

Chapter 6:

From History's Rubble:

Kluge on Film, History, and Politics

The central figure in Alexander Kluge's 1979 film *The Patriot* (*Die Patriotin*) is Gabi Teichert, a high school history teacher from the German state of Hesse, whose dissatisfaction with the shortcomings of her discipline guides us through the eclectic collection of photographs, drawings, poems, stories, maps, posters, and staged and documentary footage out of which the film is constructed. The fictional character of Gabi Teichert (who is played by Hannelore Hoger) does not only feature in *The Patriot*, but actually made her film debut some twelve months earlier in *Germany in Autumn* (*Deutschland im Herbst*) – a collaborative film project undertaken by Kluge and other prominent members of the New German Cinema including Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Volker Schlöndorff.

As Kluge and his co-directors have noted in their brief analysis of the project, the impetus for *Germany in Autumn* sprang from the perceived extent to which the events that took place in Germany during the Autumn months of 1977 – including the kidnapping and murder of Daimler-Benz board member Hanns-Martin Schleyer by the Red Army Faction (RAF), the hijacking of a Lufthansa plane, and the alleged suicides of terrorists Gudrun Ensslin, Andreas Baader, and Jan-Carl Raspe in Stammheim Prison – seemed to pass into the annals of German history without undergoing any rigorous public debate.¹ Constructed out of a series of thematically interrelated episodes (which consist of

1. See Alf Brustellin, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Alexander Kluge, Volker Schlöndorff, Bernhard Sinkel: "Germany in Autumn: What is the Film's Bias? (1978)", in: West German Filmmakers on Film: Visions and Voices, ed. by Eric Rentschler, New York and London: Holmes and Meier 1988, pp. 132-133. See also Kluge's notes on the film in Alexander Kluge: *Die Patriotin: Texte/Bilder 1-6*, Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins 1979, pp. 20-37. Hereafter referred to as *Die Patriotin*.

both fictional and documentary elements), the film seeks to raise a series of questions about the period (and, in particular, its relationship to Germany's Nazi past) without seeking to provide the viewer with any clear-cut answers or firm conclusions. "Autumn 1977", the directors argue, "is the history of confusion", and if the film is to do justice to the complexities of the situation, then it is "[e]xactly this [confusion which] must be held on to".²

In *Germany in Autumn*, it is the threat posed by this confusion to the neat conception of German history that Gabi Teichert is expected to teach in the classroom which prompts her to actively go in search of new materials for her lessons. In *The Patriot* too, Teichert is thrown into action, not only by her dissatisfaction with the high school history curriculum, but by the threat to the subject posed by the Hessian Cultural Ministry, which in 1977 decided to amalgamate "history" with "geography" and "social studies".³ Teichert's reaction to this decision is not only to join the "Hessian School Campaign" in their fight for the preservation of "history" as a subject⁴, but – as depicted in both films – to head into the field in search of materials which have been forgotten and/or discarded by the highly reductive, official narratives that appear in the textbooks assigned to her students.

One of Teichert's first ports of call is the Party Convention of the Social Democrats, in which she seeks to encourage a number of real politicians (including Heidi Müller – representative for Niederbayern) to join in her attempts to rejuvenate the high school history curriculum. When questioned by Müller as to whether she has managed to collect anything of value, Teichert states that her first task is – with the cooperation of Müller and another perplexed delegate – to broaden the official version of German history in order to make room for the inclusion of material which has fallen outside of what has been commemorated as historically significant.⁵ "I am of the opinion", she states to Müller,

2. "Germany in Autumn: What is the Film's Bias?", p. 133. For a detailed account of the film, see Miriam Hansen: "Cooperative Auteur Cinema and Oppositional Public Sphere: Alexander Kluge's Contribution to Germany in Autumn", *New German Critique*, No. 24-25 (Fall/Winter, 1981-2), pp. 36-56.

3. See "Gabi Teichert's Geschichtsbegriff", in: *Die Patriotin*, p. 427. As Anton Kaes has pointed out, this attempt was made despite the fact that "a poll in 1977 had shown enormous deficits in students' historical knowledge". See Anton Kaes: *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press 1989, note 6, p. 239.

4. "Gabi Teichert's Geschichtsbegriff", p. 427.

“that the material for high school history lessons is not positive enough”. As revealed, however, throughout the course of the film, Teichert’s conception of a more “positive” curriculum is based not on the replacement of a negative chain of events with a narrative which is more salubrious in its focus, but on the opening up of the subject to incorporate materials that could challenge her students to question the extent to which the history of their country could have turned out very differently. “It would be bad”, Teichert states, “if that which is known about the history of my country were ultimately the truth. There is always a way out”.⁶

This desire to open up the curriculum to include sources and materials which have, in the past, been either ignored and/or disregarded as peripheral and insignificant is – as revealed by Teichert’s colleague in a staff meeting about the state of the discipline – driven by the very limited conception of German history she is expected to teach in the classroom. The version, Teichert’s colleague states, which draws a line “from Bismarck to Hitler” is the only “consequential extrapolation [*Fortschreibung*]” of the course of German history – a point of view supported by the head of the department who claims that “from now on, we must concentrate on keeping the topic of ‘history’ limited”.

