

Fragments, Cityscapes, Modernity. Kracauer on the Cannebière

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Abstract

Written as a small tribute to David Frisby's inspiring, pioneering work on Critical Theory and the modern cityscape, this essay explores a number of *feuilletons* and other textual fragments in which the cultural theorist Siegfried Kracauer expresses his enduring fascination with the French port of Marseilles. It is suggested that this city has a two-fold significance for him: firstly, in the vibrancy of its street-life, Marseilles is an exemplary, indeed inspirational, instance of the cinematic qualities of modern urban environments. It is to Marseilles that Kracauer's 1960 *Theory of Film* is indebted not only for its first formulation but also for its central motif of the quotidian 'flow of life' to which the film camera must attend. Secondly, this seedy city constitutes the preeminent site of 'promiscuous modernity', understood here in two senses: not only as an environment of explicit sexuality and sexual activity/exchange, but also one that is 'for mixing' – that is to say, open and inviting to the most eclectic and outré elements. This notion of promiscuity as the continuous co-presence and curious contiguity of heterogeneous populations and incongruous objects also has its filmic aspect – as Kracauer observes elsewhere, such surreal juxtapositions are also to be found off-set in the costumes and props of the film studio. In its fusion of everyday urban energies and extraordinary eccentricities, the cinematic city of Marseilles takes on a dreamlike quality.

Keywords

Cityscape, film, Frisby, Kracauer, Marseilles, modernity, promiscuity

With thanks

I actually met David Frisby on only a few occasions, but it is true nonetheless that both my academic work and my career are profoundly indebted to him. Our first encounter was in Cambridge back in 1990, after he had kindly agreed to take on the role of external examiner at my doctoral viva; our last meeting, some eighteen years later, was

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coincidentally at another doctoral viva, this time at the London School of Economics with David serving as the internal and me now in the role of external. In between we had had brief chats at a couple of conferences here and there. But also, in between, David had generously and graciously written innumerable references on my behalf in support of applications for fellowships that would take me to Germany and for lectureships that would bring me back to the UK, journeys that would define my academic life. He never complained at the absurdly short notice I gave, and remained an enduring source of encouragement for each new venture. And there is more: for me, his work was inspirational. Published just as my own fascination with Walter Benjamin's labyrinthine urban writings was first forming, David's *Fragments of Modernity* (1988) was decisive in so many ways: in its subtle and sensitive readings of Georg Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer and Benjamin as social and cultural theorists of urban modernity; in the elegance of its tripartite, dialectical form and the lucidity and deftness of its prose; in the intensive use of painstakingly mined archival material; in the rigour and precision of its scholarship. I read it with that mixture of intoxicating excitement and intense anguish familiar to all doctoral students (oh please let there be something still left for me to say!). In unfolding these writers, David not only opened up so many new possible things to say, he also enthused and encouraged those who tried as best they could to say them. What follows is a small offering in thanks from someone with much reason to be grateful.

Cityscape and dreamscape

In *Fragments of Modernity* (1988) and *Cityscapes of Modernity* (2001), David focused his attention on the great imperial metropolitan centres of the North, those European cities of 'pallid, foggy countries', as the Viennese journalist and author Joseph Roth once described them,¹ at particular historical moments: the final years of Wilhelminian Berlin so vividly rendered by the Expressionists; Paris of the Second Empire, capital of the nineteenth century, and home to the phantasmagoria of arcades and operettas; and Habsburg Vienna as envisaged and designed by Otto Wagner, as home to Robert Musil, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Sigmund Freud. Interestingly for me, at the same time, those same writers who fascinated David most were also attracted to, and penned portraits of, the cities of Southern Europe and the Mediterranean: Georg Simmel composed miniatures on the contrasting architectural aesthetics of Rome (1898),² Florence (1906) and Venice (1907);³ Walter Benjamin sketched his now-famous *Denkbilder* ('thought images') capturing the boisterous everyday life of Naples and Marseilles in the 1920s; and Kracauer wrote numerous *feuilleton* fragments for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in the Weimar years reflecting on various excursions to the French and Italian coasts (Marseilles, Nice, Positano).

