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**The stubborn persistence of Alexander Kluge**

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**Alexander Kluge**

**Raw Materials for the Imagination**

*Edited by Tara Forrest*

AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

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# The Stubborn Persistence of Alexander Kluge

Thomas Elsaesser

As a film-maker with a modest but loyal transatlantic following, Alexander Kluge's oeuvre and career are markedly different from those of other European directors venerated by cinephiles.<sup>1</sup> Celebrating his eightieth birthday, he belongs to the same generation as Jean-Luc Godard, Jean Marie Straub and Theo Angelopoulos, but trained as a lawyer before making his first film in 1960. In Germany, he is equally if not more famous as a short story writer and the author of several volumes of sociology. To film historians, he is the legal brain and policy-shaper behind the New German Cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, having been the driving force behind the famous Oberhausen Manifesto of 1962 and the government film-funding legislation that followed.<sup>2</sup> In 1964 he co-founded West Germany's first film school (at the Ulm Institute for Design) and in 1972 he published, in his capacity as professor of sociology at the University of Frankfurt, a book with Oskar Negt which became a classic for the student generation of 1968, *Public Sphere and Experience*, a radicalised rejoinder to Jürgen Habermas's equally classic 1962 *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Co-author of other critical and political analyses, including a book-length study of the European film industry, Kluge remained, for more than two decades, the undisputed master strategist of the parliamentary lobby and the chief architect of a state film-subsidy system based around the concept of the *Autorenfilm* (auteur film) – before becoming, in the 1980s, one of its fiercest critics.<sup>3</sup>

Between 1966 and 1983 he directed some twenty films, of which about six have remained in active memory: *YESTERDAY GIRL* (1966), *ARTISTS UNDER THE BIG TOP: PERPLEXED* (1968), *OCCASIONAL WORK OF A FEMALE SLAVE* (1974), a segment of *GERMANY IN AUTUMN* (1978), *THE PATRIOT* (1979) and *THE POWER OF FEELINGS* (1983). On these titles rests his reputation as a film-maker, although for his fans, a few more remain to be rediscovered, such as *THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD IS A VERY DEAD END* (1974), *STRONGMAN FERDINAND* (1976) and *THE BLIND DIRECTOR* (1985).

By 1985 Kluge had changed tack, having entered into what many saw as a Faustian bargain with commercial television to produce late-night cultural magazine shows. *The Hour of the Film-makers: Film Histories, Ten to Eleven, News and Stories* and *Prime Time: Late Edition* are programmes that have been sponsored by, among others, the Japanese advertising firm Dentsu, and supervised by

Kluge with a consortium headed by the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*.<sup>4</sup> They feature half-hour mini-films, ciné-essays and interviews on subjects as diverse as the guillotine and montage cinema, opera and Greek mythology, a 'sampling' of a scene from Godard's *CONTEMPT*, an interview about the Roman historian Tacitus with playwright Heiner Müller, or 'Fidel Castro, the Last of the Mohicans'. This output has averaged two half-hour programmes per week over the last twenty-five years, complementing a filmography of altogether thirty films (features and documentary shorts), in addition to a thousand short stories that run to ten volumes and a further sixteen works of nonfiction.

Faced with such relentless productivity in so many media, one's first reaction is awe, followed perhaps by scepticism and incredulity. For besides the books, the films and the hundreds of hours of television, there are also newspaper articles, polemics, interviews, press conferences and public lectures: if Kluge has become something of a myth, an institution even, one could be forgiven for also sensing something almost monstrous in so much talent. His energy never flags, his curiosity is inexhaustible, and no occasion is too ephemeral to ignite his enthusiasm for reform or creative engagement. Unlike that other German filmmaker of seemingly superhuman productivity, R.W. Fassbinder, Kluge has proven himself a marathon man, still going strong after more than fifty years on the front line: predating the generation of 1968, he has outlived even their pessimistic afterlife and (self-)defeat.

