In his 1927 essay “Photography,” Siegfried Kracauer argued that the camera’s capacity to “register the spatial imprint of people, conditions, and events from every possible perspective” led to the eradication of memory, rather than its extension, and it destroyed, rather than enhanced, our consciousness of the real. Kracauer used the word Abkłatsch to signify this spatial imprint, connoting both a poor copy and a cast impression taken from an extant model to highlight the indexical nature of the photograph as well as its deficiency in giving us back the world through replication. In his diagnosis of photography as a mass medium, he added: “Artworks are injured by this fate through their reproductive.” The twin specters of the wounded artwork and the diminished beholder in the wake of an onslaught of photographic images would subsequently haunt the “Facsimile Debate” published in the Hamburg art journal Der Kreis in 1929. The contribution provided by Erwin Panofsky, for example, pulled back from the metaphor of suffering central to Kracauer’s verdict. Panofsky claimed that reproductions conformed to their own aesthetic criteria irreducible to those in operation for the artworks they registered and that they could even have a salutary effect on the acumen of those confronted with the art of the past in the era of the silent film, the gramophone, and the illustrated magazine.

A central point of contention in the “Facsimile Debate” was the analogy between photographic reproduction and plaster casts of sculpture. Yet, as reproductions of artworks were produced and disseminated on an industrial scale, the display of casts, long sanctioned for study and connoisseurship, was suddenly guilty by association. How, precisely, were form and material liaised? What did a given reproduction actually return to the beholder? As Kracauer expressed dismay with the photograph’s faculty for delivering the spatial continuum to vision without any elisions, so too did the art historians participating in the “Facsimile Debate” articulate the suspicion that specifically invisible aesthetic qualities were irrevocably lost with the widespread reproduction of art. What was at stake, therefore, was not only the relationship of copy to original, but also the specific resistance the spatial arts might provide to a world conceived as available to the panoptic pressures of the camera or industry more broadly. The rise of technologies of mass reproduction demanded a wholesale revision of modernist norms dictating the perception of space and the aesthetic judgment of sculpture inherited from the nineteenth century. For instance, in a series of three essays initiated in 1896 and entitled “How sculpture ought to be photographed,” Heinrich Wölfflin saw in photography the embodiment of what Adolf von Hildebrand had proclaimed, that “there will always be one view that presents and unites the whole plastic nature of the figure as a coherent surface impression, analogous to painting or relief.” Yet, in order to regard the photograph as a cognate for space condensed to such a planar surface, Wölfflin had opened a Pandora’s box of concerns unavoidable for the next generation of thinkers like Kracauer and Panofsky, such as the status of photography as a commodity, the circulation of “false” reproductions and their cumulative effect on our ability to see art.


“correctly,” and even Benjaminian concepts like aura and Spielraum (room-for-play).

Let us turn first to Panofsky’s contribution to the “Facsimile Debate.” In May 1929, the famed Kestnergesellschaft in Hannover mounted the highly controversial didactic exhibition, “Original und Reproduktion.” This exhibition had been undertaken by industrial concerns trafficking in the sale of deluxe photographs of artworks, and there, according to one visitor, “the best reproductions . . . were shown next to originals and fakes, which even deceived the connoisseurs.” 4 Visitors were asked to distinguish originals from the reproductions and two young boys who had no artistic education at all received the best results—to the embarrassment of the experts who participated. 5 The Hannover scandal fanned the flames of the “Facsimile Debate,” which had begun in March 1929 as a dispute regarding the aesthetic legitimacy and pedagogical value of sculptural reproductions. Participants were concerned with the exhibition of painted plaster and metal facsimiles and argued over their possible status as duplicitous forgeries. After the contest in Hannover, however, the debate quickly shifted to a polemical discussion about the function of photographic reproductions of paintings. Max Sauerlandt, director of the Hamburg Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, sent tear sheets outlining his position calling for the ban of all facsimiles from museum display to a larger circle of academics, inviting them to comment. In the end, Der Kreis published no fewer than thirteen articles by ten different respondents. Panofsky’s response, entitled “Original und Faksimilereproduktion,” was too lengthy to be included with the other replies and warranted its own special issue. 6

For Panofsky, the hysteria regarding the threat of photography to contravene our ability to recognize an “authentic” work of art was predicated upon a fundamentally false assumption. Both friend and foe of the facsimile accepted that its aim is “to insert itself directly in the place of the original.” By contrast, he demanded that we move away from this criterion of displacement toward one of medium specificity, which in the case of the facsimile was determined by its “inorganic, mechanical character.” With this shift, however, Panofsky did not abandon the spatial metaphor. It was not the reduction in the “distance” separating original and reproduction that was at issue, but rather its unevenness or inconsistency. His chief example of a “poor” copy was none other than the painted plaster cast. In this case, “the activity of the human eye and the human hand not only intervenes between that of the copying apparatuses, but rather the entire reproduction process really splits into two acts: one is mechanical and the other is equally important but purely personal, indeed more ‘artistic.’ The hand-painted reproduction of the colored surface blankets the mechanically produced cast of the plaster form, thereby engendering a peculiar hybrid between mechanical cast and ‘artistic’ copy.” 7 We begin with the direct casting of an object in plaster and move to a more willful overlay of painting and coloristic excess.