For Kracauer, some of these various Mediterranean destinations were, years later, to constitute the 'anderswo' ('elsewhere') of his *Strassen in Berlin und Anderswo* (*Streets in Berlin and Elsewhere*, 1987 [1964]), a collection of essays and other fragments from the 1920s and 1930s which he himself selected for republication in one volume. And it is in one of these texts from 1926, 'Stehbars im Süden' ('Standing Bars in the South'), that one finds the following typically puzzling, typically provocative distinction, prompted, it seems, by a visit to some commonplace drinking establishment in Nice: 'The cities of

the North appear to be dreaming, those of the Mediterranean have something of the dream about them' (1987 [1964]: 50).⁴

In this paper I turn to one of these cities with 'something of the dream', Marseilles, a city that Kracauer was to experience at first hand in the very different guises of tourist, reporter and, finally, refugee.⁵ It was, moreover, a city which, in the crowded confusion of its rough and ready street-life, resonated with key themes in his work: the ceaseless torrent of modern urban existence as happenstance and contingency; the perpetual restlessness of people and things forming and dissolving transient patterns and ephemeral figures; the continual emergence of new and unexpected possibilities and potentialities amid the quotidian flux; the predilection for the unforeseen, for improvisation, for the extempore. These vital attributes of everyday urban existence are not only key motifs for Kracauer's various writings on Marseilles, and indeed on other cityscapes, but they are also central to his understanding of the character and role of the film medium and its 'elective affinity' with the modern metropolitan environment. And this is neither coincidental nor insignificant: as the late Miriam Hansen has pointed out, Kracauer's *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1997a [1960]) finds its origins in a series of notebooks that he kept while in Marseilles anxiously awaiting an escape route from Occupied France in 1940–1941.⁶ It is surely the teeming, turbulent cityscape of Marseilles that Kracauer has in mind when he writes of the predilection of the film camera for recording and rendering the 'unstaged' hustle and bustle of the urban street:

The street in the extended sense of the word is not only the arena of fleeting impressions and chance encounters but a place where the flow of life is bound to assert itself. Again one will have to think mainly of the city street with its ever-moving anonymous crowds. The kaleidoscopic sights mingle with unidentified shapes and fragmentary visual complexes and cancel each other out, thereby preventing the onlooker from following up any of the innumerable suggestions they offer. What appears to him are not so much sharp-contoured individuals engaged in this or that definable pursuit as loose throngs of sketchy, completely indeterminate figures. Each has a story, yet the story is not given. Instead, an incessant flow of possibilities and near-intangible meanings appears. This flow casts its spell over the *flâneur* or even creates him.

(1997a [1960]: 72)

And it is the very failure of one particular movie to live up to this promise of filmic *flânerie* – that is to say, to capture all of this vitality and vibrancy of Mediterranean proletarian street-life – that leads Kracauer to open his 1932 fragment 'Marseilles' with an expression of bitter disappointment:

I recently saw Marseilles again after a long time. Saw it in a film based on Pangol's popular stage play *Marius*. An unforgivably boring film ... it doesn't even make the most of the chance it has to lead us through the streets of Marseilles. A fleeting glance into the alleys of the harbour, a few street-level shots and the usual sailing boats – it grants us no more than that.

(1996: 292)

But even these few clichéd images are enough for Kracauer to ignore the rest of the feeble film and let his mind wander freely amid the city he remembers:

And yet these laughable suggestions transported me into the heart of the city and instead of listening to the interminable dialogue I pushed through the bead curtain and walked the streets as I had often done before. Marseilles is so much the present that it only needs to give the merest hint and one is wholly there.

(1996: 292)

Of course, it is interesting to note that even though the film in question is hopelessly inadequate to the task of representing the myriad sights and sounds of Marseilles, nevertheless it still succeeds in recalling them, or at least in prompting Kracauer's own vivid recollections. Film works as a mnemonic device even, perhaps *especially*, where and when it fails in its mimetic role. We will return to this cinematic character of Marseilles.

