of German national identity following World War II. Although Kracauer refers frequently to the nation in *From Caligari to Hitler*, a close reading of the book reveals that the ‘inner psychological dispositions’ which he refers to have nothing specifically national about them, but are rooted in the human condition itself. Inner life is thrown into turmoil by the sort of disruptive events which influence all individuals, and Kracauer argues that in such periods of radical disruption ‘core underlying motifs’ rise to the surface and become embedded in cultural artefacts such as films.

Far from being a consideration of national identity, *From Caligari to Hitler* is a study of the ways in which alienating conditions create trauma within ‘the base’. These events of ‘turmoil’ disrupt the operations of the *lebenswelt*, and reinforce abstraction and the systems of power which underlie abstraction. The main influences on Kracauer’s conceptualization of the psychological content of the *lebenswelt* were Freud’s *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* and *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and Erich Fromm’s *Escape From Freedom*. However, the influence of both Freud and Fromm on Kracauer was not as great as that of Husserl, and Kracauer argued that Husserl’s model of the *lebenswelt* was superior to Freud’s model of the unconscious because it dealt with both the conscious and the unconscious.

**Kracauer’s theory of film**

Kracauer argued that an aesthetic medium must build from its basic ‘properties’, ‘affinities’ and ‘appeals’. The basic property of film is its capacity for ‘recording’ and ‘revealing’ physical reality. The basic affinity of film is, as previously mentioned, for representing
aspects of reality such as ‘the unstaged’, ‘the fortuitous’, ‘endlessness’, ‘the indeterminate’ and ‘the flow of life’. The basic appeals of film are to notions of truth and authenticity concerned with ‘the transient effects of things’, and to notions of aesthetic beauty concerned with the perception of a multiplicity of meanings.

Because human experience is not ‘synthesized’, but fragmented, consisting of ‘bits of chance events whose flow substitutes for meaningful continuity’, Kracauer espouses an indeterminate cinema characterized by ‘vague indefinability of meaning’ and ‘uninterpretable symbolism’. Natural objects and events represented in films should, therefore, have a theoretically unlimited number of ‘psychological correspondences’ and should be surrounded by a ‘fringe of meaning’. Images on the screen should also reflect the ‘indeterminacy of natural objects’, providing ‘raw material’ with multiple meanings. Similarly, the film shot should ‘delimit without defining’, and preserve the ‘essential neutrality’ of reality.

Kracauer argued that the filmmaker has two obligations. The first is to give each scene in the film a dominant meaning relevant to the plot. The second is to retain the plurality of meanings within each scene so that ‘a considerable degree of indeterminacy is retained’. Such a mode of filmmaking would generate what Kracauer called ‘free hovering images of reality’. Kracauer summed up his conception of an indeterminate cinema by recourse to the model of the ‘flow of life’, a term which he derived from Bergson and Husserl. Experience was a continuum, exemplified by the ‘image of the street and the experience of the modern city’, and film should express this.

It was this which led Kracauer to argue that the basic appeals of the cinema were to notions of truth and authenticity based on the transience of things and to notions of aesthetic quality based on the multiplicity of meanings. This, in turn, led him to support forms of avant-garde filmmaking based on an impressionistic style, and to praise films such as Alberto Cavalcanti’s Rien que les heures (1926), Joris Ivens’s Regen (1929), and Jean Vigo’s A propos de Nice (1930), films which form part of the ‘city symphony’ genre of the 1920s. These films conform closely to Kracauer’s requirement to depict physical existence through types of representation which are ‘cinematic’. Films such as Regen contain many such depictions, including the ‘aftermath of a rain storm’, the ‘movements of clouds in the city’, ‘smoke effects’ and ‘other transient things’. Kracauer argues that these are subjects which the medium of film appears ‘predestined to exhibit’.