The sheer size of Kluge's oeuvre makes it enigmatic and not only because the man himself has chosen to remain so utterly private. He credibly maintains that film-making is only one way of pursuing his activist's agenda, and compared to the work of younger compatriots like Fassbinder, Herzog and Wenders, his features look deliberately improvised – brilliant compilations of aperçus and astonishing montages of 'bits and pieces' rather than self-sustaining masterpieces (one of his last films, from 1986, was actually called *MISCELLANEOUS NEWS*). Finally, in contrast to two film-makers of his own generation, Edgar Reitz and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, Kluge seems free of the obsessive urge to undertake works of the *longue durée* like *HEIMAT* or *OUR HITLER*. Instead, he has chosen case studies of remarkable or odd individuals, like Anita G., the heroine of *YESTERDAY GIRL*; Ferdinand Rieche, the security chief of *STRONGMAN FERDINAND*; or the contrasting fate of two women, one an East German spy, the other a prostitute and shoplifter in *THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD IS A VERY DEAD END*. If asked, Kluge might argue that his film-making is 'work in progress', with each film more of a means to an end than a goal in itself – the documentation of a contingent history, not of himself as an artist, nor necessarily that of his characters, but of the historical body called 'Germany', belated nation and premature state, alternately bloated and divided, with which the film-maker is engaged in an un-

ending and unhappy dialogue, like an old couple for whom tenderness, aggression and mutual dependence have become inseparable.

The close links between Kluge's literary output and his film scenarios suggest that a web-like network binds his other activities to his cinema work and vice versa: many of his film protagonists first appeared in the story collections *Case Histories* (1962), *Learning Processes with a Deadly Outcome* (1973) and *The Uncanniness of Time* (1977). Some films are the result of utilising the out-takes from a previous film; others feel like slightly hysterical self-parodies. The director has even reworked and re-edited films in response to public discussions with audiences. But if the films are off-cuts from an ongoing dialogue, the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle fit into an overall design that is by necessity both self-directed and remote-controlled. Kluge's working method is best described in Harun Farocki's words as a *Verbund*, or 'network'. A symbiotic or mutually implicating arrangement of input and output, Kluge's *Verbund* is at once a dada collage and a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, where newspaper clippings, photos, snatches of popular music, Wagner, Verdi, home movies and *objets trouvés* serve as material for installations in a permanent museum of human idiocy, idiosyncrasy and heroic persistence. His work is furthermore held together as much by the structural contradiction of remaining an artist while servicing a culture industry, as by the exigencies of grappling with several media simultaneously. Like Brecht, Kluge wants to intervene from within, rather than, in the manner of Adorno, critiquing from without (to contrast two of Kluge's own master thinkers).<sup>5</sup>

Despite the public attention he generates through television (though he is never on screen in his shows, only a voice-off), Kluge is enigmatic also in the eccentric impersonality of his working method. Unlike others in the film business, he has never sought the limelight, nor presented himself as a visionary artist with a personal mission – the latter being the all-too-Germanic vice of other New German Cinema auteurs. What is immediately striking are the many collaborative projects and collective signatures, not only on manifestos and press releases, but also with the omnibus films *GERMANY IN AUTUMN*, *THE CANDIDATE* (1980) and *WAR AND PEACE* (1982), as well as one short and one feature, all made in conjunction with, amongst others, Ulrich Schamoni, Edgar Reitz, Volker Schlöndorff, Margarethe von Trotta and Fassbinder. Kluge often hands his television slots over to friends like Ula Stoeckl, Alfred Edel and Günter Gaus. Shaped by the collectivist ethos of the 1960s, with a deep distrust of specialisation and an abiding antipathy towards any division of labour, Kluge is an ideal advocate of cooperation. But in practice, he is the auteur as autocrat: even the most sprawling enterprises with which he is involved reverberate with the quirky logic of his mind – while being held in the steel grip of his formidable intellect, reclaiming as idiosyncrasy and stubbornness the very dis-

persal of authorship and self-expression that the collectivist projects and the different media outlets otherwise imply.

