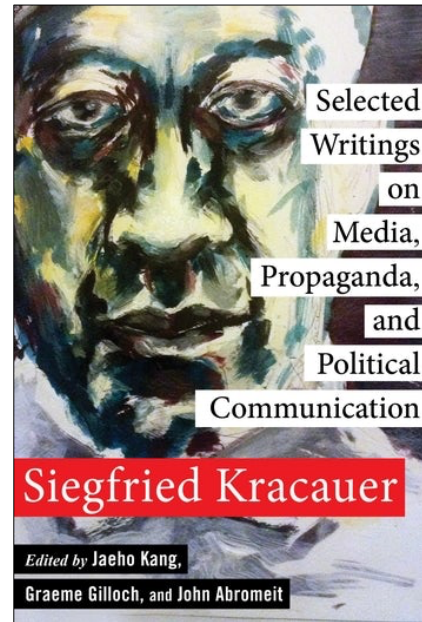


Siegfried Kracauer, Jaeho Kang, Graeme Gilloch, and John Abromeit (Eds.), **Selected Writings on Media, Propaganda, and Political Communication**, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2022, 480 pp., \$115.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by  
Aaron Hyzen  
University of Antwerp

***Selected Writings on Media, Propaganda, and Political Communication*** is a new collection of work by Siegfried Krakauer. Editors Jaeho Kang, Graeme Gilloch, and John Abromeit have assembled this retrospective of Kracauer (1889–1966) as part of a renewed interest in his work and writings. Historically less well-known compared with some of his contemporaries such as Walter Benjamin or Theodor Adorno, Kracauer is now being recognized as one of the most forward-thinking critical theorists of the twentieth century, specifically because his work draws together the realms of the political and popular culture for critical analysis, notably innovative in his time. This book will surely appeal to Frankfurt and critical school scholars, especially those researching the role of media in society. It is also relevant to scholars of propaganda, populism, and film and should pique some interest from the wider political communication field, as well as media and communications scholars focused on the mid-20th century, World War II, and Cold War eras.



The book is well-structured and begins with a thorough general introduction, contextualizing the various chapters as well as offering insightful anecdotes about Kracauer's life and career. For example, his contentious relationship with figures like Adorno and hostile exchanges of manuscripts are a reminder that there have always been tough reviewers. Adorno's critiques are revisited and elaborated on in the appendix, which contains two sections: Adorno's original criticism of Kracauer and editor John Abromeit's positioning of Kracauer concerning the Frankfurt School and analysis of fascist populism. The book contains collections of essays divided into four parts: Studies in Totalitarianism, Propaganda, and the Masses (1936–1940); The Caligari Complex (1943–1947); Postwar Publics (1948–1950), and Cold War Tensions (1952–1958). Each section begins with a valuable introduction providing an overview of the proceeding chapters. The section on Cold War tensions engages in quantitative and qualitative methodological discussions that feel very relevant today.

When evaluating a retrospective or anthology of writings, in this case, Siegfried Kracauer's, it is natural to ask: why revisit this particular scholar, at this particular moment? What lessons and analyses from their time illuminate our times? As Kracauer's work fast approaches the century mark, we find ourselves, though not identically, under similar conditions of change in media practices, rapid technological development, and political polarization. I agree with the editors when they state:

Many of his concerns in these writings are all too relevant for us today. The “prophets of deceit”—as Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Gutermann so memorably described them back in 1949—are not only still among us, but they prosper now in new guises and have at their disposal unprecedented technological means of mass propagation and circulation, modes of ideological transmission and forms of interaction unimaginable in Kracauer’s own lifetime. (p. xi)

First off, Kracauer promptly recognized the importance of popular culture and mass media as objects of study and was the central critical theorist engaging in this analysis. Noting his recognition and engagement “with the proliferation and prevalence of new forms and technologies of cultural production” (p. 5; i.e., radio, television, and film), we find ourselves contending with political and cultural meaning in the wake of the digital revolution and its myriad of platforms, apps, and social media. To this end, Kracauer’s reflections and observations warrant revisiting to process the current state of digital popular culture, empirical questions concerning big data research about propaganda, political communication, and popular culture.