Kracauer focused on those avant-garde films with a documentary content when he argued that Cavalcanti’s En rade (1926) and Vigo’s A propos de Nice reveal otherwise hidden aspects of the urban environment. Kracauer expands on the idea that films can reveal hidden aspects of reality through a quotation from Germaine Dulac,
Kracauer and surrealism

Kracauer rejected the notion that film was 'an art medium in the accepted sense', and, because of this, was both critical of French
impressionism, and more sympathetic towards surrealism. A number of links can be established between Kracauer and surrealism. French surrealism was well known to German artists and intellectuals. One of the basic tenets of surrealism, the notion that the film image could capture the unconscious, was a common feature of 1920s German film theory, appearing in the writings of Balazs, Kracauer and Benjamin, as well as in that of lesser known writers such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal. The publication of Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1906 also stimulated debates in Germany, based on the premiss that, if the function of the dream was to satisfy repressed desire, then the same held true for the cinema. By the early 1920s, descriptions of the film as dream and the spectator as dreamer had become commonplace within German film criticism. Walter Benjamin’s 1929 essay: ‘Surrealism: the last snapshot of the European intelligentsia’ and his unfinished work on the Paris arcades, the *Passagenwerk*, were both strongly influenced by surrealism.

Benjamin’s interest in surrealism is well known, but what is less well known is that his approach to surrealism was significantly influenced by his reading of Kracauer’s writings from the 1920s. His theory of the ‘optical unconscious’, for example, elaborated in the 1931 essay ‘A small history of photography’, as well as in the *Passagenwerk* and, in 1936, ‘The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction’, was derived from a 1927 article by Kracauer entitled ‘Photography’. Kracauer’s concerns, particularly as expressed in *Theory of Film*, were actually closer to surrealism than were Benjamin’s. During the late 1920s, and under the influence of Brecht, Benjamin criticized surrealism for being ‘anarchistic’, ‘nihilistic’ and ‘undisciplined’, and also argued that the art work should contain organizing elements which would guide the spectator’s interpretation. However, up to as late as 1960 in *Theory of Film*, Kracauer remained committed to the ideal of an indeterminate cinema capable of engendering self-determined associative and revelatory activity in the mind of the spectator.

It is partly because of this concern with indeterminacy that Kracauer is sensitive to surrealism, and considers films such as *La Coquille et le clergymen* (Germaine Dulac, 1928) and *L’Etoile de mer* (Man Ray, 1927), as well as René Clair’s more Dadaist *Entr’acte*, to mark an important turn away from explorations of artistic form to investigations of unconscious and subconscious content. For Kracauer, the Buñuel/Dali *Un Chien andalou* (1929) shows the ‘erratic and the irrational’, and refers to the ‘play of varied impulses in deep psychological layers’. Other surrealist filmmakers, such as Jean Cocteau and Hans Richter, are described as being concerned with the ‘externalization of oblique emotional experiences’, and with the representation of an inner reality which determines visible aspects of external phenomena. Here Kracauer
argues that surrealism explores that part of the phenomenological base which consists of unconscious psychological desire, and is therefore ultimately concerned with the representation of external reality.

In company with the surrealists themselves, Kracauer argued that surrealism constituted an advance on previous avant-garde practices in marking a shift away from the formal aestheticism of movements such as cinéma pur. Kracauer is often vague when referring to cinéma pur, grouping together abstract films such as Viking Eggeling’s Diagonal Symphony (1924) with films more generally recognized as belonging to the cinéma pur, such as Henri Chomette’s Jeux des reflets et de la vitesse (1925), Germaine Dulac’s Thèmes et variations (1928), and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy’s Lichtspiel, schwarz-weiss-grau (1930). What unites these films, according to Kracauer, is their emphasis on formalism. The distinctions between films such as Jeux des reflets et de la vitesse, cubist machine-aesthetic films such as Fernand Léger’s Ballet mécanique (1925), and abstract films such as Hans Richter’s Rhythm 12 (1921–5), were less important to him than their common formalism, which, for Kracauer, amounted to ideology.

A number of conceptual correspondences exist between Kracauer’s ideas and surrealism. The surrealist device of automatic writing, a technique designed to uncover the fragmentary, unconscious processes of thought, as opposed to the tendency towards totality implied by analytic thought, is similar to Kracauer’s ideas on the nature of filmic consumption, where the spectator ‘writes’ his or her dislocated meanings on the ambiguous film text in an impressionistic, evocative way. Both Kracauer and the surrealists also referred to the ‘dream-like state’ which the film spectator experiences during the watching of a film. The surrealist conception of the unconscious as a present, but unknown, realm of experience is also similar to Kracauer’s notion of the ‘base of life’, which exists beyond conceptualization, within a phenomenological experience of reality. Closely related to this is the notion of rediscovering a world which is hidden and suppressed and, in both cases, this rediscovery takes the form of redeeming the world from abstraction through indeterminacy and the empirical.