As stated, however, in voiceover in the opening sequence of the film, Gabi Teichert is a “patriot” because “she takes an interest in all the dead of the Reich” – an interest which (as revealed by her activities throughout the course of the film) is more specifically focused on redeeming those voices, memories, and materials that challenge the tightly organised, linear conception of the course of events around which the history curriculum is structured. The disembodied voice of one such member of the Reich is represented by the voiceover narrator of *The Patriot* itself, who is introduced as “a knee” – a character inspired by a Christian Morgenstern poem in which the uninjured knee of a dead soldier abandons its body to travel around the world.⁷ As revealed in the opening minutes of the film, the knee in *The Patriot* is the only remaining body-part of Lance Corporal Wieland who was killed during the Battle for Stalingrad on January 23, 1943. The only time we actually get to see Wieland is via black and white, slow motion footage of a young boy with his arm outstretched in the form of a Nazi salute. “This”, the knee claims in

5. For a transcript of these discussions, see *Die Patriotin*, pp. 74-85.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 450.

7. This poem is quoted in full in the film and is printed in *Die Patriotin*, p. 480.

voiceover, “was once my owner Lance Corporal Wieland, eight years before he died in Stalingrad. Wanted to live, found himself in the wrong history”.

As revealed by comments made throughout the course of the film, the knee’s presence in *The Patriot* is driven by a desire to rectify a series of commonly held misconceptions about the process of learning and writing about history – the interrogation of which forms the basis of Gabi Teichert’s activities in the film. Like Teichert (who finds it difficult, if not impossible, to learn about history from “the small print in thick books”⁸) Wieland’s knee claims that it is “an error” to think that “the printed letters in libraries have anything to do with history”. “We”, it claims, “are history, the dead and the dead parts”, and it is only the resurrection of the dead which “presupposes a thorough knowledge of history”. In a statement in tune with Teichert’s faith in the extent to which her students’ conception of the possibilities of both the past *and* the future could be rejuvenated by such a resurrection, the knee claims (over footage of the despondent faces of soldiers in the snow-covered battle fields of Stalingrad) that, contrary to those who believe that the “dead are somehow dead”, “we dead are full of protest and energy”.

In the following scene (part of which also features in *Germany in Autumn*) Gabi Teichert is shown – with a shovel thrown over her shoulder – heading into the field in search of buried, forgotten materials with which she can rejuvenate the high school history curriculum. Armed, at various points throughout the film, with a range of tools (including a hammer, drill, saw, and sickle) *The Patriot* charts her attempts to explore, dig up, discover, crack open, and redeem the traces of the history of her country which have fallen outside of what has been monumentalised as historically significant – a task which is not just confined to the activities of Teichert, but which is the task of *The Patriot* itself.⁹

6.1 Autorenkino and Counter-histories

In his 1979 acceptance speech for the Fontane Prize for Literature, Kluge emphasised the importance of “working on” German history in a fashion reminiscent of the work of Gabi Teichert. “By that”, he stated, “I mean something very concrete; one might start by telling stories [Ge-

8. See “Gabi Teichert’s Geschichtsbegriff”, p. 428.

9. Miriam Hansen: “Alexander Kluge, Cinema and the Public Sphere: The Construction Site of Counter-History”, *Discourse*, No. 6 (1983), p. 70.

schichten] in turn about it"¹⁰. Playing on the double meaning of the German term *Geschichte* (which designates both "history" and "story"), Kluge claims that "[t]elling stories [...] is precisely [his] conception of narrative cinema; and what else is the history of a country but the vastest narrative surface of all? Not one but many stories".¹¹

Although Kluge is best known outside of Germany as a prominent member of the New German Cinema, his work spans a broad range of fields, and since the 1960s he has also actively "worked on" German history in his capacity as an author, social theorist, historian and, since 1988, the producer of a number of programs for German television – the highly experimental structure of which is (as we will see in Chapter 7) reminiscent of the structure of his films.

Indeed, despite the associations which Kluge himself has drawn between his own experimental filmmaking practice and "narrative cinema", Kluge's films have – since the release of his first feature film *Yesterday Girl* (*Abschied von gestern*) in 1966 – differed significantly, in both their form and content, from the tightly organised, character driven stories ordinarily associated with narrative cinema. Kluge's distaste for commercial film can be traced back to 1958 to his experience as an assistant on the set of Fritz Lang's film *Journey to the Lost City* (*Das Indische Grabmal*) – a position made possible by a letter of introduction from Kluge's close friend and mentor Theodor W. Adorno.¹² What shocked Kluge about this experience was the extent to which the restrictions imposed upon the director by the film's producer Artur Brauner made it impossible for Lang to realise the project in the form in which he had originally envisioned it.¹³ Disappointed by this experience, Kluge spent

10. Alexander Kluge: "The Political as Intensity of Everyday Feelings", *Cultural Critique*, No. 4 (Fall, 1986), p. 127.

11. Alexander Kluge: "On Film and the Public Sphere", *New German Critique*, No. 24-25 (Fall/Winter, 1981-2), p. 206.

12. See "Die Funktion des Zerrwinkels in zertrümmernder Absicht. Ein Gespräch zwischen Alexander Kluge und Gertrud Koch", in: *Kritische Theorie und Kultur*, ed. by Rainer Erd et al., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1989, pp. 111-112. For a discussion of Kluge's relationship to Adorno in English, see Stuart Liebman: "On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment, and the Public Sphere: An Interview with Alexander Kluge", *October*, No. 46 (Fall, 1988), pp. 23-59.

