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Absence as Presence, Presence as Parapraxis On Some Problems of Representing “Jews” in the New German Cinema¹

Thomas Elsaesser

Absence as Presence

Anyone looking for traces of the Holocaust in postwar West German films of the 1950s and 1960s, is likely to be disappointed: such, at any rate, is the common assumption.² But the same seems no less true of the so-called “New German Cinema” of the 1970s: While in the films of some of the well-known names—Edgar Reitz, Alexander Kluge, Hans Jürgen Syberberg, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Volker Schlöndorff—Fascism and especially the German family under National Socialism eventually became major topics, the Jewish experience—persecution and annihilation—rarely figured. Nor did the postwar Jewish Diaspora and the difficult Jewish-German dialogue, sometimes known as the “negative symbiosis” after Auschwitz.³ In the case of Wim Wenders and Werner Herzog, neither National Socialism nor the Holocaust plays a role before the 1990s. On the few occasions where Jewish characters do appear, their representations have invariably given offence. One thinks of Fassbinder’s disastrously controversial play “The City, Garbage, and Death,” made into the film *Schatten der Engel* (Daniel Schmid, DE/CH, 1976), Syberberg’s resentful remarks about West Germany after the war having too readily accepted the Jewish émigré version of “German” culture, or Edgar Reitz’s *Heimat*, where the brief mention of deportations and the camps seems to have alibi function at

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best. What is more plausible than to note a pervasive disavowal, and to conclude that in the face of these unimaginable crimes at such close proximity, repression and invisibility had set in? One could be forgiven for fearing that the most gifted generation of filmmakers in Germany since the 1920s had been guilty, if not of complicity, then at very least, had sinned by omission not breaking the silence: surrounding the Jewish victims, among the clamor and violence with which the “sons” accused the “fathers” of their Nazi past.⁴

Of course, such a judgment is retrospective in a particular sense. One now speaks from a vantage point that postdates 1979, the year the television series *Holocaust* (NBC, US, 1978) was first screened on German television, and 1989, the year of German unification, after which the Holocaust became the abiding topic of Germany’s public life, media attention, and historical research. There are thus two points that this ubiquity of the Holocaust raises about its “absence” in the films during the 1960s and 1970s. Firstly, I am struck how it is always read across the Freudian paradigm of “repression” and “amnesia,” of “denial” and “disavowal”: in other words, how perfectly legible this absence now is from the vantage point and seeming security of our own position of knowledge from hindsight. What is it, one wants to ask, that in turn is now barely being seen, what is overlooked in the excessive looking during the 1980s and 1990s?⁵ And secondly, what makes me pause is also the way in which, more generally, presence and representation are equated, and given a positive valuation in an opposition that makes absence the purely negative term.

An example of an outright denial can be found in Alexander Kluge’s first film *Abschied von Gestern/Yesterday’s Girl* (West Germany, 1966) where the heroine Anita G. appears before a judge for shoplifting. After going through her personal data and noting that her parents had been deported to Theresienstadt and their property confiscated, the judge provocatively asks whether Anita claims that what happened to her parents in 1938 had any bearings on the case for which she was being tried. “No,” replies Anita, “none whatsoever.” This scene, one could argue, makes denial visible, aggressively on the part of the judge, auto-aggressively on the part of Anita, and thus drawing the spectator’s attention to the fact that “Theresienstadt” and what it stands for may indeed be a crucial fact in Anita’s life and thus her actions. Today, the scene jumps at the viewer; at the time of the film’s first release in 1966, it was read quite differently: the knowledge position of superior irony was entirely directed at the judge. Framed from the back with a thickset neck and a rasping voice, he stands as the epitome of the arrogant ex-Nazi, sitting in judgment over others when it should be he who probably deserves to be tried (given that most senior judges well into the 1960s had served under Hitler). But the exchange also makes clear that merely to present in a fiction film a character that is Jewish does not say much about the presence or absence of “the Holocaust” in German postwar society. And how could it? Given that the very term (or its Israeli counter-term “Shoah”)

would not have been in use in 1966, and that before the 1967 Six-Day War, even in Israel the fate of European Jews during World War II was rarely considered part of the nation's self-image as a courageous, combative, self-confident, that is, "chosen" people.