One of the most important similarities between the ideas of Kracauer and those of the surrealists lies in the rejection of an aesthetic of expression and the adoption of an aesthetic of discovery, of finding meanings which exist at some level of conscious or unconscious reality. Although a rejection of traditional notions of art as expressive vision was common throughout the French and German avant garde at the time, both Kracauer and the surrealists combine that rejection with the adoption of a discourse of exploring, or deciphering, a hidden environment or terrain.

The metaphorical relationship of film to dreams, one of the key

59 Kracauer, Theory of Film, p. 299.
60 Ibid., p. 165.
surrealist concerns with the cinema, also had a significant influence on Kracauer, as the following passage from Theory of Film indicates:

Once the spectator’s organized self has surrendered, his subconscious or unconscious experiences, apprehensions and hopes tend to come out and take over. Owing to their indeterminacy, film shots are particularly fit to function as an ignition spark. Any such shot may touch off chain reactions in the moviegoer, a flight of associations which no longer revolve around their original source . . . films look most like dreams when they overwhelm us with the crude and unnegociated presence of natural objects . . . there is something in the abrupt immediacy and shocking veracity of such images which justifies their identification as dream images.61

Kracauer’s metaphor of the ‘ignition spark’ which activates chains of association in the spectator shares a number of similarities with the surrealist metaphor of ‘the spark’, which arises from the juxtaposition of contrasting images.62 Like Breton, who argued that the cause of the spark could be found in the unconscious, Kracauer also refers, in the above extract, to the ability of the indeterminate film image to stimulate chains of association emanating from the unconscious. Phrases such as the ‘overwhelm[ing] presence of natural objects’, ‘abrupt immediacy’ and ‘shocking veracity’ also testify to the fact that Kracauer frequently described film in terms which are similar to the intense experience of disorientation implied by surrealist devices such as dépaysement. Although the darker interests of surrealism – the concerns with death, sacrifice, sadism, and violent unconscious impulses – do not figure particularly prominently in the kind of spectatorial activity advocated by Kracauer in Theory of Film, they are still present there, and form the basic subject matter of From Caligari to Hitler.

Another similarity between Kracauer and surrealism is a shared concern for the concrete. One of the techniques practiced by the surrealists was that of taking an object from its functional context in order to observe the new associations which it gave rise to, and which emanated from the ‘concrete density of the thing itself’.63 This act of looking closely at an object, until the functional veils of ideology were pierced and the pure materiality of the object enabled structures of associatory meaning to emerge, is similar to Kracauer’s appropriation of the concept of naturschöne, as well as general concern with the need to return to the concrete.

Distinctions must also be made between Kracauer’s ideas, German film theory in general, and surrealism. Kracauer’s notion of the base must be distinguished from the various conceptions of the unconscious held within surrealism. As mentioned previously, Kracauer argued that the Freudian theory of the unconscious was inferior to Husserl’s notion of the lebenswelt, and that films which
represented the *lebenswelt* were 'cinematic', whilst those which represented the unconscious were 'merely surrealist'.\(^6\) Benjamin also took up this distinction, arguing that the 'optical unconscious' which revealed the phenomenological world of barely perceptible instances must be distinguished from the 'instinctual unconscious' which psychoanalysis revealed.\(^5\)

The degree of emotional intensity which surrealism wished to evoke in the spectator is also different from the kind of contemplative experience which Kracauer, following Kant, frequently wishes to evoke in the spectator. Rather than Breton's 'shock to the eye', Kracauer emphasized a degree of textual ambivalence which promoted an exploratory activity within the spectator. However, Kracauer's use of the Kantian sublime, as well as *naturschöne*, means that this distinction over the intensity of the spectatorial experience is not clear cut. There is also a certain relationship between Kracauer's concern for the disinterested perusal implied by *naturschöne*, and the kind of 'flaneur' activity represented by Breton and Aragon in *Nadja* and *Le Paysan de Paris*. Here, although it is the new nature of the city, rather than of nature itself, which is the focus of attention, there is a common concern with immersion in a constantly changing, potentially enchanted environment, which is similar to Kracauer's conception of physical reality.