Another layer that coats the original work of sculpture is its registration as photographic image. In a note appended to the conclusion of his letter to Der Kreis, Panofsky addressed Sauerlandt’s objection to the fact that the photographs of artworks betray the stylistic idiosyncrasies of a particular age or artist. How is this possible for a medium that ought to be rigorously mechanical and resistant to all subjectivization? To answer this question, Panofsky makes a categorical distinction between the photography of “three-dimensional objects” and that of paintings or drawings, what he called “reproductive photography in the proper sense.” With the photography of architecture or sculpture, “we are talking about an entirely personal re-creation. Here, the photographer is no less ‘free’ than a painter as concerns cropping, distance, pictorial orientation, focus and lighting.” 8 Those photographs whose planarity coincides with that of the objects they inscribe are free of any interference from style, which enables us to assess its technical merits. As uneven as


5. According to another contemporary, “There was a prize question: ‘Which is the Original?’ First, nobody wanted to have anything to do with this very easy task. When it was made known that there were 36 originals among the 104 pictures in the exhibition, contenders began to step up. For hours the pictures were subjected to a detailed test: they took them from the walls, held them against the light. No one was completely successful. Five of the approximately 150 contestants could indeed point out all the originals, but only because, to be safe, they also mistakenly declared a few reproductions to be originals” (Wilfried Basse, “Original und Reproduktion,” Der Kunstwanderer 11 [August 1929]:560).

6. For a complete bibliography of the “Facsimile Debate” as it appeared in the pages of Der Kreis, see Diers (note 2), p. 134, note 5.


8. Ibid., p. 122.
the photographs of pictorial artworks are compared to what Panofsky regarded as the superior “inorganic” quality of gramophone records, for example, they nevertheless maintain a more consistent distance between the facsimile and its object (and, for that matter, between object and beholder) than do photographs of the spatial arts.

We find echoes of Panofsky’s position in a 1933 review by Walter Benjamin of an art historical study devoted to architectural drawings:

As regards the images themselves, one cannot say that they re-produce architecture. They produce it in the first place, a production which less often benefits the reality of architectural planning than it does dreams. . . . Such architecture is not primarily “seen,” but rather is imagined as an objective entity and is sensed by those who approach or even enter it as a surrounding space sui generis—that is, without the distancing effect of the edge of the image space [Rand des Rildraums].

For Panofsky, it is specifically the photography of space, rather than facsimile reproduction as such, that collapses the distance between the camera and the subjective world of the beholder. Indeed, he would go on to celebrate an analogous identification of the eye of the spectator with the lens of the photographic apparatus in his essay on motion pictures, first published in 1936: “As movable as is the spectator, is the space presented to him. Not only solid bodies move in space, but space itself does, changing, turning, dissolving and recrystallizing as it appears through cutting and editing of the various shots.” Both Panofsky and Benjamin suggest that the image of space paradoxically demands its own annihilation as image, namely the detonation of the very framing boundary that demarcates that image as autonomous and prohibits us from immersing ourselves within it. Through its reproduction, they conclude that space becomes symptomatic of our psychic and perceptual investment in the world. Space becomes space-for-us: it moves when we move, it is the stuff of our dreams and imagination.

This is a far cry from Wölfflin’s insistence, at the turn of the century, on a Haupt- or Normalansicht—a chief or normative view of a sculpture that conforms to the historical development of style. He noted, for instance, that with Renaissance sculpture the frontal view almost always provides the chief vantage. An acceptable photograph of a sculpture therefore has to instruct its audience on how to perceive the work. Wölfflin’s prejudice in favor of the planar image is reinforced when he revisits the topic of sculptural photography in 1914, asserting that the proper lighting and disposition of sculpture in photographs and exhibition spaces ought to be determined by the painterly conventions during the period it was made. Again and again he accords priority to those framing devices that stage the work of art for our ideally stationary bodies and permit our perceptual investment in the world. Space becomes symptomatic of our psychic and perceptual investment in the world. Space-for-us: it moves when we move, it is the stuff of our dreams and imagination.

Wölfflin maintains a correspondence between the photographic surface and the Hildebrandian planar image of an object that we apprehend at a distance, once the intimate union between the hand of the artist and the body of the sculpture has been consummated and disengaged. He argues that this image, as a photograph, “represents to the eye all at once that which has been gathered into a simple, effortless perception what in Nature must be grasped through successive perceptions.” When Panofsky moves away from this model for the mechanical reproduction of spatial depth, the beholder’s vision is no longer identified with the planar image and is instead aligned with the


12. Wölfflin (1897; see note 3), p. 297: “Of course the sculpture would have to be positioned such that the beholder need not search for the view, but rather that the frontal view is already accentuated in the pedestal.”