In the case of West Germany and its cinema, the destruction of the Jews signifies a double absence: an absence determined by physical absence (from the body politic after 1945) and material destruction (of the signs of centuries of German-Jewish presence), but also an absence in the thoughts and emotions of the Germans themselves, mirrored in the films. In other words, the absence of Jews in the films of the New German Cinema in the first instance confirms, and in this sense, truthfully records (the enormity of) the fact that their absence in the public and private life of West Germany in the 1960s and 1970s was not missed. Conversely and correspondingly, invisibility was the order of the day among the small Jewish communities who made Germany their home after 1945. They, too, had to keep themselves doubly invisible: invisible to the Germans, in order not to rouse resentment and thus to allow more efficient negotiations behind the scenes with the federal authorities about compensation and reparation. But they made themselves invisible also because of the disapproval they knew themselves exposed to in Israel for continuing to live in Germany, the land of the murderers.

So the question to be put to the directors of the New German Cinema would therefore have to be: how to show what is not there, especially if its not-being-there is not missed? In other words, how can the cinema show this missing as missing, how can it "perform" this double missing, and come to terms with it? The issue becomes one of representation itself. We now "see" the non-representation of the Jews, the absence of positive Jewish protagonists, the failure of "German" protagonists to show signs of regret or repentance, and see it as evidence of bad faith, bad conscience, and cover-up. But what exactly was it that we think was not "seen" or not "represented" in the 1960s and 1970s? What would the presence of say, credible, positive or sympathetic Jewish characters in these films have signified? It is fairly obvious that a depiction by a German filmmaker of the Holocaust from the perspective of the victims, or a credible version of the Jewish experience in Germany after the war would have been at once too much and too little. Too much, in that it would have presumed an act of empathy, as well as an understanding of the "other" that clearly was not present. Too little, in that it might easily have given the illusion of normality: the good Jew, the positive identification figure is a trap that Fassbinder wanted to expose, and one that Henryk Broder once satirized in his imaginary German who says: "If I take the trouble to be a philo-semite, the least I can expect is that the Jews know to behave themselves."⁶

But even then, the question of representing German-Jewish relations in the New German Cinema is imperfectly put, if it does not factor in the insisted-upon, frequently resented, and never adequately answered "demand" on the part of the rest of the world, to give a response, take respon-

sibility, make amends, or be accountable. This inadequacy of Germans—individually and collectively, through its politicians and in the arts—meeting this demand, compacts several kinds of impossibility and constitutes the ever-present backdrop to the all-too-perfect legibility of this absence, with which I began. The deadlock can only be opened up—such would be my main argument—if absence and presence are not (only) constructed antithetically, and the possibility of presence can be recognized within absence: accordingly, it is only within absence that one can begin to look for signs of presence, not against it.

Presence as Parapraxis

The traditional answer to this “coming to terms” has been to speak about mourning, and in particular, about “mourning work”—articulated once more as a demand, in respect to which the Germans in general, and the New German Cinema in particular are mostly assumed to have failed (the famous “inability to mourn,” first diagnosed by Alexander and Margarethe Mitscherlich in their book *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern*).⁷ My working hypothesis will be a different one: firstly, I would argue that nowhere is the absence of the consequences of the Holocaust more present than in the New German Cinema of the 1970s, provided one accepts that the figures of such presence-in-absence may not always function according to the repression/disavowal mode, nor conform to the model of “mourning work,” at least not in its most commonly invoked form of PC—“proper coping”—that of mourning work as “working through”: of loss, the de-cathecting of the internalized love object, and a letting go. Instead, I want to argue, one can imagine a different kind of mourning work, somewhere between the “acting out” of melancholia, and the “working through” of mourning.⁸ This mode I want to call “presence as parapraxis,” implicit in, and a consequence of “absence as presence.”

By parapraxis I refer to Freud’s *Fehlleistung*, usually translated in English as parapraxis. The German term is, as will be seen, more precise, not least because “Fehl-” can mean both failure and missing, and “Leistung” refers specifically to the performative aspect, as well as to the concept of “work,” as in mourning work. Furthermore, “work” (*Arbeit*) is also the concept of choice in Alexander Kluge, the filmmaker I am primarily concerned with. I define parapraxis therefore not primarily as the “slip of the tongue,” or the lapse in attention, but as a kind of effort, a kind of persistence, usually one with unexpected or unintended results, including among others, reversals or displacements in time and space. For instance, one feature of parapraxis I shall highlight is the way in which it often seems to figure “the right thing at the wrong place, the wrong thing at the right time.” An example of such a parapraxis would be the final scenes of Fassbinder’s *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (DE, 1980), when the heroine places a rose on a hat stand, and her handbag in the flower-vase.

