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Rod Stoneman

Alexander Kluge: Utopian Cinema

Alexander Kluge's films, television programmes and his other diverse activities contribute to a developed understanding of contemporary politics and culture. He took a version of creative critical theory into spheres of production normally dominated by industrial fabrication. Opportunistic and inventive (and entrepreneurial in the best sense) he made a number of exemplary incisions in the body politic. His radical intertextuality and polysemy reveals the both possibilities and limitations of contemporary cultural spaces.

Hiatus valde deflendus / A gap greatly to be lamented

Alexander Kluge's activities as film-maker, lawyer, lobbyist, writer, teacher and theorist played an important role in shaping the development of German cinema since the Oberhausen Manifesto in 1962. Kluge may be well enough known in Germany, but his international profile tends to rely on the films he made in the Seventies as the section of his work that is most distributed outside Germany¹. For example it is not widely known that when private television expanded in Germany in the Eighties he set up a new initiative to make high quality programming for commercial satellite television. The context and the form of this programming is almost invisible; the few fragments of programmes like 10 to 11 and Primetime that have been shown in television and video festivals and specialist seminars abroad allow viewers to glimpse a complex range of polysemic fragments. The context and the scope of this brave and experimental television production are scarcely public.

At a weekend seminar held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in December 1993 Kluge suggested that his artistic practice might be best conceived as having a 'homeopathic' role – the smaller the dose the greater the effect on the body politic. It is an inspiring and poetic metaphor, but one that begs a sceptical question about the real effects of avant-garde film and television programmes in the public sphere.

Vox audita perit / The heard word is lost

Roland Barthes suggested that thorough formal analysis makes us confront history rather than shielding the text (and the critic) from it. Although a textual approach is not that of historiography, it demonstrates that no area of film is untouched by history. Nearly all of Kluge's films circulate around imaginative reconstructions and creative re-readings of those nodal moments of the German narrative that constitute the present. His texts offer an intensely subjective

¹ This paper draws mainly upon English language sources.

approach to the experience of history, an aesthetic of digression, centring on the individual – “What else is the history of a country but the vastest narrative surface of all? Not one story but many stories”.²

In *The Patriot / Die Patriotin*,³ made in 1979, an overt intertextuality plays into a diverse, self-consciously heterogeneous structure. The patriot herself is Gabi Teichert, a history teacher who digs away at Germany’s cultural past; her excavations depart from conventional narrative structures as Kluge attempts to discover the appropriate form through which to approach German history and contemporary reality. Walter Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk* represents a premonition of intertextuality, aiming at developing collage and montage as constructive principles for a progressive form of writing; Benjamin intended that the project “must develop to the highest point the art of citing without citation marks. Its theory connects most closely with that of montage”.⁴ *The Patriot* also takes the combination of diverse texts and materials to a heightened level, as there are new forms of overt cross-reference and implicit connection through juxtaposition in the 122 minutes of a feature film. The film moves through a tissue of textual shards and quotations and a clash of very distinct filmic genres; the costume drama of the army officer’s love story, interviews with a doll salesman and a lawyer who is a fairy tale expert and the rough verité of a SPD conference.

Kluge deploys a single voice over to work amongst a loose assembly of disparate, discordant elements. In his analysis of the film, Thomas Elsaesser suggests, “the chaos of disparate visual sources and artlessly shot footage that makes up the narrative give the spoken or written word in his films almost invariably the dominant role”.⁵ In *The Last Modernist*,⁶ Peter Lutze also argues that to an extent the voice over is a master code that offers the author’s preferred reading. These readings over-estimate the weight of the film’s softly spoken voice as a coherent, credible centre⁷ – it is not linear or directorial enough to take the dominant role in organising the film’s meanings.

Roland Barthes makes a crucial distinction between “histoire” and “discours” in *Image-Music-Text*,⁸ outlining the differences between third party and first person, nominated speech. The voice over in *The Patriot* is in the third person, but

² Alexander Kluge: On Film and the Public Sphere. In: *New German Critique* 24–25 (Fall-Winter 1981–82). P. 206.

³ Literally the *female* Patriot.

⁴ Susan Buck-Morss: *The Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press 1991. P. 572.

⁵ Thomas Elsaesser: *New German Cinema, A History*. London: BFI 1989. P. 98.

⁶ Peter C. Lutze: *Alexander Kluge, The Last Modernist*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1998. Pp. 86–89, 177.