13. Ibid., p. 294.
photographic apparatus itself. The stationary beholder and the static space of the theater yield to a spectator no longer bound by physical constraints and free to roam within a projected and incorporeal space. True, Wölfflin leaves room in his analysis for Baroque sculpture, which by his definition generates several images that refuse to cohere into a pregnant unity, prompting the beholder to circumambulate the work. As a result, historians enjoy many more useable photographs of such “painterly” sculpture than their “stricter” counterparts from the Renaissance. Yet, at no point does he ascribe this multiplicity of views to the beholding subject. Sculpture that demands to be apprehended from more than one vantage point is not freed from the frame of the image; it is subjected to ever more of them, a series of photographs that simply follow, one after another (fig. 1). For Wölfflin, the photographer mines images already inured in the original sculptural body; for Panofsky, the photographer is as “free” as a painter, composing a new object before our eyes.

Figure 1. Series of illustrations from H. Wölfflin, Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst, “Wie man Skulpturen aufnehmen soll (I),” Neue Folge VII/10 (July 1896): 229.

This issue of freedom brings us back, by way of conclusion, to Kracauer, who objected to the identification of our vision with both the planar image and the photographic apparatus. The photograph can only skim the surface of a world void of depth; its true object is mere exteriority, and what is registered in the image “are not the features envisaged by a liberated consciousness." We ought to contrast this assessment to Wölfflin’s description of the pleasure we gain by circling a sculpture and arriving at the chief vantage after considering a number of confused and subsidiary views: “We will never tire of repeating this experiment of achieving the purified image from the inadequate appearances, which stands there calmly and clearly and is felt to be a liberation in the truest sense.” If it is the vocation of the photograph to give us this image instantly, the aesthetic experience Wölfflin is celebrating is nothing other than the comfort gained through a repetitive, compulsive searching for what has already been found.

For Kracauer, any photograph that violates the specificity of its medium by attempting to penetrate

14. On “painterly” and “strict” sculpture, see Wölfflin (1914–1915; see note 3), p. 32. For his conclusion that a multiplicity of possible viewpoints necessarily yields a series of photographic images, see Wölfflin (1896; see note 3), p. 228.

15. Kracauer, “Die Photographie” (see note 1), p. 31; and Wölfflin (1897; see note 3), p. 295.
a world riven by significance is but a mechanical product disguised by artistic “touches.” In retrospect, this emphasis on the truth of the medium aligns his argument closely to that of Panofsky in his contribution to the “Facsimile Debate.” Yet Kracauer goes further in his meditation on the photography of space to articulate a difference between “information” and “knowledge,” between contiguity (one thing after another) and context (space imbued with historical consciousness). What he seeks is an image that would sustain this consciousness, without coercing it back into the bonds of an immediate and mythic immersion in nature. With photography, “for the first time, the inert world [Totenwelt] presents itself in its independence from human beings.” Surface phenomena are no longer integrated by an absolute and rational order; rather “the order they assume through the image is necessarily provisional.”

Ultimately, Kracauer is calling for an approach to space that does not place our subjectivity at its center. Our vision is no more a privileged agent in the organization of this space than the corporeality of other objects. If the photography of space is to model our relation to a world now governed (as Panofsky himself asserted) by “forces of masses and machines,” its project must be “the redemption of physical reality.” At least this is how Kracauer would describe it when he revisited these early thoughts on photography in 1960 with his *Theory of Film*, written in close correspondence with Panofsky in America. The photograph may deploy form across a surface in a manner consistent with the conventions of central perspective, which had been predicated upon man’s confidence in his own reason and his empathetic projection into the world, yet it would be through its ability to linger on the nonessential and superficial that we might gain access to what Wölfflin had been searching for in the *Hauptansicht* of a sculpture. What is at stake is nothing less than a choice between a life of freedom or domination, which, in an increasingly technocratic postwar milieu, was a lesson we still had yet to learn.


17. Panofsky’s comment comes at the powerful conclusion of his 1934 essay, “What Is Baroque?” written the year of his emigration to America and published for the first time in *Three Essays on Style* (see note 10), p. 88. Here he argues that the Baroque is a climax of the Renaissance, rather than its undoing or decline, and that this period “lasted, roughly speaking, up to the time when Goethe died and the first railroads and industrial plants were built. For not until as late as that were man and nature (meaning man as a really human being and nature as the totality of natural things not tampered with by man) doomed to become less interesting and less important than those antithuman and antinatural forces that seem to determine our own period—the forces of masses and machines—and of which we don’t yet know whether they are the manifestations of an unknown God or an unknown Devil. The rise of these new forces, not the Baroque movement, means the real end of the Renaissance, and at the same time the beginning of our own epoch of history, an epoch that is still struggling for an expression both in life and in art, and that will be named and judged by the generations to come—provided that it does not put an end to all generations to come.”