Such a shift of terms from “working through” to “parapraxis” would thus not discard the idea of mourning work as a form of “coming to terms.” On the contrary: it would clarify and expand its significance to include the other stages (as in Freud’s original formulation of “remembering, repeating, working through”), making especially the stage or act of repetition productive where at first sight mourning work appears to have failed most spectacularly, namely in opening up a dialogue between Germans and Jews since 1945, which can take mis-communication as part of the “given” of such a dialogue. “Fehlleistung” thus quite literally translates as “performed failure,” which I see in contrast to “failed performance” (about which more below). More specifically, the hypothesis would be that the films of the New German Cinema implicitly take the first two stages to be as necessary and indispensable to mourning work as the third, which means that as historians and analysts we need to assume that “remembering, repeating,” too, have their textual effects and figurative presences. With regard to the Holocaust, we may—collectively and culturally speaking—even after forty or fifty years, be only at the stage of “remembering,” or possibly at the stage of “repetition”: which may suggest that the very omnipresence of the Holocaust as media-event in the 1990s partakes in mourning work, but in a way that makes its compulsive iteration symptomatic for its in-completion.

For these peculiar forms of repetition in history, one could also point to a different discourse, and invoke one of Jean-Luc Godard’s definitions of montage in his *Histoire(s) du Cinema* (FR, 1988–98), where he speaks of the “stereo- effect” of history, which he likens to “the mystical hexagram”:

There was Euclid and then there was Pascal—this is the mystical hexagram. But in History, in the history of History, there was Germany, which projected Israel. Israel reflected this projection and Israel found its cross. And the law of stereo continues. Israel projected the Palestinian people and the Palestinian people in turn bore their cross. This is the true legend of stereo.⁹

This is an interesting, and interestingly problematic proposition. It suggests a kind of fatality and tragic irony not without Old Testament overtones, and it takes a look at patterns of repetition and inversion from a long way off. In order to find a somewhat more direct way into the regimes of repetition of the New German cinema, I shall remain within the terms so far introduced, and propose to talk not about stereo-history, but about “parapraxis as mourning work” (“performed failure”), and—as indicated—distinguish it from “mourning work as parapraxis” (“failed performance”), by which I mean the often spectacularly failed, officially prescribed acts of public mourning in West Germany, usually resulting in a kind of repetitive ubiquity of unintended mishaps and dreadfully embarrassing *faux pas*. In particular, I am referring to the many incidents and occasions in the public life of the old and the new Federal Republic, from the “incident” caused by a German diplomat at a Russian Embassy reception in May 1955, who angered his hosts when he refused to

toast to the liberation of Germany by the victorious Red Army in 1945 (as a patriot he saw it as a “defeat”), to the novelist Martin Walser, who as recently as 1998 and as publicly as in his acceptance speech of the Frankfurt Book Fair Peace Prize, meant to pay his respects to the memory of the Jews when he spoke of Auschwitz as the “moral stick” that the world was still beating Germany with, prompting a violent and despairing attack from Ignaz Bubis, the then Head of the Council of Jews in Germany.¹⁰ In between these two dates lies a sheer unending catalog of such public spats and scandals, of which the Helmut Kohl–Ronald Reagan visit to the Bitburg military cemetery in 1985 and the speech by Philip Jenninger commemorating the so-called “Kristallnacht” in November 1988 are perhaps the most egregious examples.

The New German Cinema, on the other hand, I would argue, has in the 1970s given several examples of the opposite, “performed failure,” where figurative tropes such as catachresis or zeugma, stylistic peculiarities such as repetition or “faux raccord” (mis-matched) montage, as well as rhetorical strategies of reversal and irony all point to a “politics of performative failure,” whose mis-alignments, double-takes and “parallax” effects together constitute a kind of “mourning work-in-progress,” an ongoing return and repetition around something which, perhaps only now and certainly only with hindsight, can be read and deciphered differently.

Alexander Kluge: “The Power of Feelings”

How do these “parapraxes as mourning work” present themselves in the films of Alexander Kluge, the director who has often been called the father of the New German Cinema? As to the representation of a Jewish character in the “positive fiction” of narrative agency (i.e., as a central character), the example already cited of Anita G. in Kluge’s *Yesterday’s Girl* has remained unique. Significantly, her Jewish background is named only once in the film, and only to assert categorically (also for the subsequent story) that it is deemed irrelevant. Kluge never again used such heavy and direct irony as he did in 1966. This subsequent absence of Jewish protagonists in Kluge’s films has not gone unremarked, though primarily outside Germany. The critic Jörg Drews, for instance, once asked: “what does it mean, incidentally, that in [Kluge’s film] *The Patriot* the murder of the Jews appears to be entirely excluded from Gabi Teichert’s excavations of German history—a fact noted with great amazement by my American students?”¹¹