Where, then, in this massive output, this eccentric personality, this shadowy, publicity-shy presence, can one finally locate a centre? Is there a real Alexander Kluge, or merely a dazzling, and to some observers, irritating succession of disguises, masks, masquerades and performance pieces? To adapt a phrase originally taken from Walter Benjamin (who took it from Karl Kraus) and quoted at the beginning of *THE PATRIOT*: 'The longer one looks at [him], the farther [he] looks back at you'. The inventor of the *Autorenfilm* challenges all the usual assumptions of auteurism that would sanction the reading of his work thematically or as existential self-expression. On the other hand, given Kluge's own voluminous commentaries on his (cinematic) intentions, (reformist) aims and (didactic) methods, his views on everything and anything, his obsessive-compulsive return to certain phrases and references, it is tempting to quote the director on his own behalf and assume a strong autobiographical core. But it is a temptation (initially) to be resisted: reading Kluge and viewing his films can leave you with the blurry feeling of watching a spinning top only to realise that his self-analysis only deepens the enigma. What exactly does he mean by sound bites like 'film theory is film politics', 'public sphere is the productivity of the senses', 'opera is the power-house of feelings?' In the end, one abiding concern remains clearly discernible in everything he does: the why and where of his nation, his country and its history.

How could it be otherwise? For *any* German of his generation, history looms large, usually contracted to the twelve years of Nazi rule, its consequences and aftermath. Not so in Kluge, at least at first glance. In the dada *Gesamtkunstwerk* that is his oeuvre, the grand design is laid out in the second book he wrote with Oskar Negt, *Geschichte und Eigensinn (History and Idiosyncrasy)*.<sup>6</sup> Translating literally as 'self-sense', the *Eigensinn* of the title can mean anything from obstinacy and persistence to resistance and self-determination. From Tacitus' account of Arminius' Teutoburg Forest victory to the Battle of Stalingrad, via the Stauffer Kings, Martin Luther's Reformation, Thomas Münzer and the Peasants' Wars, to the German Romantics and their contact with first the French Revolution and then the France of Napoleon, Kluge and Negt survey Germany's near-two-thousand year history not in order to extrapolate the German mentality or a putative national identity, but to observe generations of Germans at work, at battle and in their sleep, having nightmares in their fairy tales, passing on ballads and folk sayings, building cities and inventing the postal service. The patterns that emerge are perhaps predictable: the book's 1,250 pages document the endlessly self-blocking and deadlocking ways in which Germans over the centuries have built themselves a homeland only never to feel at home, have buried themselves in work only never to have a sense of achievement, have dreamt of hidden

treasures only to wake up to dreadful ogres, have imagined their future only to end up wrecking it for generations to come.

And yet the Nazi regime, World War II and the Holocaust are barely mentioned. Instead, according to Kluge, the dead of those two thousand years now look at the living and utter the phrase 'that's not at all what we had in mind'.<sup>7</sup> This phrase echoes in *THE PATRIOT* and *THE POWER OF FEELINGS* through the sometimes scurrilous, sometimes distressing catalogue of futile efforts of Kluge's protagonists to forge a destiny out of accidents – 'a hundred thousand reasons which afterwards are called fate'.<sup>8</sup> Kluge's preoccupation with history turns out to serve as a kind of 'dream screen' for an intense working over and obsessive return to the only question that seems to matter: 'How could it have come to this?' where 'this' is never named. In *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, Kluge and Negt opt for an answer of sorts in a Brothers Grimm fairy tale, *Das eigensinnige Kind* (*The Wilful Child*) about a girl who repeatedly disobeys her mother. She eventually dies, but even buried underground, her resisting hand digs its way up until the mother herself has to go out to the graveyard and chastise it with a rod. This terrible, but mysterious tale becomes a sort of leitmotif hinting at forms of resistance, but also self-destructive obduracy, that for Kluge becomes a kind of archetype for the sort of political action he both admires and fears, embodied as it is in female rebels against authority and the power of the state. The Wilful Child is Germany's own Antigone, who leads to the terrorism of the Red Army Faction, to Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin – in short to the Hot Autumn of 1977.<sup>9</sup>

Gabi Teichert, the history teacher in *THE PATRIOT* had already appeared in *GERMANY IN AUTUMN* (the documentary record of those six September-October weeks) suggesting subterranean links between the violent underground of Germany's protest generation and Kluge/Negt's efforts to 'read' the country's two thousand years of destructive/self-destructive 'patriotism' across Kluge's own coming to terms with political radicalism and the emerging feminist movement. Female *Eigensinn*, it seems, has to carry a lot of historical baggage, as well as a moral burden in Kluge: it stands for the ethical act of refusal par excellence (Antigone); for the way the popular imagination can work through historical trauma and memorise its history lessons; for legitimate liberation from (patriarchal) oppression; as well as for violence well beyond protest and entirely outside the law. Awe-d admiration for this peculiar obstinacy and persistence infuses several of Kluge's 1970s films, and their air of baffled urgency gives them a topicality worth revisiting today, when 'terrorism' and 'suicide' have taken on a quite different meaning and political charge.