Marseilles as 'elsewhere'

The *Strassen in Berlin* collection itself contains two contrasting texts on Marseilles:⁷ one representing the cityscape in terms of its panoramic and perspectival possibilities; the other recounting an enigmatic and ephemeral encounter with one of the innumerable figures of destitution and decay drawn up from the urban underworld. In its concern with the spatial configurations of the city and the dubious pleasures of spectatorship and surveillance, 'Zwei Flächen' ('Two Planes') (1926) juxtaposes, on the one hand, the natural 'dazzling amphitheatre' (1995 [1963]: 37) which encloses the bay around the city's old harbour district and, on the other, a deserted square set amid the labyrinthine backstreets of the proletarian districts, enclosed by houses of vice and corruption, and where the inquisitive stranger ventures at some peril. For Kracauer, this pair of horizontal 'planes' or 'surfaces' share the curious sense of a perspective onto nothing, of gazes cast upon emptiness, of a vigilance presiding over a void: the old harbour, where once a colourful spectacle of sailing ships and fishing boats greeted the visitor, is now long past its heyday, has 'lost its luster' (1995 [1963]: 37) and must make do with the comings and goings of a few pleasure boats and yachts, shipping that has not, unlike the great ocean liners and cargo ships, abandoned it for new port facilities nearby;⁸ the little square, 'stamped into the urban tangle' (1995 [1963]: 39), seemingly offers nothing of interest, and yet all eyes are fastened upon it. And in each of these expanses there is the palpable feeling of danger and entrapment, of the unwary being irresistibly and inescapably lured into them, of the inattentive becoming inextricably entangled in the suspicious scrutiny of unseen others as in a web or a net. 'The city', Kracauer warns, 'keeps its fishing nets open' (1995 [1963]: 38). Perhaps this little text does not so much capture the cityscape of Marseilles as give due warning against *being captured* by it.

Indeed, this profound sense of unease and disquiet which pervades the city and troubles the visitor, one I have referred to elsewhere as the uncanny combination of 'sunshine and noir',⁹ imbues the other Marseilles text forming the last piece of the *Strassen* collection: 'Erscheinung auf dem Cannebière' ('Apparition on the Cannebière'). This fragment finds the eponymous Ginster, Kracauer's Chaplinesque everyman and innocent abroad,

in front of a café on the city's main thoroughfare late one evening. Before him, the little square calls to mind an eclipse: a dark centre encircled by intense illumination. It is, for him, a veritable 'site of coincidence' ('*Zufallsplatz*') (2004: 255). Suddenly his attention is caught by a ghastly and ghostly figure, an ageing woman whose grotesque appearance – starkly contrasting black attire and white powdered face accentuated by a motley collection of military medals on her breast and an outré riding cap on her head – betrays a lifetime of working the streets. She is an anachronism, a walking ruin, a figure who has seemingly stepped straight out of a Ludwig Kirchner canvas. Fascinated like the anonymous narrator of Edgar Allen Poe's 'Man of the Crowd' story,¹⁰ Ginster finds himself drawn into following this eccentric figure as she wanders across the Cannebière and over to the old harbour, where, in response to a policeman's impertinent call, she turns and contemptuously sticks out her tongue, a gesture of defiance which elevates her above any patronizing sense of pathos and pity. Imperturbable, seemingly indifferent to possible customers, she is, unlike Poe's bizarre character, no desperate seeker of stimulation or solace amid the city crowds, which in any case gradually melt away in the Mediterranean night. Nor is she 'the type and genius of deep crime' (Poe, 1986: 188). But like 'the man of the crowd', our madame of Marseilles defies definitive interpretation, eludes our understanding, and, ultimately, '*läßt sich nicht lesen*' (does not permit herself to be read) (Poe, 1986: 179). And here is her significance, for, in remaining a mystery, she becomes the very embodiment of the uncanny haunting the streets of this seedy cityscape. In the final analysis we might simply say: she has 'something of the dream' about her.

'Promiscuous modernity'

The 'apparition' on the Cannebière is, of course, not alone; indeed, prostitution here, like poverty, like pollution of all kinds, literal and metaphorical, is an unavoidable phenomenon that floods out from the city's backstreets, spills onto its squares and avenues, and drains inevitably downward to the harbour front, flushing out at least the hypocrisy and cant of bourgeois opprobrium and moral respectability that elsewhere consigns such misery to the metropolitan shadows. And so not surprisingly it is a recurrent motif in Kracauer's fragments on the city. In another 1926 *feuilleton* piece, 'Die Frau vor dem Café' ('Woman in Front of the Café'),¹¹ the eponymous figure, stationed like an ever-vigilant sentinel at a street café, keeping patient, silent watch over the traffic of the street, seems a younger and better dressed incarnation of our seductive spectre. Her continual humiliation, Kracauer notes, is not being allowed to sit at one of the café's many empty tables – these are reserved for customers only, as the haughty waiters are quick to remind her. And so she stands there, is made to stand there, and hence stands out like 'a narrow reef in the gloss of the café' (1997b: 46).¹² But she is not only an accretion on, an irritation to, the café; she is also quite capable of turning the tables on her own customers, putting them to shame with a scornful stare. Kracauer observes as a stranger proffering money approaches her. She merely looks up and eyes him with a quizzical expression. The coin falls and rolls on the cobbles. She lets it roll.