⁷ As does B. Ruby Rich: She Says, He Says: The Power of the Narrator in Modernist Film Politics. In: *Discourse* 6 (1981). P. 36.

⁸ Roland Barthes: Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives. In: *Image-Music-Text*. Glasgow: Fontana 1977.

because of what it says, because it offers a fantastical point of view – the ‘d’ou je parle’ is indeed that of a knee of a dead soldier, it does not have the status or position normally accorded to this form of speech. This voice (actually recognisable to those familiar with his films as Kluge’s own) does not pretend to offer a quasi-objective perspective but rather that of a mere body part and a deceased one at that. The device of the dead soldier’s knee was invented by the film’s editor Beate Mainke-Jellinghaus – with reference to a poem by Morgenstern⁹ and the preposterous and ironic anatomical placement of the omniscient voice over from a place “where the dead criticise the living” ensures an ambiguous perspective and an unreliable voice which undercuts a dominant or coherent viewpoint.

As the voice over in *Artistes at the Top of the Big Top: Disoriented / Die Artisten in der Zirkuskuppel: ratlos* (1967) indicates, there is always room for internal disagreement and dialectics from a single narrator: “Leni Peickert says: I want to reform the circus because I love it. Answer: Because she loves it, she will not reform it. Why? Because love is a conservative impulse. Leni Peickert: That is not true”.¹⁰

The role of the voice in *The Patriot* is also fractured by subversive strategies of narration when the constant digression even lapses into Latin, garbled and unintelligible, at the end of the film – it may be less well known that Kluge was pseudonymously responsible for translating *Winnie the Poo* into a minor Latin classic *Winnie ille Pu*. Kluge’s soft spoken univocal discourse does not offer the reliable explanatory guide that an authorial voice over normally provides – the omniscient narrator desired by the subject searching for stable meaning in the text. Kluge has quoted Kleist in relation to the “gradual construction of [forms of] thought through speaking”¹¹ and for him, as for other contemporary film-makers,¹² his form of speech is part of a specific mode of thinking.

Another phrase deployed by Kluge at the ICA seminar referred to his films utilising “a certain quantity of narrativity” and this phrase may be taken to indicate the precise and calculated attention to meaning production in all his work. Sharing Adorno’s concern¹³ with effect and the calculation of the spectator’s response down to the last nuance, Kluge constantly projects the reception of the signifying system he creates: “The film is composed in the head

⁹Miriam Hansen: Alexander Kluge, Cinema and the public sphere: the Construction Site of Counter History. *Discourse* 6 (1981). P. 66.

¹⁰Hans-Bernhard Moeller and Carl Springer: Directed Change in the Young German Film: Alexander Kluge and Artists Under the Big Top: Perplexed. In: *Wide Angle* 2.1 (1977). P. 17.

¹¹Stuart Liebman: On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment, and the Public Sphere: An Interview with Alexander Kluge. In: *October* 46 (1988). P. 38.

¹²Rod Stoneman: Among Godard’s Forms of Thought. In: *Undercut* 2 (1981); and *The Undercut Reader*. Ed. by Nina Danino and Michael Maziere. London: Wallflower Press 2003. P. 200–204.

¹³Miriam B. Hansen: Introduction to Adorno. Transparencies on Film. In: *New German Critique* 24–25 (1982). P. 189.

of the spectator. It is not a work of art that exists on the screen by itself. Film must work with the associations, to the extent they can be estimated, to the extent they can be imagined, which the author can arouse in the spectator".¹⁴

Often, the process of viewing a rough cut¹⁵ of a film is the first point at which this calculation is brought into focus. It is rare enough to encounter such a precise and rational focus on the positioning of the text in relation to the spectator and the process of meaning production on the part of the film-maker. Larger scale industrial film-making often deploys test screenings as a form of pre-emptive market research to monitor meanings. Film-makers who do not think of how their work will be understood by the audiences may encounter the dangers of solipsism – accurately satirized in Anthony Burgess's fictional poet Enderby. Having been scalded by prunes at birth, he uses the significant phrase 'death, terrible as prunes' in his poetry, assuming that this fruit has the same dreadful resonance for everyone. Thinking social meanings and audience positioning through at an early stage is also the basis for a necessary clarity before the film-maker enters the field of contention arising from naked market pressures that intervene with, say, casting issues or script changes.