The fairy tale of the self-willed girl also throws into sharper relief another peculiarity of Kluge's work, besides the gender of his protagonists, who are – with few exceptions – female. All are compulsively hyperactive, constantly at

work on something, full of schemes, life plans, grand designs. Their relentless motor-sensory apparatus is set to red alert, while their mental navigation is determined by self-directed admonitions like 'I'll just make the extra effort'. Is Kluge making fun of them? The viewer cannot be sure. To say that his protagonists are accident-prone would be an understatement: the dynamics of their lives have an inner momentum that turns their best intentions into their worst enemies, but it also makes them look stupid, sometimes irritatingly so. What critic Wolfram Schütte has called 'the conceptual slapstick of Kluge's characters'<sup>10</sup> reflects an irrepressibly well-intentioned decisionism, responsible not only for the miscalculations that bring the characters down, but also for putting up the roadblocks to which the miscalculations are intended as the pre-emptive response.

Kluge, too, always seems in a hurry in his films, rarely letting a scene develop its own dramatic weight before butting in with a voice-over or cutting to a completely different location or moment in time. He shares with his heroines this restless, impatient spirit, which could make his satire more compassionate, but also contradicts his self-appointed role as chronicler of the nation's little people and custodian of their dreams. Peel away the layer of concern and empathy, and a salvage operation of a different kind is revealed, for which the lives caught on celluloid and in Kluge's prose narratives are mere energy coils, headed for entropy. In all the life stories and biographies that Kluge puts before us in such profligate profusion, much the same principle prevails: desires, hopes and wishes, seen from the vantage point of their eventual futility, take on a terrible mechanical quality. For not only are the characters' motives and intentions exposed as pitiable, their lives seem like impersonations of life, templates and ready-mades, formed and fashioned elsewhere and for another purpose. They may have acted like saints, ordinary mortals, or monsters, but especially in the short stories, they are miniaturised and serialised, they are more like wind-up toys, marching on and on, with Kluge watching them plummet or fizzle, or freeze-framing them when their time is up. It makes the characters both tragic and ridiculous, at once perpetrators and victims. This compulsion to repeat, the motor behind the characters' initiative and survival, could be called the dark side of *Eigensinn*, when obstinacy, perseverance and even resistance have become a 'programme', perfectly executed and replicated once installed. Repetition turns these 'drive-creatures' into phantoms of their own life plans, which is why it is ultimately irrelevant whether Kluge has faked his documents and merely invented their biographies: for these lives there can be no 'original'.

One is left with a paradox and a conundrum. On the one hand, Kluge's films are part of the New German cinema's mourning work, not unlike those of Syberberg, or early Herzog: speaking about the unspeakable by endlessly speaking about something else, unable to mourn 'the others' because not permitted to

mourn 'our own', thus always risking self-pity. On the other hand, Kluge's cinema is in a hurry, with time-lapse and fast-forward motion among his stylistic signatures. Is Kluge rushing to get to the future, in order to look back from there at the present and perhaps finally give the past a happy ending – and thereby overcome the infinite sadness of 'that is not what we had in mind at all?' If so, it suggests a possible answer to our initial enigma, namely how the cinema fits into his patchwork *Gesamtkunstwerk*: Kluge may have become a film-maker because he wanted to be a time traveller and he needed to be a time traveller in order to cope with the many deferred actions and hypotheticals (if only... what if...?) that make narrating German history such a tragic undertaking. It would explain why Kluge's commitment to the cinema does not require him to make films, and why he can be faithful to the redemptive power of cinema as a time machine even when abstaining from film-making. Such time travel is as much a matter of displacements in moral perspective and rearrangements in mental space as it is a science-fiction trope: in either case, however, it is a quintessentially 'cinematic' way of living time, memory and history.