True, then, in Marseilles one encounters all manner of modern misery: one is subject to the raucous din of the workaday port, assailed by the stench of industrial fumes and urban filth, threatened on all sides by the contagious presence and proximity of

corruption, and confronted by the contempt and hostility of those with little left to lose, but the last vestiges of dignity to defend. And this sensory assault, this 'moral miasma', may well appall the squeamish tourists who, preferring the deceptive façades of bourgeois decency and decorum, are more than happy to be merely passing through. Kracauer, by contrast, expresses, if not his relish, then certainly his preference for this public staging of the obscene of modernity:

... there is something right about things, so you end up staying in Marseilles even if you originally only wanted to spend the night. And then you learn to love the din, prefer the overt filth to hidden grime, and find the undisguised prostitution more noteworthy than some over-polished states of civilization.

(1996: 293)

The city openly parades its iniquities and inequalities: luxurious wealth and abject poverty are incongruous and uncomfortable bedfellows.¹³ Taking in the spectacle of the Cannebière, that 'street of streets' (1997b: 270), one is only too aware that, just a stone's throw away are the squalid sidestreets and alleyways of Marseilles, all subject to the same relentless decline and dereliction as the old harbour itself: 'A labyrinth of houses and alleyways, its topography absolutely unfathomable. If this was once the centre of urban life, then today it is the place where the trash collects' (1996: 271).

Perhaps such brazen disparities and contradictions allow for the critical 'disenchantment', the de-mythologization, of the modern capitalist city; in any case, they are certainly what give this city its distinctive sense of immediacy and proximity: it is always and everywhere utterly 'present' or 'actual' ('*Gegenwart*'), even in the most tedious films.¹⁴ This in turn is what prompts Kracauer to write: 'Marseilles is small, Marseilles is big. A provincial town. The world' (1997b: 270).

This notion of Marseilles as 'the world', as a world in miniature, a veritable cosmopolis of waifs and strays, of outcasts and misfits, is highly significant. What Kracauer finds so beguiling in Marseilles is not simply the vibrancy of its public spaces but, above all, the radical heterogeneity and incongruity of its fabulous, floating population. In one of several similar descriptions of the exoticism of the Cannebière,¹⁵ and one which highlights precisely those qualities he will later identify as cinematic, Kracauer acclaims the street as

... the elusive meeting place for all the peoples of the earth. Above all, of Africa and the Orient. Moroccans in burnouses, Negroes, Indians, Armenian beards surge by, a procession without order or cohesion, as likely to break off as the tales of the 'Thousand and One Nights'. To be able to remain seated at colourful café tables and finally take in this living picture of anarchy! It is an apparition¹⁶ that will vanish and, at the same time, illuminates future times.¹⁷ I vainly try to bring the roaring Cannebière to a standstill. It has to be experienced, undergone, it cannot be held fast. And so it is with Marseilles as a whole.

(1996: 293)

As a port, an entry and departure point, a crossroads, a place of passing through *en route* elsewhere, the city has long been the site of multifarious multicultural encounters

and exchanges, of diversity, alterity and hybridity. Marseilles remains a stopover, a transient way-station for those multitudes in transit, *en passant*: itinerants, travellers, seafarers, migrants, nomads, refugees, fugitives, escapees, not forgetting those hapless tourists. As a colony of the colonized, a cityscape of the subaltern, Marseilles provides an unhomely home to anyone and to no-one in particular; it proffers shelter for the 'spiritually shelterless' of society, allows those of no fixed abode to bide their time.¹⁸ As Kracauer was himself to discover in 1940, the city can also become a web catching and trapping all those in flight.