A theory of reception is relevant here; Kluge remarked: "It is not only a question of art, but of its reception. The reception itself constitutes public life and experience".¹⁶ Umberto Eco's book *The Role of The Reader* reopened the theoretical debate about reception and the journal *New German Critique* took up elements of the investigation initiated by the Russian Formalists half a century earlier and continued to examine the bases for understanding reception.

Kluge shares something of the same motives and the same critique as Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin in relation to the limitations of forms of 'realism'; he reiterates the example they gave of a photograph of a factory: "What use if an exterior view of the AEG if I cannot see what is going on inside the building in terms of relationships, wage labour, capital, international investments – a photograph of AEG says nothing about the AEG itself".¹⁷ Filmed images reproduce

¹⁴ Stuart Liebman: Why Kluge. In: *October* 46 (1988). P.14.

¹⁵ In a particular and peculiar 20 year trajectory working for Channel Four and Bord Scannán na hÉireann / The Irish Film Board I have viewed probably over 1000 rough cuts with film-makers; a process which precisely deploys a distant and less involved perspective to help calibrate meaning production.

¹⁶ Stuart Liebman: On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment, and the Public Sphere: An Interview with Alexander Kluge. In: *October* 46 (1988). P. 41.

¹⁷ Kluge: On Film and the Public Sphere. In: *New German Critique* 24–25 (1981–82). P. 218. The actual passage reads as follows: "The situation is complicated by the fact that less than ever does a simple 'reproduction of reality' tell us anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupps factory or of the AEG yields practically nothing about these institutions. The genuine reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations; the factory say, no longer gives out these relations. Hence it is in fact 'something to construct', something 'artificial', 'posited'. Hence in fact art is necessary". Bertolt

the appearance of things and therefore to some extent reaffirm the existence of them; representations that show things as *they are* – not as *they could be*.

In Kluge's case the utopian impulse intervenes and leads to an exploration of forms of film which engender more active, more questioning spectator positions. The experimentation with an alternative practice of cinema paralleling the development of alternative practices of politics in that epoch; this a moment of modernism which assumes that film-making may engender radical change through radical forms of representation. The imperative for social change underlined in Marx's 1848 manifesto ended with the phrase "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it".¹⁸ The cultural enactment of 'the point' is intercepted by modernist concerns with the form and, crucially, the power relations of the discourse that could lead to change.

Kluge arrives at a very different solution to the question of a radical filmic discourse which might act as a catalyst for change than earlier Soviet versions of montage aesthetics, even if they share some of the same aims. He reacted against the manipulative dimensions of Eisensteinian meaning control; in his view, paradoxically Soviet film-making is too close to mainstream modes: "Hollywood films which try to persuade the audience to give up their own experience and follow the more organised experience of the film. In my opinion, the opposite is right".¹⁹

Kluge endeavours to create a specifically loose space for images and sounds to play off one another, decentred narratives and digressions to circulate and the possibility of the interpellation of an active spectator to work between them. His films are construction sites where a variety of discourses intersect and clash, engendering what Barthes called "the very plural of meanings" his "fabric of quotations" becomes an enhanced, explicit intertextuality.²⁰

Kluge's films have maintained a separate, adjacent relation to his writing. The space of literature is very different and constrained in relation to the scale of intervention available in film and television – inevitably his work encounters a greater field of force in popular media. The social reach of literature is constrained – although western societies had achieved almost universal literacy by the end of the 19th century the proportion of the population open to literature once they have left an institutional context is minimal. Because popular cinema continues its pervasive social reach in theatres and on television, even peripheral forms of film, such as 'art house' genres, can connect with relatively

Brecht: *Der Dreigroschenprozess* (The Three Penny Trial), translation Ben Brewster. From Shklovsky to Brecht: A Reply. In: *Screen* 15.7 (Summer 1974). P. 93.

¹⁸ Karl Marx: Theses on Feuerbach. See <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/index.htm>.

¹⁹ See Peter C. Lutze: *Alexander Kluge, The Last Modernist*. P. 237, note 49.

²⁰ Another adjacent example might be Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* which is a project constructed from a complex lattice of intertextual quotation and reference.

wide audiences. I programmed *The Patriot* in a season called *European Directions* and it was transmitted by Channel 4 on 3 September 1984 at 11pm. It would have been watched by over 400,000 viewers.