13. Kluge claims that the producer and his sister-in-law went as far as to give "direct instructions to the chief lighting technician, to the stage architects, to all co-workers who were their employees; every second idea of Fritz Lang was undetermined as too expensive, as too erroneous [abwegig]". See "Reibungsverluste.

most of his time in the studio canteen writing the stories which were published in 1962 as *Lebensläufe* (*Case Histories*)¹⁴, travelling in the evenings to the film museum in East Berlin to view a retrospective of German, Soviet, and American films from the silent period.¹⁵ “This was the first time”, Kluge notes, “that I encountered noncommercial films from film history”¹⁶ – an experience which not only sparked his interest in early cinema (and the work of Georges Méliès, Louis Lumière, and Alexander Dovzhenko in particular), but had an important impact on the development of his conception of a cinematic practice not bound by the emphasis on continuity and closure characteristic of classical narrative cinema.

It was, however, Jean-Luc Godard’s 1959 film *Breathless* (*A bout de souffle*) that inspired Kluge to become a filmmaker.¹⁷ Godard’s interest in the writings of Bertolt Brecht – and more specifically, his adaptation of Brecht’s conception of theatrical distancing for a filmmaking practice oriented toward the creation of an active, critical spectator – had an important impact on the development of Kluge’s conception of the task of a radical cinema. In more general terms, the production techniques and supportive structure of the French New Wave (of which Godard was a key member) provided Kluge and other German filmmakers with a model for the development of an alternative filmmaking practice – the contours of which were outlined in 1962 in “The Oberhausen Manifesto”.

Gespräch mit Klaus Eder”, in: Alexander Kluge: In Gefahr und größter Not bringt der Mittelweg den Tod. Texte zu Kino, Film, Politik, ed. by Christian Schulte, Hamburg: Vorwerk 1999, pp. 250-251. This book will hereafter be referred to as *In Gefahr*.

14. Rainer Lewandowski: Alexander Kluge, München: C.H. Beck and edition text + kritik 1980, p. 9. Alexander Kluge, *Case Histories*, New York: Holmes and Meier 1991. The collection of stories contained in the English edition does, however, vary from the collection of stories published in *Lebensläufe*.

15. Liebman: “On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment, and the Public Sphere: An Interview with Alexander Kluge”, p. 50.

16. Ibid.

17. “Reibungsverluste. Gespräch mit Klaus Eder”, p. 250. For more detailed analyses of Kluge’s relationship to Godard, see Gloria Behrens et al.: “Gespräche mit Alexander Kluge”, *Filmkritik*, Vol. 12 (December, 1976), pp. 569-570, and Christina Scherer: “Alexander Kluge und Jean-Luc Godard. Ein Vergleich anhand einiger filmtheoretischer ‘Grundannahmen’”, in: *Die Schrift an der Wand: Alexander Kluge: Rohstoffe und Materialien*, ed. by Christian Schulte, Osnabrück: Universitätsverlag Rasch 2000, pp. 79-102.

to", in which Kluge and twenty-five of his colleagues heralded the birth of the New German Cinema.¹⁸ More specifically, the conception of "*auteur*" cinema advanced by the French New Wave (within which the director – in a similar vein to a literary author – maintains complete control over all aspects of the film's production) provided Kluge with a model of filmmaking which guarded against the kind of directorial interference that he had observed on Fritz Lang's set.

Central to Kluge's conception of *Autorenkino* (*auteur* or author's cinema) is not only the creative independence of the director¹⁹, but the active participation of the spectator, whose task – he claims – is not to "understand" the intentions of the director, but to actively participate in the film's construction.²⁰ Film, Kluge argues, "is not produced by *auteurs* alone, but by the dialogue between spectators and authors"²¹ – a dialogue which is not manifested in the film itself, but rather (in a similar vein to the mode of spectatorship cultivated by the "*separation of*

18. "The Oberhausen Manifesto", in: West German Filmmakers on Film: Visions and Voices, p. 2.

19. "The Autorenfilm", Kluge claims, is "a form of protest against the overhang of the thinking of banks, the thinking of lenders, the thinking of producers in the film". "Reibungsverluste. Gespräch mit Klaus Eder", p. 250.

20. Harmut Bitomsky et al.: "Gespräch mit Alexander Kluge: Über Die Patriotin, Geschichte und Filmarbeit", Filmkritik, No. 275 (November, 1979), p. 510. In a fashion reminiscent of Benjamin's criticism of the sovereign, contemplative gaze of the art critic, Kluge argues that "[u]nderstanding a film completely is conceptual imperialism which colonizes its objects". "If I have understood everything", he claims, "then something has been left out. We must make films that thoroughly oppose such imperialism of consciousness". In an attempt to illustrate this point, Kluge provides an example reminiscent of Kracauer's delineation, in *Theory of Film*, of the magical image of an ordinary street reflected in a rain puddle: "I cannot understand a puddle on which the rain is falling – I can only see it; to say that I understand the puddle is meaningless. Relaxation means that I myself become alive for a moment, allowing my senses to run wild: for once not to be on guard with the police-like intention of letting nothing escape me". Kluge: "On Film and the Public Sphere", p. 211, and Siegfried Kracauer: *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1997, p. ii.

21. Jan Dawson: "But why are the Questions so Abstract: An Interview with Alexander Kluge", in: Dawson: Alexander Kluge and the Occasional Work of a Female Slave, New York: Zoetrope 1977, p. 37.

the elements” characteristic of Epic Theatre²²) in the associations cultivated in “the spectator’s head” by “the gaps [...] between the disparate elements of filmic expression”²³.

