This anthology is intended as a contribution to the wider dissemination of the work of the German social, cultural and film theorist Siegfried Kracauer (1889–1966), a highly original and critical thinker, whose manifold and varied writings are gaining an ever wider and increasingly appreciative readership across the humanities and social sciences. In presenting a selection of his numerous works examining propaganda, political communication, and media research, we address themes, concepts, and motifs that, while clearly corresponding to many of Kracauer’s other works, have nevertheless not hitherto been prominent in its anglophone reception. 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—satellite channels, digital platforms, the internet and social media. The mediascape of the mid-twentieth century was very different from that of today—there are probably very few still living who can recall watching newsreels at the cinema. So if the medium is indeed the message, then the message now would bear little relation to that even of the recent past. But reading Kracauer’s explorations of, for example, fascist propaganda, one is struck repeatedly by the pertinence and perspicacity of his work, and by its relevance. Time and again, his pioneering insights into the promulgation of deceptions and duplicities by “charismatic” leaders—charlatans invoking the “people” while stereotyping and stigmatizing “others”; promoting prejudice and pandering to racism, xenophobia, and
anti-Semitism; mythologizing the “nation” and its “history”—reveal the authoritarian fulminations of our post-truth world as the nothing-new of rancid rhetoric, the poisonous regurgitations of lies and hand-me-down hate. We are certainly not the first generations to encounter political leaders and pretenders asserting “alternative facts,” decrying the “fake news” of critical alternative voices, and peddling conspiracy theories to listeners all too willing to conspire. It seems some messages—shrill, verbose, toxic—have changed less than the media which configure and carry them. Reading Kracauer the question arises: how different are digital demagogues from analogue ones?

The texts in this anthology explore themes beyond the hucksters of authoritarian propaganda, be they twentieth or twenty-first century specimens. In the 1950s, Cold War politics also looked to strategies of ideological persuasion targeting national populations, what now goes under the rubric of “soft power.” Kracauer was commissioned to report on the efficacy of media operating trans-nationally and interculturally in the propagation of pro-Western, pro-liberal-democratic, pro-capitalist values, sentiments, and sensibilities. He was also to attend to and assess the “satellite mentalities” of Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe and the influence and reach of American radio broadcasts on popular perceptions in the “peripheral” countries around the Mediterranean. In short, he was tasked by American government agencies and others with investigating and evaluating the potentialities of, and challenges to, American ideological and cultural global hegemony, the universalization of the American “way of life” as an ideal, the dream of the “American dream.” At the same time, Kracauer’s critical eye was also turned to matters closer at hand, to what this American “lifestyle” comprised, how it was configured and, in particular, how it was insistently promoted. Indeed, the formation and inculcation of a particular habitus, of everyday ways of living and seeing, the adoption of certain attitudes and validation of tastes claimed as one’s own, were the mundane, routine work of the American advertising and marketing industries. Envisioning and celebrating youthfulness, vitality and “clean-living,” advertising does much more than promote this or that individual product. Rather, it works normatively, enforcing and policing the normativity of the “normal,” disciplining, domesticating, and fashioning our all-too-docile bodies. Even the most banal advertising plays its part in the creation of predictability, homogeneity, and conformity—the production of the mass for the profits of mass production and, concomitantly, for the contemporary prophets of deceit too. For it is precisely this, the dissolution of the individual, the subject, the distinctive, the idiosyncratic, the other, the heretical, into the compliant complacent mass that is central to Kracauer’s critique of capitalist modernity and the work of contemporary media. The mass
media produce the mass. And the mass is the very stuff of fascism. This is the “message” of these media. And so, this might beg the question today: what kind of “social” is produced by social media is the question we confront today.

We were rather naïve. When we first embarked upon this anthology we had little sense of how long and how complex the process of its completion and publication would prove to be. To begin with: how do you solve a problem like NYANA? Following Kracauer’s death in 1966, the rights for his works passed to the New York Association for New Americans (NYANA), a charitable organization set up in 1949 to help immigrants establish themselves in the United States in the wake of the Second World War. The association was, however, dissolved in 2008, leaving the issues of copyright and permissions completely opaque. Thanks to the kind support, good-will and industry of the Deutsche Literatur Archiv (DLA) in Marbach am Neckar, the holders of Kracauer’s archive, of Suhrkamp Verlag, the University of California Press and our own publishers at Columbia University Press, the copyright issue was fortunately resolved. Then there was the selection of materials. The inclusion of some materials was straightforward; but what to do with the 150-page *Totalitäre Propaganda* work which, painstakingly transcribed from manuscripts held in the DLA, was simply too extensive to include in its entirety in an anthology of this kind? If we were to translate and include a selection of this study, what should we choose and on what basis? And, moreover, what should be done with Theodor W. Adorno’s substantially abridged, revised and edited version of this text, a rewrite repudiated by Kracauer himself and one which is, after all, technically a piece by Adorno? We have chosen here to honour Kracauer’s own preferences in translating and including sections E (on the masses) and G (his conclusion) and excluding Adorno’s version altogether. And this is just Part I! Moving on ... there are three extant versions of the ‘Below the Surface’ script: which one should we include?

We have had plenty of causes and pauses for thought during this project. And this is as it should be: for interruptions and impediments, obstacles and quandaries, are very much in accord with the spirit of Kracauer’s writings, work which, eschewing shortcuts, leads into the snagging “thicket of things.” And indeed, as the scope and intricacies of the anthology increased, as this thicket became
thicker, so too has both our own appreciation of the texts we have selected here and our confidence in their intellectual value and contemporary relevance. We hope that we have made justifiable decisions, wise choices.

We hope, above all, that this anthology will invite new readers of his work, stimulate new interest, provoke new engagement, encourage new scholarship, prompt new practices. For of this we are certain: we have much to learn from Kracauer and his Critical Theory colleagues for the struggles of the present.

This anthology is for all those who refuse, refute, repudiate, and resist the prophets of deceit then and now.