Kracauer's focus on naturalistic continuity also differed from the estrangement devices employed by the surrealists, although a distinction can be made between the use of realistic imagery in surrealism and the more deconstructive devices employed by avant-garde movements such as Dada. Although visual estrangement devices were advocated within surrealism in order to destabilize the spectator, surrealist films still retained a greater mimetic content than the more deconstructionist films associated with Dada.\(^6\) Surrealist estrangement was based upon the juxtaposition of realistic images and 'surreality' emerged from this conjunction, rather than from the inherent strangeness of each individual representation.

Because Kracauer argued that the film image should be indeterminate and semi-autonomous, he was opposed to the anchoring of cinematic signifiers to specific psychoanalytic concepts, arguing that such an approach was 'excessively prescriptive' and that film, as a medium, could not accommodate such symbolism.\(^7\) In Kantian terms, such symbolism also contradicted the proper relationship between the understanding and imagination because, in this case, the understanding dominated the imagination. Discussing *Un Chien andalou* he argued that

One familiar example is the fascinating and truly realistic shot of a small street crowd seen from far above in *Un Chien andalou*. If this shot were integrated into contexts suggestive of camera-reality and the flow of life it would invite us dreamily to probe into its
indeterminate meanings. Yet actually we are not permitted to absorb it, for the symbolic function assigned to surrealism automatically prevents them from unfolding their inherent potentialities.68

It is worth exploring how Kracauer interprets this scene in *Un Chien andalou*, by comparing it to scenes from a film Kracauer commends, Ivens's *Regen*. *Regen* explores the impact and aftermath of a rain storm in the city. It is filmed in the new realist style of the late 1920s, but is also influenced by the impressionist style of painters such as Monet. It is primarily concerned with visual effects, such as the changing conditions of light, reflections seen through rain-soaked windows, and abstract patterns picked out from the fabric of city life and presented to the spectator in order to be observed and contemplated. The film is impressionistic and episodic, and its symbolic content is centred on the evocation of a visual and poetic experience of the city. Although an aesthetically beautiful film, *Regen* is beautiful in the spirit of *naturschöne* rather than of the composed art work, and conforms to Kracauer's belief that the truly 'permeable' episodic film must be loosely composed.

In *Un Chien andalou*, the scene Kracauer refers to occurs near the beginning of the film, where a man and woman are seen looking down through the window of an apartment at a small crowd which has gathered around a young woman who is prodding a severed hand lying in the road. A policeman arrives and places the hand in a box, then gives it to the woman. We then see a shot, taken from above, of the woman surrounded by the crowd, then a further shot of the couple looking down at the scene from the window of their apartment. As the two continue to gaze in fascination at the woman in the street she is run down by a passing car.

Kracauer argues that the scene is not suggestive of the flow of life because, unlike in a permeable episodic scene, the action does not cut from the activities and desires of the characters portrayed to show images of the environment around them. The characters appear to exist within a hermetically sealed subjective world, which is given a sense of extreme self-enclosure influenced by the circumscribed intensity of the dream. This means that, for Kracauer, their social character is inadequately portrayed. Unlike *Regen*, with its lateral, paradigmatic narrative structure, the narrative within this scene is linear and, for Kracauer, too composed and ideological. The continuity editing employed also conveys a sense that the scene is observed from the point of view of the couple in the apartment. *Regen*, on the other hand, dispenses with such an organizing viewpoint, and employs editing to build up an assemblage of impressions seen from a variety of viewpoints.

Kracauer argues that the scene where the young woman is given the severed hand and appears to enter a trance-like state, clutching
the box with the hand in to her breast, is potentially rich in significance. However, the spectator is prevented from exploring the inherent potentialities of the indeterminate meanings which could arise from the scene because, in the first place, the characters and events depicted are too disconnected from their immediate physical environment (and this limits the degree of exploration which can occur) and, in the second place, because the extent and opacity of the symbolism involved obstructs the development of free, self-directed interpretative activity on the part of the spectator. In effect, the symbolism in the scene is such that the link between the hand, the woman, and her adoption of a trance like state is only interpretable by reference to specific psychoanalytical concepts – such as that of fetishism – and the problem for Kracauer is that such a concept is already embedded within a pre-existing theoretical discourse. As a consequence, the spectator becomes a subject of the discourse rather than a free creator of meanings.