In stark contrast to classical narrative cinema (which draws the spectator into the world of the film via an editing system which aligns his or her perspective with that of a lead character), the editing practice favoured by Kluge (and his longtime editor Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus) is characterised by a constant movement between highly eclectic image and sound tracks that consist of both fictional and documentary materials. In *The Patriot*, these materials (the organisation of which is structured around the creation of a series of “montage miniatures” designed to spark thoughts and associations in the spectator’s head pertaining to a particular theme, period, or event) include photographs, poems, interviews, maps, sketches, paintings, illustrations from fairytales, movie snippets, clips from the German national anthem, lengthy voiceover statements, newsreel footage, and a frequent use of intertitles that both supplement and challenge the image on screen. (See Figure 1)

Indeed, in stark contrast to Hollywood cinema (which, Kluge argues, limits our capacity to conceive of the past outside of the terms of a tightly woven, character driven story²⁴), the form of historiography both represented in – and cultivated by – *The Patriot* (and Kluge’s literary work more generally) is more akin to the extracurricular activities of Gabi Teichert, which revolve around “digging up” materials which complicate the highly reductive, official narratives propagated by Hollywood cinema and the commercial media.²⁵

22. Bertolt Brecht: “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre”, in: Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic, ed. by John Willett, New York: Hill and Wang 1998, p. 37.

23. Edgar Reitz, Alexander Kluge, and Wilfried Reinke: “Word and Film”, October, No. 46 (Fall, 1988), p. 87. One can hear in this formulation an echo of Theodor W. Adorno, who – in his 1952 analysis of the musical compositions of Arnold Schoenberg – states that “Schoenberg’s music demands from the very beginning active and concentrated participation. [...] It requires the listener spontaneously to compose its inner movement and demands of him not mere contemplation but praxis”. See “Arnold Schoenberg 1874-1951”, in: Adorno: Prisms, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1990, pp. 149-150.

24. “There can be no doubt”, Kluge states, “that the narrative of an individual fate, unfolded in ninety minutes, can convey historical material only at the price of dramaturgical incest”. “On Film and the Public Sphere”, p. 206.

25. As stated in Public Sphere and Experience (a book which Kluge co-

Figure 1: Images from *The Patriot*



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authored with Oskar Negt in the early 1970s), the simplistic representation of historical events presented by the commercial media has a significant impact on the way in which history is “packaged” for future generations. A media conglomerate, they write, “transfers the propylaeum history of the world onto cassettes; the same selection of images and historical dates is thus programmed into educational cassettes, television programs, educational tools, discussion programs, courses of instruction, and parlor games. It is possible to imagine the uniformity of such a presentation of history by keeping in mind how even today press photos that are distributed by news services overdetermine the polymorphic image world of real political events”. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge: *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993, p. 140.

Meaning, Kluge states of the radically heterogeneous imaging practice characteristic of *The Patriot*, is not to be found in any particular image (nor in the film as a whole), but in the thoughts and impressions sparked by the relationship between the materials – connections that encourage the spectator to think about the “place” of the past in different terms.

This idea of a “co-production” between the author and the spectator (which is fundamental to an understanding of the significance of Kluge’s film, television, and literary work) stands at the heart of his conception of the role that film can play in prompting the viewer to rethink both the task of historiography, and the futures of the past that have been buried under the highly circumscribed historicist narratives which chart the relationship between the past and the present. For Kluge, what is problematic about these narratives is not only their carefully crafted, linear structure, but the extent to which both the process of exclusion out of which such narratives are fashioned, and the ideology of “historical necessity” through which they are rendered meaningful, prohibit our capacity to conceive of the possibilities of both the past and the future in different terms. Why, Kluge asks, do

we carry in us such a fixed conception of the probable order of events, which is only the sum of what is impressed upon us by the objective history or the media? Why do we hang on to it so energetically, while the imagination circles elsewhere [...]. and while] the sum of improbabilities is just as great as the sum of all probabilities?²⁶

When Kluge announced in a live radio interview conducted at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2003 that the task of the some five hundred [hi]stories (*Geschichten*) contained in *Die Lücke, die der Teufel läßt*²⁷ is to “preserve something beyond probability”,²⁸ he reiterated what has, for many years, been the driving force behind his work: A desire to overcome the restrictions imposed upon our conception of the possibilities and limitations of the present by the “probable” order of events around which our conception of history is structured. For Kluge, central to this idea of historical probability is a conception of historical realism that could

26. Claus Philipp: “Vertrauenswürdige Irrtümer: Ein Gespräch”, *Kolik*, No. 13 (2000), p. 10.

27. Alexander Kluge: *Die Lücke, die der Teufel läßt*. Im Umfeld des neuen Jahrhunderts, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2003.

28. “Bücher-Herbst”, *Deutschland Radio Berlin*, October 11 (2003).

more accurately be described as “historical fiction”²⁹. He claims that “[w]hat you notice as realistic, [...] is not necessarily or certainly real. The potential and the historical roots, and the detours of possibilities, also belong to reality. The realistic result, the actual result, is only an abstraction that has murdered all other possibilities for the moment”.³⁰

Both the “highly porous”, “chance-bound”³¹ nature of events that have been strung together under the guise of “historical necessity”, and the degree of “abstraction” that is required in order for that sense of necessity to be rendered meaningful, is revealed by Kluge in a literary montage piece entitled “Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945” (“The Air Raid on Halberstadt on April 8 1945”), the content of which is constructed – in a manner reminiscent of *The Patriot* – out of a diverse collection of fictional and documentary elements (including interviews, stories, quotes, drawings, reports, strategy descriptions, photographs of pilots, and diagrams of weaponry).³² Remarkable among these elements is a fictional interview (said to have been conducted in London in 1952 at the conference of the *Institute for Strategic Research*) between a German reporter and Brigadier General Frederick L. Anderson of the 8th Division of the US Air Force.³³ The focus of the interview (which is a format employed frequently in Kluge’s literary, film, and television work) is the air raid on the German town of Halberstadt in the final weeks of World War II (the late occurrence of which, as An-

29. Kluge: “The sharpest ideology: that reality appeals to its realistic character”, *On the Beach*, No. 3-4 (Summer, 1984), p. 23. Hereafter referred to as “The sharpest ideology”.

