Introduction

I realized in a flash the many existing parallels between history and the photographic media, historical reality and camera-reality.

SIEGFRIED KRAUCAER

Kracauer must think we read books on the movies to get our knowledge of history and philosophy.

PAULINE KAEL

This book reassesses Weimar cinema in light of the “crisis of historicism” widely diagnosed by German philosophers in the early twentieth century. I argue that films of the Weimar Republic lent vivid expression to the crisis of historical thinking, revealing the capacity of the medium to engage with fundamental questions of the philosophy of history. Reconstructing the extensive debates over historicism that unfolded during the initial decades of moving-image culture, I propose a more reflexive mode of historiography, exploring how the medium itself meditates on problems of historicism. Not least, I suggest an approach to studying cinema in conjunction with enduring historical-philosophical concerns.

In drawing attention to the philosophical critiques of historicism that gained an acute urgency and popular currency during the Weimar period, this book participates in critical reflection on the import and legacy of the “historical turn” in Cinema and Media Studies. Emerging in the mid-1970s, New Film History was animated by several impulses: a reaction against the monolithic assumptions of apparatus theory; the archival preservation and restoration of early cinema and the concomitant challenge to traditional conceptions of film history; an interest in the genealogy of nonnarrative, documentary, and avant-garde cinemas; the counterhistories associated with feminism, postcolonialism, and further political liberation movements; and, finally, a Marxist view of historical change that deemphasized individual inventors and pioneers in favor of uneven technological, socioeconomic, and institutional developments. These disparate strands wove together as television and analog video posed increasing threats to cinema’s status as the dominant dispositif and cultural form. The history of cinema could no longer be studied in isolation from a broader system and multimedia environment, and the hermeneutic analysis of filmic texts gave way to forensic and contextualist approaches.¹
New Film History has remade our understanding of cinema, correcting the inadequacies of prior accounts and opening areas of inquiry that have remained enormously generative. Yet the past years have seen stirrings of discontent with the methodological commitments that informed the discipline’s historical turn. For, in seeking to establish the study of cinema as an academic pursuit, revisionist film historians appealed to nineteenth-century practices and ideals of primary-source research, rigorous documentation, and precise, factual representation. Where New Film History aspired to what Thomas Elsaesser glossed as “scientific or empirical standards of exactitude and knowledge,” more recent scholarship has confronted absences and irreducible ambiguities in the archive, embracing approaches or artifacts often deemed speculative, unstable, dubious, or otherwise illegitimate. Questioning the objectivist and recuperative investments of New Film History, scholars such as Mark Lynn Anderson, Jane Gaines, Katherine Groo, Priya Jaikumar, and Samantha N. Sheppard have engaged theories of history and the archive by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Joan Wallach Scott, Saidiya Hartman, and others.

This book contributes to contemporary efforts to provide a more robust philosophical foundation for film and media historiography. Drawing film history into the history of ideas—especially ideas of history—I analyze five pioneering works of German silent cinema: Robert Wiene’s The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari, 1920), Fritz Lang’s Destiny (Der müde Tod, 1921), Hans Richter’s Rhythm 21 (Rhythmus 21, 1923–25), Arnold Fanck’s The Holy Mountain (Der heilige Berg, 1926), and Lang’s Metropolis (1927). With their experiments in cinematic form and style (e.g., intricate narrative structures, Expressionist mise-en-scène, abstract animation), these highly innovative and influential films gave expression to the early-twentieth-century crisis of historical thinking, demonstrating the ability of the medium to carry out complex thought on ontological, epistemological, and historiographical questions of the philosophy of history. Placing Weimar films in conversation with concurrent debates over historicism, I create intellectual commerce between cinema and the philosophy of history, and indeed show that this commerce has taken place since the advent of moving-image culture.

In this way, Historical Turns not only proposes a more reflexive and philosophically grounded mode of historiography, but also historicizes and expands the field of film philosophy. The status of theory in Cinema and Media Studies has been contested over the past decades on account of the discipline’s historical turn as well as the “post-theory” debate launched by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, who polemized against the grand
frameworks of semiology, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Althusserian Marxism that had shaped apparatus theory of the 1970s. Where Bordwell and Carroll have embraced “middle-level research” and “piecemeal theorizing” modeled on cognitivist science, D.N. Rodowick has sought to defend the unique character of humanistic inquiry by offering a “philosophy of the humanities”—one that entails a shift from film theory to film philosophy, which he traces back to writings by Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze that place cinema in the service of ontological and ethical examination. Among the key problems with Rodowick’s move to film philosophy, as commentators have observed, is that it forgoes the explicitly political concerns of 1970s film theory, including the emancipatory project of feminism and the Marxist tradition of ideology critique.