In this light, Kluge's 'film theory as film politics' also takes on another meaning from that of successfully lobbying for production subsidy: it becomes the politics of memory and commemoration, knowing full well the cinema's ambiguous role as a medium of history – which on film can never quite come alive, just as it is never quite dead – and its inability to put the past to rest, since each viewing reopens the wound. As the constantly renewed experience of loss, 'truth 24 frames a second' is necessarily a melancholy truth. Kluge proposes a very particular kind of ethics of self-implication: since everything he satirises is an impersonation, it follows that this applies just as much to himself. But if the melancholy that emanates from his films derives in part from the fact that in mourning the 'wrong' Germans – a dead soldier frozen in Stalingrad in *THE PATRIOT* or the civilians burnt in the firestorms of Hamburg, Halberstadt, or Magdeburg in *THE POWER OF FEELINGS* – then this marathon perseverance of *Eigensinn* gains its energy from the hope of righting that wrong at another time, in another place. In 1995, five years after German unification, Kluge published the conversations he had had on his TV programme with Heiner Müller, the East German playwright, under the title: *Ich schulde der Welt einen Toten* ('I owe the world the [one] dead').<sup>11</sup> One of the more interesting and intriguing records of a nation's 'talking cure' conducted in the public media by leading artists, this television dialogue is a reminder that needs to be heeded not only by Germans, East or West. Elsewhere, too, in the aftermath of war or worse, such melancholy mimicry as found in Kluge's films, TV programmes and literary output may be the mourning work preliminary to recognising the debt the living have not only towards the future, but to the past as well.

## Notes

1. See, for instance, the special issue on Kluge in *October* (no. 46 fall, 1988), with essays, among others, by Fredric Jameson, Andreas Huyssen and Stuart Liebman. On Kluge's reception in the US, see also Peter C. Lutz, *Alexander Kluge, The Last Modernist* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998).
2. For a more detailed account, see Eric Rentschler ed., *West German Filmmakers on Film: Visions and Voices* (New York/London: Holmes & Meier, 1988) and Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989).
3. Alexander Kluge ed., *Bestandsaufnahme: Die Utopie Film* (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 1983).
4. Alexander Kluge, 'Why Should Film and Television Cooperate?', *October* (no. 46 fall, 1988), and Christian Schulte and Winfried Siebers eds., *Kluges Fernsehen: Alexander Kluges Kulturmagazine* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002).
5. The third master thinker would be Ernst Bloch. Kluge's analysis of why fascism had been so successful in mobilising the libidinal energies of the working class derived from Frankfurt School thinking about the mass media, while his conception of a counter-cinema revives the more 'optimistic' outlook on how to reclaim popular culture for emancipation from Ernst Bloch's love of operetta, Karl May novels and sentimental popular chansons. See, for instance, Ernst Bloch, 'On Fairytale, Colportage and Legend', in Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 153-168.
6. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Geschichte und Eigensinn* Volumes 1-3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981). For an early commentary, see Eric Rentschler, 'Kluge, Film History, and *Eigensinn*: A Taking of Stock from the Distance', *New German Critique* (no. 31 winter, 1984).
7. 'For the last 2000 years, human beings have been working on a territory we now call Germany as 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 by reality 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 identify with the result. Their answer would be: "that's not at all what we had in mind"'. *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, p. 499 (my translation).
8. Alexander Kluge, *Die Macht der Gefühle* (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 1984), p. 5.
9. *Geschichte und Eigensinn* opens with a description of the 'German Autumn', 1977, which is also the topic of Kluge's most famous omnibus film, *DEUTSCHLAND IM HERBST / GERMANY IN AUTUMN* (1977). The parallel of 'Das eigensinnige Kind' with Antigone is elaborated on pp. 767-769.
10. Wolfram Schütte, 'Alexander Kluges "Angriff der Gegenwart auf die übrige Zeit"', *Frankfurter Rundschau* (8 November 1985).
11. Alexander Kluge and Heiner Müller, *Ich schulde der Welt einen Toten* (Hamburg: Rotbuch, 1995).