For Kracauer, the over-determined symbolic function of the image in films such as *Un Chien andalou* restricts the image’s potential indeterminacy, and imposes a ‘strained meaningfulness’ on it.\(^6^9\) He also regarded such symbolism as an essentially literary, as opposed to cinematic, mode of expression. His opposition to such symbolism was also conditioned by his attitude towards ideology, as is made clear when he argues that art in which the ‘imagery exhausts itself in projecting its creator’s ideas uses the image for a utilitarian purpose’.\(^7^0\) Directive symbolism is here equated with prescriptive authoritarianism, and, beyond this, the ‘literary’ itself is equated with the realm of ideology, because language is saturated with the coercive imperatives of modernity.

Kracauer argued that film is an essentially literal rather than literary mode of aesthetic representation. Discussing Cocteau’s *Death of a Poet* (1930) he criticizes Cocteau (a ‘littérature rather than a filmier’) for his interpretation of the scene in the film where a wound-like mouth appears in the hand of the poet. Cocteau explains that ‘the mouth of one of his creations lives in his hand like a wound’, but Kracauer argues that, in the film, the image principally signifies a real hand with a real mouth-like wound. The image may be inexplicable, but does not possess poetic or symbolic qualities. Kracauer does not argue that the film image only possesses a literal, as opposed to a symbolic, function but that, in general, the literal function overwhelms the symbolic function in film, making film an unsuitable vehicle for surrealism.

Neither does Kracauer argue that surrealism as such intentionally demands fixed symbolic relationships between image and psychoanalytic signification, and he is aware that surrealist theory emphasized the role of the art work in stimulating the spectator into engaging in activity. He was also aware of the debate between Antonin Artaud and Germaine Dulac over *La Coquille et le*
clergyman, in which Artaud criticized Dulac for connecting the imagery in the film to specific conceptual meanings. According to Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, for Artaud, meaning was 'the result of productive relations between images themselves, and between text and viewer ... [and] any attempt ... to clarify the meaning of the images ... was seen as a distortion of the original and direct impulse of the images.' However, although Kracauer was aware that surrealists such as Artaud and Breton advocated, in his own words, ‘indeterminate’ as opposed to ‘symbolic’ signification, he believed that the spectator inevitably interpreted the image as a psychoanalytic symbol because of the relationship between surrealism and psychoanalysis.

Focusing on the essence of what he calls surrealistic activity, which he defines as associative thought, Kracauer argued that surrealism is best envisaged as a field of activity within the mind of the spectator. Cinematic images do not illustrate concepts. Instead, the ‘cinematic symbol’ (as opposed to the literary symbol) is principally an image of an object in relationship with other objects, displaying all the physical complexities and particularities of those objects. As the spectator scrutinized the image, chains of associative thought were produced. Along with the revelation of the visible world which followed such scrutiny, what Kracauer calls an ‘outgrowth’ of relations between the image and the lebenswelt of the spectator occurred as the spectator made connections between the image and her/his own experience. This led Kracauer to define the proper role of surrealism in the cinema as that of providing the potential and framework for the spectator to explore that area of the
lebenswelt which consisted of psychological, unconscious desire, and he agreed with René Clair that ‘film nevertheless remains a field of incomparable surrealistic activity for the mind of the spectator’.

Along with a concern with indeterminacy, Kracauer also shares with Artaud a desire to return to the ‘concrete density of things.’ In ‘Cinema and reality’, Artaud uses language and ideas which seem indistinguishable from those used by Kracauer in his 1927 ‘Photography’ essay, as well as in Theory of Film. Artaud states that:

The human skin of things, the epidermis of reality: this is the primary raw material of reality. Cinema exalts matter and reveals it to us in its profound spirituality . . . out of this pure play of appearances, out of this, so to speak, transubstantiation of elements is born an inorganic language which moves the mind . . . and because it works with matter itself, cinema creates situations which arise from the mere collision of objects, forms, repulsions, attractions. It does not detach itself from life but discovers the original order of things.