This brings us to what I suggest is the very leitmotif of Kracauer's fragmentary accounts of Marseilles: the representation of the cityscape as a site of *promiscuity*, understood here in two senses: firstly, in its more common usage, it is a locus of casual, indiscriminate and overt or explicit sexual activity; and, secondly, perhaps more importantly, it is a space given over to and favouring mixing and mingling of diverse elements – 'promiscuous' from the Latin *pro-miscere*, literally as 'for mixing'. In the profusion and confusion of its street-life, Marseilles as an 'assembly point of nations' (1997b: 260) constitutes the space and spectacle of modernity *as* promiscuity, of 'promiscuous modernity'. It is perhaps little wonder then that prostitution and the figure of the prostitute feature so prominently in Kracauer's writings on the city as the very embodiment of this double promiscuity: sex as the combination, the conjoining, of bodies; sex as sold by 'whores of all nations, young and old' (1997b: 271), as bought by customers from everywhere and anywhere. Now, while it is doubtless the case that Marseilles constitutes a cityscape of sexual selling, of sexual mixing, this would be, at best, a tired refrain, a banal conclusion.¹⁹ And it would miss Kracauer's abiding concern with the interconnections of cinema and cityscape, for the notion of promiscuity is something they share, albeit indirectly – that is to say, not so much on-screen as off-set.

While a trip to the cinema in 1932 brings Marseilles to mind for Kracauer, his accounts of the city's eccentric and eclectic (dis)array of inhabitants remind me of his visit to UFA's film studios in Neubabelsberg, just outside Berlin, as recounted in yet another 1926 essay, 'Calico-World'. Here, off-camera, one enters into another world in miniature, a realm of fakes and fabrications presided over by set designers, props managers, animal trainers and wardrobe supervisors. Behind the scenes are stored the most fanciful and fantastic assemblage of objects, costumes, flora, fauna and figures, an utterly surreal manifold ranging across time and space, bringing together 'all periods, peoples, and styles' (1995 [1963]: 282) under the obscure rules of a 'regime of arbitrariness' (1995 [1963]: 283). Nowhere is this promiscuity more apparent than when, as Kracauer wryly observes, the everyday and the extraordinary are to be found side-by-side, lunching nonchalantly in comical counterpoint: 'One of the primary hubs is the canteen, where people in full costume sit among white-collar workers, technicians, and chauffeurs, looking like leftovers from a carnival' (1995 [1963]: 287).

This seems to me a most apt image. In their propensity for mixing, the streets of Marseilles certainly share this penchant for the surreal. Moreover, as a promiscuous cityscape, while it may seem to offer the eroticism and ecstasy of the carnivalesque, in its sleaze and seediness, Marseilles is truly home only to the soiled residues of such revelleries, to their leavings and 'leftovers'. Indeed, what better description could be found for the 'apparition' on the Cannebière than this, for is she not precisely the most forlorn

remainder and reminder of past excesses? And this is not all: for at the same time she is an exemplary instance of those ‘sketchy, completely indeterminate figures’ with a tale to tell but for whom ‘the story is not given’, whom the film camera might chance upon, and who are its true subject matter. Indeed, now more sleepwalker than streetwalker, perhaps this is her secret mission: as uncanny somnambulist, to lend her city, Marseilles, a cinematic air, and to ensure that it will always have ‘something of the dream’ about it.