Yet if one starts from the premise that in Kluge’s work too, the Holocaust is present, though in the mode of Fehlleistung, i.e., “performed failure,” then Drews’s question does begin to find a possible answer. Indeed, it opens up a field of reference that encompasses almost all of Kluge’s films and not only these, since it includes also his scholarly publications and his short story prose works. I have in mind, above all, the following films and texts: *Lebensläufe mit tödlichem Ausgang/Attendance List for a Funeral* (short stories, 1968), *In Gefahr*

und größter Not . . . (film, 1972), *Die Patriotin/The Patriot* (essay film, 1979), *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (sociological work, written with Oskar Negt, 1981), *Die Macht der Gefühle/The Power of Feelings* (film, 1983) and *Die Macht der Gefühle* (book, 1984). One can consider—as has usually been the case—these works as a giant socio-ethnographic meditation and interpretation-machine about the modes of productivity typical for human labor, creativity, and affectivity over the centuries. But with equal justification and pertinence, Kluge’s work can be seen in the context of the paradigm of “absence as presence, presence as parapraxis,” that is, as a kind of documentation not so much of what is missing, but of what constantly mis-fires, goes awry and misses its intended goal or target. This central thematic and semantic complex in Kluge revolves around the concepts of *Geschichte* (history) and *Eigensinn* (obstinacy, resistance): the title of his magnum opus as a social historian. Accordingly, a number of very specific characteristics can be noted in Kluge’s work that relate to this complex:

- the restless, manic urge for action and activity in his protagonists, as if they found themselves in a permanent state of emergency
- the compulsion to repeat, which affects not only Kluge’s fictional characters but also typifies his own work, often a kind of looped reprise of a limited number of themes-and-variations, always incomplete, proudly presented as a permanent work-in-progress
- the cinematic device of time-lapse photography (e.g., in *Unheimlichkeit der Zeit/The Blind Director*, 1985)
- a special form of mimicry, of deadpan humor and disguise, especially in his pervasive (and to many critics, intensely irritating) voice-over commentary

Emblematic in this respect—and altogether paradigmatic for his method—is an episode in *The Power of Feelings*, announced by Kluge’s voice-over as “gerettet durch fremde Schuld” (“saved thanks to someone else’s fault/guilty act”), in which a woman, slumped unconscious in her car in a car-park, is raped by a commercial traveler who happens to park his car next to hers. However, by raping her, he actually and accidentally saves her from death, because—abandoned by her lover—she had swallowed an overdose of sleeping pills and was intending to commit suicide. What does this strange scene signify? Its anecdotal-episodic appearance in the film (we never see either the woman or her rapist ever again) is altogether typical for the apparently frivolous-farcical nature of Kluge’s film. Yet one only has to consider it under the heading of “Fehlleistung,” and turn this bizarre fictional/narrative construction by 180 degrees, so to speak, to arrive at an intriguingly different, “alternative” situation. Instead of “rescued through someone else’s guilty deed,” we get the inverse possibility, namely of someone incurring guilt and making himself guilty, by *not* rescuing someone in mortal danger. Held against the background of the presence-in-absence of the German response

to the Holocaust, the reference of the scene would then be, for instance, to the guilt (-feelings) of those not having come to the rescue of Jews during the years of confiscation, expulsion, and deportation. It is one of the central aspects of the relation between German Jews and “ordinary” Germans during the so-called Third Reich. The purpose of the reversal of the historical situation as (para)practiced by Kluge would be that it allows for a “virtual” or utopian dimension, nurturing the insanely forlorn hope that in the nonexistent, forever deferred and therefore always present trial of the German nation regarding the responsibility for the Holocaust, the victim—typically imaged as a raped woman—might testify on behalf of the guilty party, by claiming not to have seen/noticed/been aware of having been raped. In other words, the “dialogue” tentatively initiated in this scene is the hope that the Jews might absolve the Germans by yet another form of “uneven exchange”¹²—yet at what price: murder becomes attempted suicide, the Jewish people become “feminized,” and genocide becomes a sort of “consenting rape.” As if to underline the transgressively absurd nature of this proposition, Kluge’s voice-over, commenting on a no less improbable hostage-taking and kidnap, which follows this scene, asserts: “what is an even stronger bond than a marriage?—an act of murder, if everyone knows about the fact that everyone else is implicated” (in German: “Was bindet stärker noch als eine Ehe?—Ein Mord, wenn jeder von der Tat des anderen weiss.”) If this construction sounds impossibly far-fetched, one might consider a second scene in *The Power of Feelings*, in which Kluge gives a further meta-discursive comment on his own method in yet another trial scene. A housewife is accused of having grievously wounded her husband with a shotgun. The judges are trying to establish what her motive was and whether she acted in self-defense, which she denies [*sie*]. Then, one of the judges laboriously twists and turns the imagined firearm, in the hope of understanding how it was possible for the heroine to shoot her husband when, according to her, she only wanted to produce a loud enough bang to shut him up. Here, the physical gestures of aligning weapon and target, and not succeeding in doing so, are like a graphic illustration of the kinds of cognitive twists and mis-alignments which, I argue, constitute Kluge’s argumentative method.