As the title of this edited collection suggests, the editors have selected pieces that focus on the areas of propaganda and political communication and scholars of these subfields will find them compelling. One chapter that stands out is “Totalitarian Propaganda,” where Kracauer explains that in his view, the principles, strategies, and propaganda techniques of totalitarian movements to construct, or in a sense unite, the masses under conditions favorable to fascism and control. The study relies on a review of writings by Mussolini, Goebbels, Hierl, and Hitler in comparison to Marxist socialist revolutionary ideology and movements. This chapter, and indeed the whole first section of the book, is not only important historically as an exposition of fascist propaganda doctrine at the time, but Kracauer also makes many observations that remain relevant. For example, “Totalitarian propaganda targets a mass that is precisely not governed and guided by one interest,” noting that “seducers of masses are not only persons but also interests. That is precisely the reason why National Socialism and Fascism prefer masses that can be called ‘broad’ conglomerates, in which many divergent interests clash and weaken one another” (p. 59). Kracauer argues that this results in the elimination of consciousness, concluding that the masses are not attracted to objectivity or the values of liberal political diversity, but rather, the masses prefer the clarity of a doctrine that does not tolerate ideological competitors or alternatives (p. 59). In today’s polarized political and cultural climate, we can observe, broadly speaking, similar symptoms and communication strategies across the ideological spectrum. We also see this expressed in art and film, where political affiliation is increasingly affecting cultural production and consumption. For many, the 2023 summer blockbuster film was the patriarchy-critical *Barbie* (Ackerley, Brenier, Heyman, & Robbie, 2023), for others it was the QAnon-inspired *Sound of Freedom* (Verástegui, 2023).

Another particularly interesting observation of Kracauer was the importance of in-person rallies and speeches to fascist movements in consolidating identities and ideology. Noting that in Germany, “mass gatherings have become the rule; so far, attendance at mass rallies has been obligatory” (p. 73). Kracauer argues totalitarian propaganda functions as an “attenuation of consciousness,” continuing that the “‘mass-man’ finds himself in a condition that borders on hypnosis” (pp. 60–61). Kracauer explains the hypnotic deference to authority found in massifying the individual, showing, in their own words, Hitler and

Goebbels's own commitment to the mass rally, speeches, and their overwhelming success. Certainly, in propaganda and political campaign research, this sort of focus and analysis has taken a backseat to the analysis of computational methods and digitization, understandably so. However, if we look at contemporary election campaigns, it is clear that speeches and rallies, beyond the mediated, remain cornerstones of populist success. For example, in the run-up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the Trump campaign held countless rallies that were largely ignored at the time, contributing to the fact that his victory seemingly came as a surprise. Though less ignored and more celebrated, the same could be said about the effectiveness of Obama's rallies. While these topics are being revisited (Montgomery, 2020; Snyder & Yousaf, 2020), Kracauer's work shines a penetrating light on how many of these "classic" techniques continue to be deployed effectively inside and outside the digital.

Kracauer was a scholar offering fresh insights during truly turbulent and grave times. Our times are not entirely analogous, but there are disturbing trends. The rise of right-wing populism across the United States and Europe adds relevance and gravitas to Siegfried Kracauer's writings on fascist movements. Likewise, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the alliances that fortified or failed, and the ensuing media coverage reflecting those allegiances, give similar weight to his writings in the section "Cold War Tensions." Thus, the topics and approach ought to prove relevant to a variety of fields today. Those less familiar with critical theory terminology could benefit from a brief review to make the reading smoother, though it is not a high bar. At moments Kracauer's writing style can produce McLuhan-like statements, both compelling and mysterious, that initially could be confusing for some readers. Likewise, he sometimes uses abstract writing structure. My background is as a scholar of propaganda, political communication, and political economy rather than Frankfurt School, and I found that this book gave refreshing insights outside my typical paradigm. Overall, I have found these writings inspiring and offering avenues toward updating the current media ecosystem.

### References

- Ackerley, T., Brenier, R., Heyman, D., Robbie, M. (Producers), & Gerwig, G. (Director). (2023). *Barbie* [Motion picture]. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros.
- Montgomery, M. (2020). Populism in performance? Trump on the stump and his audience. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 19(5), 733–765.
- Snyder, J. M. Jr., & Yousaf, H. (2020). Making rallies great again: The effects of presidential campaign rallies on voter behavior, 2008–2016 (No. w28043). *National Bureau of Economic Research*. Retrieved from [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w28043/w28043.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w28043/w28043.pdf)
- Verástegui, E. (Producer), & Monteverde, A. (Director). (2023). *Sound of freedom* [Motion picture]. Provo, UT: Angel Studios.