In a later paper from 1933, ‘The premature old age of the cinema’, Artaud continued to advocate an indeterminate and realistic aesthetic, arguing that dramatic cinema – in which compositional principles guide the spectator – suppresses the elements of chance and the unforeseen, which are fundamental to cinema. Artaud describes documentary cinema as the ‘last refuge of the partisans of cinema at any cost’, where the ‘poetry of things’ is able to emerge and, like Kracauer, he argues that the camera lens can present the world to the spectator, conjuring up ‘shreds of appearances’. However, and in distinction to the position adopted in ‘Cinema and reality’, Artaud is also more sceptical than Kracauer of film’s ability to connect these visible shreds of appearance ‘to that which is concealed beneath things . . . that which . . . swarms in the lower depths of the mind’. For Artaud, the fact that cinema remains on the epidermis of life is also a problem, and because of this he argues that ‘it is not to the cinema that we must look to restore the myths of man and the life of today’. Artaud’s scepticism here arises from his attitude towards the sound film, which he regards as ‘arresting the unconscious and spontaneous poetry of images’. Nevertheless, he still holds out the possibility, earlier posed in relation to the silent film, that films could both create a ‘melody amongst objects’ and connect that melody to psychological existence. For Artaud, it is the image in the mind of the spectator, an image of a poeticized world, which must emerge from cinema’s otherwise ‘stratified and frozen conquest of reality’.

Conclusions

Many studies of surrealism have concentrated on the use of anti-realist devices such as dépaysement and automatic writing, whilst
fewer studies have been made of the function of realism within surrealism. Such studies are particularly pertinent in relation to surrealist film because, as Artaud acknowledges, the film is an essentially realistic aesthetic medium. Kracauer's emphasis on realism emerges from the German critique of modernity and instrumental rationality, in which a return to the 'epidermis of reality' is seen as the way to redeem the modern subject. But what are the roots of realism within the French surrealist cinema?

To some extent the source of the mimetic content within surrealist art can be attributed to the desire to render the dream image vividly. However, this does not entirely explain the prevalence of realistic imagery within surrealist art, and particularly within the surrealist cinema. Another influence may have been the French determinist and naturalist intellectual tradition, which was particularly strong in French film culture. Filmmakers such as Clair, Vigo and Cavalcanti were all associated, in one way or another, with the naturalist movement. Cavalcanti is particularly interesting in this respect, because he was associated with both the surrealist movement and the British documentary film movement, and because, in 1936, he developed an approach to cinema which he defined as 'neorealist', which consisted of a synthesis of documentary naturalism and surrealism.

The naturalist tradition in France emerged from a tradition of determinist thought which went back to the eighteenth century, and included philosophers such as Condorcet and Helvetius, as well as writers such as Balzac, Flaubert and Zola. Surrealism's concern for the determining power of sexuality and the unconscious is, in many respects, comparable to the emphasis placed on the determining power of the subconscious genetic inheritance within naturalism. The naturalist tradition also influenced the French cinema from its inception. The first film adaptation of Zola appeared in 1903, and the tradition continued to influence French cinema through the 1920s and up to the appearance of Renoir's *La Bête humaine* in 1938. Naturalism constituted a strand within French cinema which both paralleled and interacted with modernist cinematic movements such as impressionism and surrealism.

The naturalist influence is particularly strong in the films of the most important surrealist filmmaker, Luis Buñuel, a Spaniard who, like Zola and Balzac, had studied natural history and entomology. Buñuel's films contain many of the same themes and characteristics as Zola's novels: there are similar concerns over the effects of location and environment on human suffering and degeneracy, and a similar engagement with issues such as temptation, desire, violent sexuality, bourgeois degeneracy and cruelty. Buñuel's films after *Un Chien andalou* are also characterized by a greater concern for naturalistic realism: *L'Age d'or* (1930) is considerably more 'realistic and everyday' than its predecessor, and there is a significant...
naturalist content in Las Hurdes (1932), Los Olvidados (1950), Nazarin (1958), Viridiana (1961) and Le Journal d'une femme de chambre (1963). Buñuel's films after 1970, such as Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie (1972), show less of an interest in naturalist content, but still retain an emphasis on the determined human situation.

Buñuel's films contain a combination of documentary realism, tragic humanism and surrealism. This combination of naturalism, surrealism and humanism was admired by the French critic André Bazin who, like Buñuel, had also studied natural history and entomology, and who, like Kracauer, had been influenced by phenomenology (that of Bergson, rather than Husserl). Some recent critical writings on surrealism have focused on the way in which the films and ideas of the movement can inform contemporary film theory, particularly feminist film theory. However, I want to argue here that it is also within a paradigm constituted by surrealism, naturalism and phenomenology, the ideas of Kracauer, Bazin and Artaud, and the films of Buñuel, Cavalcanti and others, that a potentially significant new surrealist film theory and practice can be defined. The best intellectual source for the development of such a theory and practice remains, in my view, the work of Kracauer.