This scene and similar constellations in Kluge’s films lend themselves to closer analysis, especially once one asks what function such episodes or anecdotes have in what I would call the director’s “parapractical poetics.” Their purpose, it would seem, is to forestall an all-too-literal legibility, and to construct a more rebus-like mode of representation. In a second move, the viewer must make legible this very opacity, when held against the dominant historical trope of the entire post-1945 era, i.e., the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (“mastering the past”), according to which West Germany’s task was to come to terms with its Nazi history. That this “coming to terms” largely excluded an appropriate discourse on the Holocaust or the terms of a dialogue on anti-Semitism, merely intensifies the hermeneutic enigma of the presence-in-

absence of both Jewish life and anti-Semitism in German society of the 1970s and the New German Cinema in particular. Yet precisely because this absence cannot simply be filled by a presence, it exceeds the status of denial/disavowal, and thus to argue implicitly from a (present) position of ubiquity and omnipresence, by pointing a finger at the invisibility of the Holocaust in the films of the 1970s is to miss its most significant dimension. The unspoken and the not-seen, which I claim as typical for (part of) the New German Cinema, makes such a “presence as parapraxis” only legible when held against this double frame of reference. One frame of reference is the contemporary, universalized Holocaust discourse, which gives us the illusion of formulating the question “objectively,” from a presumed position of knowledge. The second one—more difficult to reconstruct, but just as necessary—emerges from the blocked dialogue or “negative symbiosis” where, across the official discourse of “mastering the past” a mandate confronts a demand, each rendering the other at once impossible, necessary, and inaccessible/unrepresentable. It is this deadlock, I argue, that produces the *Fehlleistungen* both in politics and in the films. Yet the two public spheres relate to each other in asymmetric mirror-fashion: to the instances of failed performance in public life the reflexivity of the films responds with performed failure. The latter would in turn be the allegorical modes of the former, re-figuring *Fehl* (failure) and *Leistung* (performance) in zeugmatic relation to each other. Loss becomes (hit-and-) miss, miss is mis-, and mis- is a symptom of work on the images, work on the temporalities, work on the discourses of guilt and responsibility, on the moments of omission and commission. In short, such work would be mourning work neither as “acting out” nor as “working through,” but one that marks its traces in the form of compulsive repetitions, conceptual catachreses, cognitive realignments, and tragi-grotesque reversals.

Fehlleistung as Eigensinn

In this light, even a sociological-philosophical work like the monumental *Geschichte und Eigensinn* receives a further, historically specifiable level of reference. The fact that Kluge and Negt base themselves on the anthropology of the early Marx has often been interpreted as if the authors had intended to add to *Das Kapital* the volume never written on “the subjective factor.” And indeed, in its size, binding, lettering, and color-scheme, *Geschichte und Eigensinn* camouflages itself and mimics the (East-) German edition of the MEGA, the Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe, widely acquired (but rarely read) by students in the early 1970s. From the present perspective, however, these preoccupations with human labor and its subjective components of emotion, affectivity, and the unconscious seem in some sense the pretext—one is tempted to call it the protective cover, the mimicry, the dissimulation—for another interest, namely an obsession with German history as a whole (and

not only the postwar period) as a series of parapraxes, which the authors call “2,000 years of productive relations as present in the [German] public sphere.” Kluge and Negt label this driving force, this symptomatic power behind production “Eigensinn,” that is obstinacy or obduracy, which I am suggesting, approximates *Fehlleistung*, once taken into the political, as well as the poetic realm.¹³ In any event, what Kluge and Negt name and document is the peculiar, historically specific, and apparently endlessly self-blocking and deadlocking ways in which Germans over the centuries have built themselves homes and a *Heimat*, only to become “*unheimlich*” (uncanny) to themselves as well as to the rest of humanity. German history emerges as a constant, uninterrupted laboratory of energy, ingenuity, and work, considered under the (positive) aspects of *Eigensinn*, but which also produces the negative fallout, for such is the nature of Germany’s “political unconscious” (to borrow a term from Fredric Jameson) that each episode of “going its own way” invariably seems to lead down yet another path of disaster. The outcome of these labors of generations upon generations of Germans is, according to Kluge and Negt, that the dead now look at the living in utter consternation:

For the last 2,000 years, human beings have been working on a territory we now call Germany, fashioning a single product: German history [. . .] If we could interview these dead generations who have worked on this product, whether the result of their work had been appropriated [. . .] differently from their intentions [. . .], and if all the dead had an overview over what the subsequent dead had done, then we could only assume the reply to be unanimous: it’s impossible to approve of the result. Their answer would be: “that’s not at all what we have had in mind.”¹⁴

It is this phrase that stays in one’s memory after seeing Kluge’s films, and it is echoed in *The Patriot* as well as in *The Power of Feelings* as a sometimes hilarious, sometimes distressing catalog of futile efforts to forge a destiny out of accidents: “hunderttausend Gründe, die hinterher Schicksal heissen” (“a hundred thousand reasons which afterwards are called fate”).¹⁵ It not only illustrates the gap between what was intended and what appeared to be the result:

The individual experiences reality not as the historical fiction that it is, but for real, as fate. However, reality is not fate, but made by the work of generations of people who all the time want and wanted something, but who [invariably] achieved something else.¹⁶

Clearly, the phrase “that is not at all what we have had in mind” expresses both horror and regret in equal measure, while it cites at once the seeing eye and the self-protecting gesture of not wanting to recognize the blindingly obvious. One could call it the very definition of Germany’s “Medusa’s mirror,”¹⁷ the “not-to-be-looked-at-ness” of its recent history, and thus outlines very precisely the thing it cannot name, the tragedy of the (Ger-

man) Jews' relation to (German) history. It gives a valuable clue as to why Kluge and Negt so persistently work over these two thousand years: their theme is not millennia in a strict sense, but the "Thousand-Year Reich," the central catastrophe of the twentieth century, started by Germany and which all but destroyed it: "in April, 1945, the 1,000 year old city of Magdeburg burnt to the ground in less than two days."¹⁸ The mis-alignment of time itself is another of these Fehlleistungen, and it includes not only Kluge's grief over the destruction of the city of Magdeburg (or his hometown of Halberstadt, to which he devoted another book), but all other forms of destruction, whose senselessness finds in this catastrophic mismatch of "1,000 years" and "two days" a commemorative symbol. Thus, Kluge's pre-emptive preoccupation with history, no less than his pre-emptive preoccupation with labor and production serves as a kind of "dream-screen" for an intense "working over," but also an obsessive return to, the only questions that seem to matter: "how could it have come to this? What does it mean that it came to this?"

The first answer, which may not be an answer at all, is contained in the title already mentioned and which programmatically heads Kluge's second collection of short stories: *Lernprozesse mit tödlichem Ausgang* ("learning-processes with a deadly outcome"). What would it mean to accept that German history has been a series of learning processes, all of them with deadly outcomes? That the dead had lived in vain, that Hitler and the war had not only robbed the present—Kluge's own—generation of its future, but as it were, had once more murdered the dead, because the shame over what Germans did has, so to speak, worked its way backward into history: this fact becomes for Kluge and Negt the starting point of any reflection about the present, but also about its re-presentation.

In *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, Kluge and Negt focus on finding a way out of this terrible dilemma, by inventing a sort of hypothetical or virtual temporality, one in which the possibility can be envisaged that these deaths could at least be comprehended and thus, retroactively, be given a meaning: on condition that the present is not seen as the end-point, the *terminus ad quem*, but itself appears already as a past, of which the future would act as the present: a sort of time-travel into the temporality of the future anterior. Bertold Brecht once said that it is not Mother Courage who has to learn. Rather, it is the spectator who has to learn from Mother Courage not learning. The question would then be not only how a nation learns or does not learn from what happens in its history, but what *Nachträglichkeit* or belatedness might make it at all possible to envisage a present, from which to draw the utopian faith to carry on, the resources for further "working on the future": this would be the possibly positive meaning of *Eigensinn*, the perseverance of parapraxis, the stubborn resilience of pushing the fast forward button, and of using time-lapse photography, so often deployed by Kluge in order to gain a vantage point on the present from the anticipated perspective of the future anterior. Kluge, like his characters, is always (metaphorically) in a hurry, mostly so that he can

look at the present from a position where it is already the past. Like so many heroes of science fiction, he becomes the chrono-naut, hoping to make the time-travelers' paradox (that one can enter the past only on condition that one does not change it) turn to the benefit of a history that Hitler has set on a course inexorably running backward.¹⁹