Kluge brings a playful, ironic spirit to bear – “making films is an anti-academic, insolent occupation, historically grounded but inconsistent [...]”.²¹ Gabi as patriot and teacher marks history essays crossing out errors which are, the voice over asserts, “the best bits”; recalling Joyce’s remark that “error is the portal of discovery”. The serious concerns of *The Patriot* are clear from the start, however the gravity of the complex exploration is undermined when early on the voice over remarks “a puddle has a three day history”; intersection of ‘impertinent’ discourses²² contribute to the understanding of complex ideas.

Effects E re nata / As circumstances dictate

One of the first significant encounters of Kluge’s work with Anglophone film culture was at the Brecht Event during the Edinburgh Film Festival in 1977; this was part of *Screen* magazine’s project to conjoin radical aesthetics and radical politics. Until that time attention had been almost exclusively focused on the work of Jean-Luc Godard as the exemplar of politicised, modernist form; a film-maker determined “to show and show myself showing”.²³ However the spectrum gradually broadened beyond Godard to include film-makers like Jean-Marie Straub / Daniele Huillet; eventually Nagisa Oshima and Dusan Makavejev. The interest in early film can also be seen as a parallel attempt to de-naturalise normative narrative forms, as a relationship can be discerned between the positions of early and experimental cinema.²⁴ They both function to relativise and counter the naturalisation of a mode of representation, the avant-garde speaks a language of *negation* and thus of *negotiation*. It is only by undermining the transparency of the institutionalised modes of representation that they can be challenged. Kluge’s films played a role in broadening the range of reference in the discussion of the politics of form.

Kluge’s montage style can also be seen to connect with the broad tradition of the Found Footage genre and the specific versions of this form which have

²¹ Kluge: On Film and the Public Sphere. P. 207.

²² When asked about the relative influence of Marx or Freud on his work Michel Foucault apparently quipped, “They still have much harm to do one another [...]”.

²³ Colin MacCabe: *Godard – A Portrait of the Artist at 70*. London: Bloomsbury 2003. P. 176.

²⁴ Thomas Elsaesser recently cited the author’s essay “Perspective Correction” (in: *Afterimage* 8–9 (Spring 1981)) and wrote “The rediscovery of the ‘primitives’ seemed like a vindication of the avant garde’s fifty year struggle to rethink the foundations of film language and dispel the idea that the cinema’s turn to fictional narrative or adoption of illusionist representational forms was its inevitable destiny”. *Early Cinema Space Frame Narrative*. P. 4.

proliferated in German and Austrian experimental film culture in recent years: Wilhelm and Birgit Hein, Peter Kubelka are leading exponents of this area. Based on the re-appropriation, transformation and reinterpretation of others' images, it was celebrated at the VIPER International Film and Video Festival in Lucerne in 1991/2.²⁵ A Cologne based television producer Thomas Schmitt made a series called *Freestyle* in the late 1980ies to early 1990ies for WDR, utilising diverse and lively conjunctions, thematic collages of material that breaks up the narrative continuities expected in this form of television programme. In a more recent manifestation Gustav Deutsch's re-editing sequences of silent film in the 'Material' section of *Film ist...* (1999) specifically recalls the poignancy of mortality and decay in Kluge's title – Love, Death and Compromise.

The precarious project of radical form explored at the edges of early Channel 4 television has been set aside in the current confluence of ideologies that constitute contemporary culture.²⁶ Maybe this is also the context to account for the relative lack of focus on Alexander Kluge in relation to the other film-makers of the new German cinema.

Martin Blaney, German correspondent of the English language film trade magazine *Screen International*, recently discounted Kluge with the phrase "I don't think he has any relevance for the current generation of German film-makers".²⁷ An anonymous reviewer writing on the International Movie Data Base described *The Patriot* as "deadly boring, belligerent and brow beating [...] This movie is one of the most slow moving and boring movies I've ever seen. It's just a long-winded, repetitive, monotonous harangue".²⁸ In all its dismissive naivety this IMDB comment is a symptom of the comprehensive failure of the project of radical form to reach an appreciative audience. As meanings proliferate in his open polysemic texts Kluge's signifying practice creates an overload and excess for many spectators, producing as much perplexity as illumination. The constraints of the basis for most of the distribution and exhibition available to avant-garde practice means that it is often protected from wider audience response. One cannot ignore the problems of difficulty, access and intelligibility experienced in relation to experimental or theoretical work – reactions described by Adorno with aggressive disdain: "They fall back on the shamelessly modest assertion that they do not understand – this eliminates even opposition, their last negative relationship to truth".²⁹

²⁵ *Found Footage Film*, Ed. by Cecilia Hausheer and Christoph Settele. Luzern: Zyklus Verlag 1992.