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Notes

1. See Roth (2004: 97).
2. See Simmel (1992: 301–310).
3. See Simmel (1993: 69–73 and 258–263, respectively).
4. Where there are no existing English versions, translations in this paper are my own in collaboration with Bernadette Boyle, to whom I would like to express my sincere thanks.
5. With his wife-to-be Elisabeth (Lili) Ehrenreich, Kracauer visited Marseilles in September 1926 and then again in the following September/October. In September 1929 they were in the South of France once more, this time in the Basque country on the Atlantic coast. See ‘Baskische Küste’ (1929) in Kracauer (1997b: 262–268). In June 1940, they fled from Paris to Marseilles, where they, like so many others, Walter Benjamin among them, searched desperately for a means of escape from Occupied France. In late February 1941, with the absurdly complex paperwork finally in hand, they were able to cross Spain and Portugal and then, in mid-April, leave Lisbon as third-class passengers on board the *Nyassa* bound for New York. For a detailed chronology see Belke and Renz (1988).
6. See Hansen’s Introduction to Kracauer (1997a [1960]) and especially pp. xiv–xxi.
7. Ironically, given that they are both reports from ‘elsewhere’, these two writings also appear ‘elsewhere’ – that is to say, in other books. ‘Two Planes’ was published in Kracauer’s other, earlier *feuilleton* selection, *Der Ornament der Masse* (1963, translated as *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, 1995) and its first section reappears in altered form in the fragment ‘Marseilles’ published in February 1930 (see Kracauer, 1997b: 269); ‘Apparition on the Cannebière’ was culled from the final pages of Kracauer’s semi-autobiographical novel *Ginster* (1928), a book bearing a dedication to Lili: ‘Für L. zur Erinnerung an *Marseille* 1926 und 1927’ (‘For L. in memory of Marseilles, 1926 and 1927’). See Kracauer (2004: 255–256).
8. In the 1930 ‘Marseilles’ piece, Kracauer makes this obsolescence clear: ‘The old harbour has long since ceased to serve major shipping. Ocean-going steamers dock at the Quai de la Joliette and at neighbouring quays stretching out in a wide arc’ (1997b: 269).
9. See Gilloch (2010).
10. See Poe (1986: 179–188).
11. While the ‘Apparition on the Cannebière’ text clearly forms the end of the eleventh and final chapter of *Ginster*, this piece seems to prefigure certain motifs of the chapter’s opening (a woman standing before the terrace of café, caught in the glow of its lights; sellers of birds, be they real or artificial; the description of passers-by and of darting taxis). See Kracauer (2004: 245–246).
12. This bathing or silhouetting of figures of destitution in the glow of the illuminated city is

- characteristic of Marseilles as a whole. Kracauer concludes his 1930 text with: 'Notre-Dame de la Garde is visible on high and, untouched by squalor, illuminates the city. Perhaps the squalor adds to her luminosity and she certainly envelopes the rags in radiance' (1997b: 272).
13. In Marseilles, Kracauer observes: 'The contradictions are drawn close together. From wealth to acute poverty is only a step' (1996: 270).
 14. Ginster, at any rate, is intoxicated with and esteems this inescapable intimacy with the debris and detritus of everyday life. In his eyes, like those of a ragpicker, 'the waste, bits of laundry and filth' chanced upon are transformed into 'treasures' (2004: 248). Indeed, for him, the 'mishmash' (2004: 249) of decrepit backstreet buildings has a humble and humane quality that will endure and outlive those pretentious palaces and imposing castles erected elsewhere in the service of power and vanity (see 2004: 252).
 15. See, for example, Kracauer (1997b: 270) and (2004: 245).
 16. The German term here is, once again, '*Erscheinung*', and it is perhaps interesting to think of the contrasts between these two rather different 'appearances' on the Cannebière.
 17. Written in 1932, this notion of an intimation of the future is intriguing in two senses at least: on the one hand, one cannot but think in terms of Kracauer's own fate less than ten years later, just one desperate figure amid crowds of other refugees from all across Europe in 1940–1941; on the other, and this is not to overstretch the point, we have here an early vision, an intimation, of our own multicultural urban spaces of today.
 18. Like Ginster. He says of the city's harbour district: 'Here I am almost at home' (2004: 252), the 'almost' ('*beinah*') serving as an essential qualification. It is significant, of course, that Ginster comes to understand his own elective affinity with the city following his first sexual experiences with the prostitute Emmi. In Marseilles, he has the sense that he has 'finally stumbled upon a world corresponding to the state I found myself in after the girl' (2004: 252).
 19. As Elizabeth Wilson (1991), among many others, has pointed out, the representation of the urban prostitute is one of the most clichéd figures in modernism.

Kracauer's Marseilles texts

- 'The woman in front of the café' (1926) in Kracauer (1997b: 44–46).
 'Two planes' (1926) in Kracauer (1995 [1963]: 37–39) and (1987 [1964]: 19–21).
 'Apparition on the Cannebière' (1928/1931) in Kracauer (1987 [1964]: 118–119) and (2004: 255–256).
 'Marseilles' (1930) in Kracauer (1997b: 269–272).
 'Marseilles' (1932) in Kracauer (1996: 292–294).

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