Trauma, Scar and Wound: Parapraxis as Embodied Mimicry

This opens up yet another perspective, present in *Geschichte und Eigensinn* and *The Power of Feelings*. As Kluge enigmatically puts it: "Die Narbe arbeitet nicht wie die Wunde" ("a scar does not work like a wound").²⁰ The corresponding scene in *The Power of Feelings* is that of a British Royal Air Force officer, offering—instead of apologies for the firestorms of Dresden, Hamburg, Magdeburg, or Halberstadt—an oddly clinical simile about the conditions under which a wound can heal without leaving a scar. The officer speaks of the firestorm as of a necessary wound, tearing open the scar tissue of a grown city in order to make it bleed, because only fresh blood can clean a wound and commence the healing process. Strangely incongruous and inappropriate to the terrible damage inflicted on Germany's venerable cities and its civilian population, the metaphor at least gains in plausibility if applied to the "scarred" (the word Kluge's officer uses is "scabby") relationship between Germans and Jews after 1945, scarred and scabby by the misunderstandings, mistakes, and tactlessness, which have kept the "skin" (i.e., contact and context of the encounter) at once over-sensitive and over-exposed. Across the film as a whole, Kluge extends a peculiar conceptual-semantic field around notions of labor, work, memory, pain, fire, ice, and warfare, which on the one hand, has everything to do with what one would call "mourning work," a process that thanks to the notions of scar and wound, now becomes wholly embodied and body-related. On the other hand, it perfectly demonstrates what Kluge means by "*die Gewalt des Zusammenhangs*" ("the violence of contexts"), invariably referring to trauma and vulnerability, repetition and the location of lost traces.

In *The Patriot*, where some of these complex filiations of the violence of contexts are worked out in greatest detail, it is the knee joint of a dead German soldier—the body part standing for the whole, but at the same time, emphasizing the joint, the relation rather than an essence—that is made to voice this demand for mourning work, in scenes whose pathos would be unbearable, were the conceit, and Kluge's manner of handling it, not so whimsical. This particular knee refers to a famous nonsense poem by Christian Morgenstern, "Ein Knie geht um die Welt" ("a knee goes out to conquer the world") which, applied to a German World War II soldier, cannot but evoke the world-conquering hubris of Germany's territorial ambitions.

Yet the whimsicality is also a purposively performed parapraxis, now in the form of dissemblance. For it takes very little to see what sort of displacements, gaps, and reversals have taken place around this pars-pro-toto of the

German knee. One only has to substitute for the knee of Soldier Wieland a solitary shoe, a pair of glasses, a comb, or a tooth, and to imagine what this passage would be like if it was these part-objects, so familiar from the archive footage of the camps, that had suddenly decided they no longer wanted to be silent.

But, then, if one takes a close look at the pictures one notices that these seem to be the “right images,” but at the “wrong place.” Do these prisoners of war that are looking at us, not belong to the images we have become used to seeing from the camps or from the rounding up of ghetto inhabitants, rather than from the trek of hungry Germans, marched into Soviet camps after the defeat at Stalingrad? And why does this scene start with a deceptively idyllic picture of the Wartburg, the home of Martin Luther, one of pre-Hitler Germany’s most notorious and vociferous anti-Semites, if not to name something the more insistently by not naming it?

The same shock of recognition-in-misprision overcame me, when noticing the images from near the opening of another of Kluge’s films, the 1972 *In Gefahr und grösster Not bringt der Mittelweg den Tod*, set in Frankfurt during the student movement and the housing riots. Do these workers silently digging the streets not look like forced foreign labor, again facing the camera with the wordless hostility of those having to bear the indignity of being classified, registered, objectified by the gaze of a camera? As one of the heroines so aptly muses in what stands as the motto at the very beginning of the film: “Inge Maier hatte das Gefühl, sie sei in den falschen Film geraten” (“looking on, Inge Maier had the feeling of having strayed into the wrong movie”). To have persisted with so much Eigensinn in making “the wrong movie” for the past thirty-five years, this is surely Kluge’s greatest contribution to the mourning work of postwar Germany, for it is in these artfully deliberate and yet nevertheless deeply disturbing parapraxes that Kluge outlines how a possible dialogue between Germans and Jews, between Germany and “its Jews” might designate itself, however negatively its “Gestalt” may have to be inferred, and however deferred or delayed its redemptive presence may still have to remain.