30. Jan Dawson: “But why are the Questions so Abstract: An Interview with Alexander Kluge”, p. 34

31. Claus Phillip: “Vertrauenswürdige Irrtümer: Ein Gespräch”, p. 10

32. Kluge: “Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945”, in: Kluge: *Chronik der Gefühle – Band II: Lebensläufe*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2000, pp. 27-82. In keeping with his analysis of the task of the stories contained in *Die Lücke, die der Teufel läßt*, Kluge has described the collection of stories contained in *Chronik der Gefühle* as “a carpet of numerous improbable incidents”. See Kluge: “Ich liebe das Lakonische”, *Der Spiegel*, No. 45 (2000), p. 338. “Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945” was originally published in 1977 in Kluge: *Neue Geschichten*, Hefte 1-18: “Unheimlichkeit der Zeit”, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

33. An abridged version of this fictional interview has been published in English as “The Air Raid on Halberstadt, 8 April 1945”, *Semiotext(e)*, No. 11 (1982), pp. 306-315.

drew Bowie has pointed out, “had no strategic significance for the course of the war”³⁴).

The questions posed by the reporter (who, like Kluge, was also born in Halberstadt) seek not only to elucidate the purpose of the attack (which levelled 82 per cent of the city, and very nearly killed the then 13 year old Kluge himself³⁵) but to challenge General Anderson to explain why the pilots involved in the raid would not have abandoned the attack had they seen the large white surrender flag flying from the tower of the city’s church. As revealed in the discussion³⁶, the reporter’s suggestion that the attack *could* have been averted is dismissed by the General as unrealistic. “The goods”, he claims, “had to go down onto the city” because it was too dangerous for the pilots to fly back to base with planes fully loaded with explosives. In response to the interviewer’s suggestion that the bombs *could* have been dropped on nearby countryside uninhabited by people, the General (whose capacity for imagination has been thwarted by an economic/militaristic logic at odds with the preservation of human life) responds with the claim that the bombs “cost a lot of money” and that it was therefore wrong to “just throw that away, in the mountains or open fields after it was produced at such expense”.³⁷

Although the text is concerned with a very specific set of circumstances, its method of questioning (which revolves around the creation of a series of gaps within which one is able to conceive of the extent to which an event, or series of events could have turned out very differently) forms the political backbone of much of Kluge’s work. “It must”, he states, “be possible to present reality as the historical fiction that it is. Its impact on the individual is real [...]. Men die as a result, are pulled apart, are subjected to bombing raids, are dead while alive, are placed in

34. Andrew Bowie: “New Histories: Aspects of the Prose of Alexander Kluge”, *Journal of European Studies*, xii (1982), p. 184.

35. Lewandowski: Alexander Kluge, p. 8. “The form left by the impact of an exploding bomb”, Kluge has written of the experience, “is easily remembered. [...] I was there, at a distance of ten metres away, when on April 8 1945 such a thing impacted”. *Chronik der Gefühle – Band II: Lebensläufe*, p. 11. Kluge’s comments are also quoted in Lewandowski: Alexander Kluge, p. 8.

36. A similar discussion takes place in Kluge’s 1983 film *Die Macht der Gefühle* (The Power of Feelings) between a German reporter “Frau Pichota” (played by Kluge’s sister Alexandra) and “Brigadegeneral Anderson”. For a transcript of this discussion, see Kluge: *Die Macht der Gefühle*, Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins 1984, pp. 94–96.

37. “The Air Raid on Halberstadt, 8 April 1945”, p. 313.

asylums as mad etc.”³⁸, but this does not mean that these realities could not have been prevented, that the “deadly outcomes”³⁹ suffered by these people could not have turned out very differently.

In order to provide a sense of the reality of alternate possibilities, Kluge opposes historical narratives (the outcomes of which are described as “probable” and or “realistic”) with his own “counter-histories” – an activity also undertaken by Gabi Teichert who is vehemently opposed to historical narratives that describe a particular outcome as a “necessary consequence”⁴⁰. In response to General Anderson’s claim that it is unrealistic to think that the pilots could have dropped their bombs on countryside uninhabited by people, Kluge describes a number of fictional, but nonetheless realistic, “counter-histories” in which human destruction was averted by pilots who – inadvertently or otherwise – dropped their bombs on uninhabited areas in the vicinity of their highly populated, intended targets.

For example, in an interview with Florian Hopf, Kluge recounts Bertolt Brecht’s account of a pilot who released his bombs onto an open field as a result of a feeling of indolence. “There was”, Kluge narrates,

a pilot, and in the first world war he had loaded bombs that were supposed to be dropped on a city. He had however the feeling: it is a beautiful morning and I am lazy. Out of indolence, he dropped the bombs in such an unskilful and untimely manner, that they fell on an open field, and the inhabitants of the city were rescued.⁴¹

Likewise, in his acceptance speech for the 2003 Georg Büchner Prize for Literature, Kluge recounts the story of a “US pilot” who – under the sudden pressure of an attack of colic – “shames himself” in the midst of

38. “The sharpest Ideology”, p. 23.