*Historical Turns* further challenges Rodowick’s programmatic work on film philosophy, particularly insofar as it has jettisoned questions of history. Much as Theodor W. Adorno critiqued Martin Heidegger for his turn to existential ontology amid the crisis of historicism (as subsequent chapters of this book discuss), I take issue with Rodowick’s focus on ontological and ethical questions during our own period of pervasive crisis rhetoric across the humanities. Where Rodowick has restricted his purview to the writings of Cavell and Deleuze from the 1970s forward, I significantly broaden the parameters of film philosophy by probing the nexus of film, history, and philosophy in the early twentieth century. Drawing sustained attention to the rich tradition of historical-philosophical debate in Germany, I position Weimar films as philosophical texts that engaged with the crisis of historicism, exploring the medium’s potential to complicate and reconfigure concepts of time and historicity—concepts that have assumed a central position in Cinema and Media Studies through books such as Philip Rosen’s *Change Mummified* (2001), Mary Ann Doane’s *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* (2002), and Laura Mulvey’s *Death 24 x a Second* (2006).

In pursuing the interconnections between film, history, and philosophy, *Historical Turns* opens an enormous cross-disciplinary and intermedial archive of historiographical, philosophical, artistic, literary, and other works. My main guide in this endeavor is Siegfried Kracauer, a journalist, critic, sociologist, and foundational film scholar whose career was bookended by questions of the philosophy of history. In a letter to Leo Löwenthal from March 1, 1922, Kracauer expressed interest in Heidegger’s “The Concept of Time in the Science of History” (“Der Zeitbegriff in der Geschichtswissenschaft,” 1916) and mentioned his own plans to begin a “metaphysics of history with a discussion of concepts of time.” While this project did not take expansive form during the Weimar period, the subject of history would move to the fore in
the final years of Kracauer’s life. In his correspondence with Löwenthal from the early 1960s, Kracauer again conveyed his strong desire to write about historical methodology and content, noting the affinities between film theory and the philosophy of history: “This essay on history, I suddenly realized, is the direct continuation of my Theory of Film [1960]: the historian has traits of the photographer, and historical reality resembles camera-reality.”

The unfinished and posthumously published essay in question, History: The Last Things before the Last (1969), returned to Kracauer’s abiding historical-philosophical concerns and further pursued the analogy between modern historiography and technological media. Kracauer may thus be placed within a trajectory of thinkers (e.g., Franklin H. Giddings, Walter Benjamin, Marc Bloch, Arthur Danto, A. R. Louch, Michel de Certeau, Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit) who have drawn comparisons with film in addressing issues of historical method and narration, suggesting the interrelation between the popular media and historical imagination of any epoch. In the following chapters, I revisit and sometimes revise Kracauer’s seminal contributions to the study of film and history, from his criticism of the 1920s up to his fragmentary final work. Where History has often been overshadowed by Kracauer’s earlier writings, my book moves it into the spotlight, reconstructing the extensive network of ideas and debates from which it emerged. Moreover, in illuminating the manifold links between cinema and the philosophy of history, Historical Turns serves as a corrective to the logocentrism of existing accounts of the crisis of historicism, which have commonly neglected the sphere of audiovisual culture.

Weimar cinema has been a privileged site for considering issues of film historiography and hermeneutics since Kracauer’s From Caligari to Hitler (1947). Where scholars have long contested Kracauer’s claim that the films of “pre-Hitler Germany” reveal protofascist psychological dispositions—Anton Kaes, for instance, has reversed Kracauer’s teleology, arguing that the films retrospectively registered the “shell shock” of World War I—this book redirects focus to the Weimar period’s own vital and prevalent historical-philosophical debates. I explore various aspects of the crisis of historicism by tracking across a full spectrum of film styles, modes, and genres: from the Expressionism of Caligari to the metaphysical allegory of Destiny, from the geometrical abstraction of Richter’s “absolute film” to the natural history of Fanck’s mountain film, and concluding with the summative pastiche of Metropolis. In analyzing these works on a formal and aesthetic level for their modernist experiments in nonlinear time, this book remains committed to the practice of interpretative close reading. The five
films under examination serve as tutor texts that help elucidate debates about time and history that permeated all realms of Weimar culture and remain relevant to the present day.