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Notes

1. This essay was originally given as a lecture at the “Not-to-Be-Looked-At” Conference, University of Tel-Aviv, Israel, on May 30, 2000. Parts of it were subsequently published as “The New German Cinema and History: The Case of Alexander Kluge,” in *The German Cinema Book*, ed. Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter,

- Deniz Göktürk (London: BFI Publishing, 2003), 182–190. My thanks to the editors for permission to republish.
2. Films made in the GDR did feature Jews, but usually in the context of the “anti-fascist” struggle, which became the regime’s official doctrine of resistance. For a more nuanced and historically researched account of this “absence” in the West and “presence” in the East, see the project and data-bank “Cinematographie des Holocaust,” jointly coordinated by the Fritz Bauer Institute Frankfurt, Cinegraph Hamburg, and the Deutsche Filminstitut/Filmmuseum Frankfurt, and supported with publications such as C. Dillmann and R. Loewy, eds., *Die Vergangenheit in der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt am Main: DIF, 2001). The project’s Web site is <http://www.fritz-bauer-institut.de/cinematographie.htm> (accessed October 13, 2007).
3. Dan Diner, “Negative Symbiose—Deutsche und Juden nach Auschwitz,” *Babylon* 1 (1986): 9–20.
4. See my “Antigone Agonistes: The RAF, *Germany in Autumn* and *Death Game*,” in *Giving Ground: The Politics of Propinquity*, ed. Joan Copjec and Mark Sorkin (London: Verso, 1999), 267–302.
5. In the last two decades, there has hardly been a film or a television program made in Germany with a twentieth-century historical setting that did not have archive footage from the Holocaust, a witness from the camps, a survivor, or spokespersons from the Jewish community. Similarly, the new Federal capital Berlin presents itself to the world mainly through three symbolic sites: no longer the Brandenburg Gate, but the Reichstag with the new glass dome, no longer the Victory column but the restored synagogue in the Oranienburgerstrasse, and no longer the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church but Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum.
6. Henryk M. Broder, *Der ewige Antisemit: Über Sinn und Funktion eines beständigen Gefühls* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1986).
7. Alexander and Margarethe Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu Trauern* (Munich: Pieper, 1967), trans. as *The Inability to Mourn* (New York: Grove Press, 1975).
8. Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).
9. Serge Daney, “Godard Makes (Hi)Stories,” in *Jean-Luc Godard: Son + Image 1974–1991*, ed. Raymond Bellour and Mary-Lea Bandy (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 160.
10. Reference to the Martin Walser–Ignaz Bubis controversy can be found in the German weekly *Die Zeit*, 14 September 1999.
11. Jörg Drews, “Leseprozesse mit tödlichem Ausgang,” *text & kritik*, nos. 85–86 (1985): 31.
12. See my discussion of uneven exchange in *Fassbinder’s Germany: History Identity Subject* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996), 253–256.
13. The volume is divided into three sections: “The Historical Organization of Labor Power,” “Germany as Productive Public Sphere,” and “The Violence of Context.” “Labor” includes its opposite, fantasy and desires, as well as the history of the senses in their somatic and cognitive relation to abstract labor and modes of production.
14. Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (Frankfurt: Zweitausendeins, 1984), 500–501.
15. Alexander Kluge, *Die Macht der Gefühle* (Frankfurt: Zweitausendeins, 1984), 5.

16. Alexander Kluge, *Gelegenheitsarbeit einer Sklavin: Zur realistischen Methode* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), 215.
17. For an elaboration of this idea, see August Closs, *Medusa's Mirror: Studies in German Literature* (London: Cresset Press, 1962).
18. Kluge and Negt, "Stadt/Bomben," *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, 719.
19. Such a rewind recalls Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, about the firestorms caused by RAF-bombers in Dresden in 1944, and Martin Amis's book about Auschwitz doctors, *Time's Arrow*. It is also how one may read the scene at the beginning of *The Power of Feelings* when a singer is asked by an interviewer: Why, even after the eighty-fourth performance, is he in denial over the fact that the opera *Rigoletto* has a tragic ending? His reply: "it might have been different, and maybe once, it will be different." In other words, even in the face of an already-written "text" (or repeatedly experienced past), he holds on to a hypothetical dimension, which might also be called a "test-scenario." Is it stupidity, disavowal of reality, or does the encounter give the usually "tragic" learning processes of Kluge a seemingly counter-intuitive, but necessary "utopian" dimension, where hope-against-hope asserts itself in the face of a fatal outcome and disaster?
20. Kluge and Negt, *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, 125.