²⁶ Rod Stoneman: Sins of commission. In: *Screen* 33.2 (Summer 1992). P. 127–144.

²⁷ Email to the author 25th March 2004.

²⁸ IMDB, 19th November 2003.

²⁹ Theodor Adorno: Addressee Unknown. In: *Minima Moralia*. London: NLB 1974. P. 216.

As it flows so strongly against the grain of mainstream culture Kluge's work is best approached in a relaxed and receptive mode, discovering the pleasures of its ambiguity, the delights of its difficulty. "The cinema is an institution of pleasure. Above all the pleasure of ideas".³⁰ Unfortunately we live in societies where any possible pleasure in ideas is constructed as a minority sport, a perverse pleasure. And furthermore Kluge's very loose arrangement of ideas moves within the play of that most dangerous game – the politics of polysemy.

Kluge's eventual expedition into the commercial territory of private satellite television followed the strategic vision and adept tactics first manifest in the collective Oberhausen Manifesto in 1962. The intervention in television, exploiting the "porosity of the institutional structures",³¹ was actually achieved as a result of his influence within the SPD; a combination of strategic thinking and opportunism having a direct effect on legislation for RTL and SAT 1. However the slots in the schedule for which Kluge's company made programming for soon began to slip to 11pm, then 11.50pm and 12.30am. Apparently the RTL television executives referred to him as 'Quotenkiller' – a ratings killer.³²

There is some parallel in Eckart Stein's experience programming Arte and 3Sat – following his work for *Das kleine Fernsehspiel*³³ on terrestrial television (ZDF) and satellite programming, but the viewing figures are also very small and the number of slots per year were drastically reduced in recent years.

Overall it has to be recognised that Kluge's homeopathic ministrations have, sad to say, had little social reach or long-term effect. Despite his intense activity as a media politician, beginning with the Manifesto, organising a collective feature like *Deutschland im Herbst / Germany in Autumn* in 1978 and the recent interventions in private television, his 'medicinal' impact has not spread outwards in terms of either cultural influence or institutional, political example, even within Germany.

Circulation Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis / Times change and we change with them

Alongside the lack of long term international influence on the infrastructure of the media, Kluge has been set aside in the German context and is inadequately recognised at home as well as abroad,³⁴ but the model of his radical polysemic

³⁰Peter C. Lutze: *Alexander Kluge, The Last Modernist*. P. 210.

³¹Stuart Liebman: *On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment, and the Public Sphere*. P. 38.

³²Lutze: *Alexander Kluge, The Last Modernist*. P. 196.

³³Created in 1962 by Hajo Schedlich and continued from 1975 with Eckart Stein.

³⁴One current reflection of this disregard is the unavailability of Kluge's feature films on the new medium of DVD – a format and a distribution context which allows access to a much greater variety of films, formerly restricted, including esoteric minority films.

cinema and television can be argued to be as relevant as ever. In fact the deterioration of public service television over the last decade makes it more imperative. The increasingly spectacular patterns of media consumption and the mercantile uses of leisure time throw Kluge's extraordinary combination of imaginative institutional and discursive strategies into stark relief. He has made small but significant contributions to an oppositional public sphere and combined creative practice and theoretical reflection in an exemplary way.

His filmic strategies, together with his television work, continue to be pertinent to a wide range of film-makers in a period of dangerous remission for European cinema. Kluge's institutional example is relevant to current debates on artists' film³⁵ and discussion of contemporary media legislation. It poses the question – how can any aspect of cultural cinema reinvent itself and enter the increasingly privatised domain of multichannel European broadcasting?

As Oscar Wilde suggested: "A map of the world that does not include the territory of Utopia is not worth even glancing at".³⁶ We can only hope that Leni Peickert was correct when, in *Artists at the Top of the Big Top: Disoriented*, she asserts that "The longer you wait for Utopia, the better it gets...".

³⁵ For instance Kluge's experiments were invoked at *Getting It Made*, an event held at the Tate Britain in London on 27th March 2004.

³⁶ Perry Anderson envisages the renewal of utopian energies more historically in: The River of Time. In: *New Left Review* 26 (March-April 2004). Pp. 67–77.



DIE PATRIOTIN - BRD 1979
Regie: Alexander Kluge
Quelle: Deutsche Kinemathek