Chapter 1, “Historical Turns,” defines and situates the book’s central terms—historicism, the crisis of historicism, and the historical turn in Cinema and Media Studies—and lays out its interventions in key fields of study: film and media historiography, film and critical theory, philosophy of history, history and film, film philosophy, and Weimar cinema. As mentioned above, scholarship within the field of intellectual history has largely neglected the intersections between the crisis of historical thinking and the advent of moving-image culture; conversely, New Film History has seldom engaged with critical reflections on the theory and practice of history, often appealing to the very model of historical scholarship that came under intense scrutiny at the time of cinema’s emergence. Challenging the oversights of prior accounts, I emphasize the concurrence of the early-twentieth-century debates over historicism and the increasing recognition of film’s capacity as a medium of philosophical thought. In this way, I also historicize contemporary interest in film philosophy, unearthing a vast archive of writings that long predates the work of Cavell and Deleuze. Subsequent chapters then develop and substantiate the book’s argument, exploring facets of the crisis of historicism through the prism of disparate philosophers and films. Across the book’s chapters, I intend not only to offer novel interpretations of familiar, much-discussed films, but also to map out the historiographical implications of the technological medium, generating a loose typology of thinking about time and history through the moving image.

While cinema was quickly recognized for its ability to capture the phenomena of the contemporary world—Thomas Edison heralded his Kinetoscope as “a new way of recording history”—the invention also immediately gave rise to an enduring genre of films that restage and reenact the past.11 My second chapter, “Things As They Could Have Happened,” examines the genre of the historical film through the lens of Kracauer’s voluminous, often-untranslated writings across nearly half a century. Moving from Kracauer’s first film reviews in the Weimar Republic up to his final books in American exile, I demonstrate how his emerging critique of the genre developed into an aesthetics and theory of film as well as a general philosophy of history. In my analysis, the historical film was problematic for Kracauer, given the genre’s attempts to resurrect an irretrievably bygone past. Where a founder of modern historical science, Leopold von Ranke, aspired to show “how it essentially was [wie es eigentlich gewesen],” the historical film can only render “things as they could have happened.”12
Kracauer thus rethought the long-standing Aristotelian distinction between history and poetry, curiously locating the *poetics* of film in the medium’s documentary function as a *historian* of present-day life.

Robert Wiene’s classic of Expressionist cinema, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, has often served as a linchpin of arguments about the Weimar Republic. Repositioning *Caligari* as a deliberation on the period’s own debates on time and history, my third chapter, “Relativist Perspectivism,” studies the film at the nexus of two interlocking sets of developments: the popularization of Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity and widespread recognition of the relativist implications of historicist thought; and the rejection of perspectival conventions in the visual arts and the emergence of perspectivism in philosophy. Eliciting comparisons to Einstein’s theory upon its release, Wiene’s film challenges basic historicist tenets, conveying a radical skepticism regarding the possibility of detached, disinterested observation. With its enigmatic narrative and distorted, postperspectival set design, *Caligari* dismisses Ranke’s ideal of faithfully and impartially reconstructing the past. Instead, the film follows Friedrich Nietzsche’s early writings in suggesting a perspectivist sense of historical reality as the interplay of finite interpretations. *Caligari’s* legacy thus consists not only in its modernist aesthetics, but also in its engagement with fundamental historical-philosophical questions.

Appearing one year after *Caligari*, Fritz Lang’s *Destiny* similarly explores the potential of film, in the director’s own words, “to photograph *thoughts*, that is, render them visually.”13 My fourth chapter, “Metaphysics of Death,” approaches *Destiny* as a film-philosophical meditation on being and time after “the end of metaphysics” (Heidegger). I argue that *Destiny* is concerned with the status of death in a period of shattered faith in the meaning and coherence of history. Where the German historicist tradition treated historical entities (e.g., epochs, peoples, states) as irreducibly individual and unique—“every epoch is immediate to God [*unmittelbar zu Gott*],” in Ranke’s well-known phrase—Lang’s episode film conveys a visual poetics of parallelism and analogy, emphasizing transhistorical affinities and commonalities rather than distinct inner principles.14 Recognizing the collapse of historicism into relativism in the aftermath of a world war and global pandemic, the film contributed to Weimar philosophical debates by indicating that the very inescapability of death remains an abiding and universal truth. Lang’s film thus participated in the theorization of finitude that characterized Weimar intellectual and cultural life, offering what might be deemed a postmetaphysical metaphysics.

“History is what is happening today,” declared Hans Richter in a 1926 issue of his avant-garde journal *G: Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung (G:*
Calling for a mode of historiography that serves present-day artistic practice, Richter’s manifesto is at odds with his later writings that retrospectively chronicle the Dada movement, early documentary and experimental film, and the cinematic avant-garde in Germany. In Chapter 5, “The Nonsimultaneity of the Simultaneous,” I examine questions of time and history in Richter’s abstract films and theoretical writings of the Weimar era—works, in my analysis, that seek to negate the past and establish a temporality of pure presence. Analyzing *Rhythm 21* as a response to the crisis of historicism, I argue that Richter paradoxically relied on aesthetic and intellectual traditions in the very act of rejecting the past, articulating an antihistoricist presentism caught in a performative contradiction. Moreover, engaging with texts by interwar thinkers on the concept of nonsimultaneity (*Ungleichzeitigkeit*), I problematize Richter’s manifesto and suggest a reflexive approach to the “historical avant-garde”—one that historicizes it in relation to contemporaneous debates on the philosophy of history.