39. The phrase is taken from the title of Kluge’s 1973 novella *Learning Processes with a Deadly Outcome*, Durham and London: Duke University Press 1996.

40. Kluge: “Presseheft zum Film”, *Filmkritik*, No. 275 (November, 1979), p. 504. See, for example, the class activity undertaken by Teichert in which she encourages her students to consider the steps that could have been taken to prevent the outcome experienced by Gerda Baethe who, in 1944, found herself under attack in an air raid shelter with her children. *Die Patriotin*, pp. 146-151.

41. “Gefühle können Berge versetzen [...]”: Interview von Florian Hopf mit Alexander Kluge zu dem Film: *Die Macht der Gefühle*, in: *Die Macht der Gefühle*, p. 185.

an air raid against alleged terrorists by “doing it in his combat suit”. The result, Kluge claims, is that he drops his “smart bombs” in a swamp adjacent to the building that was his target, inadvertently sparing the lives of the members of a wedding party who had been celebrating there.⁴²

As stated by Kluge himself, the politics of such stories lies not in their development along the lines of “a particular political praxis”, but in the extent to which they can help “to recuperate [...] what is considered unpolitical as a political matter”.⁴³ For Kluge, it is only by redeeming the non-necessary status of – and relationship between – events (which fall both within and outside of the official narrativization of the relation of the past to the present) that the chain of events out of which our conception of the probable direction of history is structured can be revealed for the “historical fiction” that it actually is. If, he argues, we can free ourselves from conceiving of the past as a linear narrative that leads straight to the present, then it is not only the past – but also the possibilities for the future embedded in the past – which can be renegotiated and re-explored.

6.2 The Construction Site of History

In Kluge’s writings on cinema, this attempt to draw attention to the non-necessary relationship between the past and the present also informs

42. Alexander Kluge: “Risse”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, October 26 (2003), p. 23. See also “Absichtloses Glück: Eine Übersprunghandlung” in which Kluge describes this event in more detail. *Die Lücke, die der Teufel läßt*, pp. 709-711.

43. “The Political as Intensity of Everyday Feelings”, p. 126. In Kluge’s films, the gap between “what could have been” and the official account of “realistic outcomes”, between the desires and hopes of human beings and the so-called objective realm of facts, is revealed by Kluge most effectively in scenes which show fictional characters such as Gabi Teichert participating in real public events. What is revealed, for example, in the scene in *The Patriot* in which Teichert is shown at the Convention of the Social Democrats, is the apparent inappropriateness of her questions at a forum for the discussion of so-called “real” political concerns. Indeed, as is rendered clear by the, at times, surprised and impatient responses of the delegates in question, Teichert’s desire to open up the history curriculum to make way for the inclusion of different historical imaginaries is not the kind of concern which the delegates can take seriously. See “Reibungsverluste – Gespräch mit Klaus Eder”, p. 245.

his analysis of the important role that a return to the “origins” of cinema *could* play in rejuvenating our conception of the possibilities of the medium. In an interview with American filmmaker Richard Linklater in *Primetime Spätausgabe* (one of four of Kluge’s weekly programs on German television), Kluge’s enthusiasm for early cinema is revealed in a discussion about the silent period:

Linklater: But what pleases me, is the thought that everything that one envisages in the imagination exists, that everything could exist. [cut] I love the early cinema, Griffith is one of my favourite directors, Chaplin, Keaton, the whole silent film actually. [...]

Kluge: You would actually develop the film again anew, if there were more of you. If you were one hundred people, then you would invent the art of film once again [...] *start again from the beginning* [...]

Linklater: [astonished laughter] *From the beginning, to begin again from the beginning.*

Kluge: Yes, yes [...]

Linklater: [with disbelief] Can one do that?

Kluge: Yes, of course, of course, yes.⁴⁴

It is, of course, Kluge’s own vision for the rejuvenation of the medium which he is impressing upon Linklater here – a vision driven by a desire for a filmmaking practice which does not seek to reproduce the form and content of films made during the silent period, but which draws inspiration from the alternative conception of the possibilities of the medium embodied in the work of early filmmakers such as Méliès and Lumière⁴⁵. Sidestepping the realist/formative split that Kracauer draws between the two filmmakers, Kluge argues that in “each of these origins,

44. “Durchbruch eines Außenseiters/Der Südstaaten-Regisseur Richard Linklater und sein Erfolgsfilm *Before Sunrise*”, *Primetime Spätausgabe*, RTL (11 June, 1995). This passage is quoted in Christian Schulte: “Fernsehen und Eigensinn”, in: *Kluges Fernsehen*. Alexander Kluges Kulturmagazine, ed. by Christian Schulte/Winfried Siebers, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2002, p. 80. My translation of this segment of the interview (as well as the notes about Linklater’s expressions) is based on this extract. The use of italics indicates words spoken in English.

45. “I do not”, Kluge claims, “take up the silent film in my films for stylistic reasons but because it is a question of ‘radically’ keeping open the elementary roots of the film”. “The Sharpest Ideology”, p. 24.