The genre of the mountain film (*Bergfilm*) is often characterized as a conservative retreat from the contingencies of sociopolitical history into a timeless, mythical nature. My sixth chapter, “Natural History,” argues that the genre participated in interwar debates on historicism by rethinking the very dualism of nature and history. Where Heidegger rendered the two terms identical, essentializing historicity as the basic ontological structure of *Dasein*, Adorno sought to overcome the reified antithesis of nature and history through a dialectical concept of natural history (*Naturgeschichte*). In my analysis, Arnold Fanck’s *The Holy Mountain* marks an instantiation of Adorno’s dialectics, tracing the interaction of nonidentical, ultimately irreconcilable human characters and geophysical forces. While the film appeals to what I call a cinematic jargon of authenticity, it also reveals seemingly fixed, lawful forces to be transient and finite. In this way, I show that early-twentieth-century Germany was already the site of nascent recognition of the mutability and potential destructibility of the Alpine landscape. Weimar films thereby prefigure contemporary efforts to reconsider the relationship between nature and history against the backdrop of global warming and climate catastrophe.

A culmination of silent-film aesthetics, *Metropolis* brought together heterogeneous elements of Weimar cinema. My epilogue, “The Weimar Analogy,” demonstrates that despite Weimar culture’s “hunger for wholeness” (Peter Gay), there was no return from fragmentation to cohesive unity, and from relativist skepticism to transcendental values and timeless, universal truths. While symptomatizing what Ernst Troeltsch identified as
a widespread longing for “synthesis, system, worldview, structure, and position,” Metropolis betrayed the promiscuous set of forms assumed by a younger generation’s revolt against its liberal bourgeois inheritance. I place Metropolis in conversation with two recent works of global cinema: Sorry to Bother You (Boots Riley, 2018) and Parasite (Bong Joon-ho, 2019). While these two films follow Metropolis in their use of vertically organized cityscapes to visualize class stratification, they extend and challenge the legacy of Lang’s film in allegorizing racial capitalism and environmental injustice. Finally, I contribute to ongoing scholarly discussions over the potential for drawing analogies between the Weimar Republic and our own moment of political, economic, and environmental crises, identifying vital questions that still emerge from the interwar debates over historicism.

Given my concern with a crisis of historicism, it may seem paradoxical that my book itself focuses on a particular cultural-linguistic context. As the following chapter elaborates, Germany was the site of a specific tradition of historiography and historical thinking that entered a state of acute, widely diagnosed crisis in the early twentieth century. This crisis gave rise to significant historical-philosophical debates that not only extended across academic disciplines, but also—as I argue—found more popular expression in the vibrant intellectual and film culture of the 1920s, when cinema gained increasing recognition as a novel medium of thought. Yet instead of presenting Weimar as a bounded, uniform epoch with a distinct zeitgeist, I trace longer-term inheritances and uneven, nonsynchronous developments, foregrounding German intellectuals’ own critiques of periodizing topos that lend undue consistency, homogeneity, and unified coherence to the historical process. And rather than treating Weimar Germany as irreducibly unique or “immediate to God,” I draw numerous connections to other contexts and also reflect on the ability of cross-temporal analogies to bring into relief the contours of the global present, helping us to write what Hans Richter invoked as a history of “what is happening today.”

To the extent that this book examines an earlier revolt against historicism even as it remains committed to aspects of the tradition at the levels of method and prose (e.g., contextualization, chronological succession, continuous or linear narration), it gestures to the basic antinomy of historical time identified by Kracauer, enacting what he ultimately proposed as “the ‘side-by-side’ principle.” In offering a historical account of antihistoricism, the book also signals an unavoidable irony, as flagged more recently by Frank Ankersmit: “Historicism quietly awaits us at the end of the route we had chosen in our attempt to escape from it.” If we are unable to evade
a historicist mode of thinking, we can nonetheless develop a more reflexive and philosophically grounded approach, exploring how the medium of film itself reflects on problems of historicism and engaging with broader historical-philosophical debates of the past. For, as I hope to demonstrate, we may yet learn from the interwar critiques of historicism in our own period of metastasizing crises. It is the wager of this book that Weimar philosophy and film provide new ways of thinking about the decisive issues of our own crisis-ridden time.