‘cousins’ and other relatives of what actually developed can be found, and these can be adapted for the New Media in very interesting ways”.⁴⁶

In Kluge’s own work, a number of stylistic devices characteristic of early cinema are employed in his own attempts to “reinvent [the] possibilities” of the medium.⁴⁷ In films such as *The Patriot* and his 1983 *The Power of Feelings*, these devices include the colour tinting of the image, a frequent use of intertitles, the employment of iris masks to frame the image, and – in a manner reminiscent of Lumière’s single-shot films – the extended presentation of natural and urban landscapes which are often divorced from any clear symbolic or narrative function.

The frequent use of these devices, combined with a highly eclectic collection of materials that are edited together in the loose, discontinuous fashion characteristic of much of Kluge’s work, results in a film practice that systematically undermines the ordinary channels through which meaning is communicated in classical narrative cinema. As Anton Kaes has argued of *The Patriot*, “[t]he splintering and disintegration of the narrative continuum [...] follow from Kluge’s conviction that two thousand years of German history cannot be grasped from the single perspective of a psychological, causal story”.⁴⁸ “Even an individual historical event like Stalingrad”, he claims, “exists only as a multitude of perspectives”⁴⁹, the majority of which – like that of Wieland’s knee – are excluded from the highly abstract official accounts of the place which Stalingrad occupies in German history.

It is also, as Kaes has pointed out, this “multitude of perspectives” which Kluge has endeavored to represent in his 1964 book *Schlachtbeschreibung*⁵⁰ – an experimental historiographical account of the battle of

46. Kluge: “Why Should Film and Television Cooperate?”, October, No. 46 (Fall, 1988), p. 99. For a comprehensive analysis of the impact that early cinema has had on the development of Kluge’s film and television work, see Miriam Hansen: “Reinventing the Nickelodeon: Notes on Kluge and Early Cinema”, October, No. 46 (Fall, 1988), pp. 178–198.

47. Jan Dawson: “But why are the Questions so Abstract: An Interview with Alexander Kluge”, p. 37.

48. From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film, p. 118.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid., and Alexander Kluge: “Schlachtbeschreibung”, in: Chronik der Gefühle – Band I: Basisgeschichten, pp. 509–793. Although originally published in 1964, Kluge has reworked the book a number of times in the proceeding years. The source cited above (to which I will be referring in this chapter) is the most

Stalingrad which (in a manner reminiscent of *The Patriot*) is constructed out of a highly eclectic montage of both fictional and documentary materials (including diary entries, government reports, interviews about strategy, radio messages, responses from the clergy, photographs, drawings, government instructions to the press, medical reports about the dead, the mad, and the wounded, as well as guidelines for German soldiers on how to deal with the treacherous winter conditions without freezing to death).

In a similar vein to Kluge's account of the air raid on Halberstadt, this highly experimental book is also driven by Kluge's longstanding protest against historical narratives which describe events such as those which took place at Stalingrad as "necessary" and/or "inevitable" outcomes of history's so-called march of progress toward the future. Indeed, the highly diverse collection of materials out of which *Schlachtbeschreibung* is constructed could be said to focus primarily on breaking the spell of the aestheticisation of violence and war enacted by Josef Goebbels' likening of Stalingrad to a painting before which one must stand back in order to do it, and presumably the history in which it is embedded, full justice.⁵¹

Vehemently opposed to the degree of abstraction required to both establish and sustain such a "long-shot" perspective (a term employed by Kracauer in his discussion of the "macro" historical accounts of the formativist historians⁵²), Kluge draws his readers in close, encouraging them to generate their own meanings and conclusions from the "micro" materials out of which the book is constructed. Similarly, in "Das Ferne Stalingrad" ("The distant Stalingrad") (a 1989 episode of his television program *10 vor 11*), Kluge presents the viewer with a vast array of "raw materials" (including German radio reports, footage of Russian civilians

recent version. The original version of the book has also been published in English translation as *The Battle*, New York: Mc Graw-Hill 1967.

51. Goebbels quoted in "Schlachtbeschreibung", p. 562.

52. In his discussion of the "macro" histories constructed by the formativist historians, Kracauer argues that "[t]he higher the level of generality at which a historian operates, the more historical reality thins out. What he retains of the past when he looks at it from a great distance is wholesale situations, long-term developments, ideological trends, etc. – big chunks of events whose volume wanes or waxes in direct ratio to distance. They are scattered over time; they leave many gaps to be filled. We do not learn enough about the past if we concentrate on the macro units". Kracauer: *History: The Last Things Before the Last*, Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers 1995, p. 118.

preparing for the German attack, still images of freezing soldiers, footage from a performance of the “Stalin Cantata”, press images of Hitler overlooking a battle plan, clips from a film about Stalingrad made before the attack, and footage taken from German planes of bombs being dropped on the city) all of which (by virtue of the extremely diverse, inherently inconsistent nature of the materials) significantly complicate historical accounts that seek to provide a panoramic overview of events that took place during the period⁵³.

Indeed, in a similar vein to both *Schlachtbeschreibung* and “The distant Stalingrad”, the historical “place” of the events that took place in Germany during the Autumn months of 1977 is, in *Germany in Autumn*, not something which can be easily determined. As in *The Patriot*, the “multitude of perspectives” contained in the highly eclectic montage of materials out of which the film is constructed (including, to cite just a few examples, footage from the State funeral of Schleyer, and the burial of Ensslin, Baader, and Raspe in Dornhalden Cemetery, fictional sequences exploring the security measures put in place by the state, and documentary footage of the Bundeswehr in action, interviews with figures as diverse as Fassbinder’s mother, and Horst Mahler – the co-founder of the RAF, and the recurrent presence of the German National anthem) challenge the viewer to both reconsider the events which took place during the Autumn months of 1977, and to actively question the manner in which these events have been packaged by more traditional historical accounts of the period. (See Figure 2).

As Miriam Hansen has claimed of the open, heterogeneous structure of the film, “[i]n the eyes of those who expected a more clear-cut, partisan statement, *Germany in Autumn* certainly lacked in political effectiveness”.⁵⁴ As she points out, however, the aim of the directors was not to replace the official account of the course of events by simply “pressing one interpretation over another”.⁵⁵ “As filmmakers”, the directors argue, “it is not our concern to provide another statement about terror here and abroad”, nor “to add to the hundred thousand theories the first correct one”⁵⁶. Rather, in collating a diverse, inherently inconsistent collection of materials, they have attempted to stimulate the imagination

53. “Das Ferne Stalingrad”, 10 vor 11, RTL (February 27, 1989).

54. Hansen: “Cooperative Auteur Cinema and Oppositional Public Sphere: Alexander Kluge’s contribution to *Germany in Autumn*”, p. 56.

55. Ibid.

56. “Germany in Autumn: What is the Film’s Bias?”, p. 132.

of the spectator into reconceiving the possibility of different historical outcomes.

Figure 2: Images from Germany in Autumn



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Kluge is careful, however, to distinguish the active, imaginative conception of spectatorship that he associates with his own films, from the mode of engagement fostered by the style of associative/rhetorical montage employed by filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein. Wary of any method of editing which seeks to impose a particular line of thinking upon the spectator, Kluge argues that montage in his films is not used “for explanations (as it is in the rhetorical montage of Eisenstein) but develops an invisible third image directly out of the tension of the incongruousness of the successive images”.⁵⁷ “We do not”, he claims, “fashion [*gestalten*] the associations of the viewers, that is what Hollywood does, we do not channel them once, but we stimulate them, so that

57. “Risse”, p. 26. For a more detailed analysis of Kluge’s relationship to the films of Eisenstein see Stuart Liebman: “Why Kluge?”, *October*, No. 46 (Fall, 1988), pp. 18-21.

something independent comes into being, something which without these incentives, would not have been actualised”.⁵⁸

This independent “third image” (which manifests itself in “the head of the spectator”) is not, however, an obvious association established by two images which have been edited together to produce a particular connection or outcome (a practice which he claims “is basically no different from the situation where [...] schoolchildren are forced to memorize [poems]” which have been “conceived in an associative fashion by somebody else”).⁵⁹ Rather, in a similar vein to Benjamin’s delineation of the active, creative mode of spectatorship cultivated by the kind of film practice outlined in the “Work of Art” essay, the active, imaginative mode of spectatorship envisioned by Kluge takes as its model not “the dramaturgy of the school hour, but the school recess; not the moralistic instruction provided by adults, but the imagination of children amongst one another”⁶⁰ – the games and activities of whom demonstrate a capacity for the “renewal of existence”⁶¹ which is not hindered by the “imperative [of] practical necessity”.⁶²

In a passage in “One-Way Street” which clearly influenced the development of Kluge’s ideas, Benjamin claims that

[c]hildren are particularly fond of haunting any site where things are being visibly worked on. They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by buildings, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry. In waste products they recognize the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things, they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the

58. “Interview”, in Rainer Lewandowski: *Die Filme von Alexander Kluge*, Hildesheim and New York: Olms Presse 1980, p. 36. See also Florian Rötzer: “Kino und Grabkammer. Gespräch mit Alexander Kluge”, in: *Die Schrift an der Wand: Alexander Kluge: Rohstoffe und Materialien*, p. 35.

59. “On Film and the Public Sphere”, p. 220.

60. Alexander Kluge: *Gelegenheitsarbeit einer Sklavin. Zur realistischen Methode*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1975, p. 196.

61. Walter Benjamin: “Unpacking my Library: A Talk about Book Collecting”, in: Benjamin: *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, London: Fontana Press 1992, p. 63.

62. The phrase is taken from André Breton’s analysis of imagination in his “Manifesto of Surrealism”, in: Breton: *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1994, p. 4.

artifact produced in play, materials of widely differering kinds in a new, intuitive relationship.⁶³

Drawing on the example of the child at play as the model for his conception of an active, creative spectator, Kluge claims that just as the imagination of children is more readily stimulated by building blocks than by electrical trainsets, so too is the imagination of the spectator more effectively cultivated by films with the unfinished structure of a "construction site" or building in process.⁶⁴ "I believe", Kluge states, "that it is [...] easier for the spectator to connect his experiences with a film that has breaks, than with a perfect film. My editor [Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus] always says: Weak films make strong viewers – strong films make weak viewers", to which Kluge adds: "a construction site is more advantageous than complete houses".⁶⁵

In Kluge's writings on film, this metaphor of the construction site is extended to incorporate the spectator as well, as a way of evoking the unfinished, active process of engagement with the past prompted by the eclectic collection of building blocks out of which films such as *The Patriot* and *Germany in Autumn* are constructed.⁶⁶ Accordingly, the radical historiographical practice both represented in – and cultivated by – *The Patriot* is not oriented toward a particular endpoint, but channels its energies toward the cleaving open of a series of gaps in the official account of German history within which the possibilities of both the past and the future can be re-imagined and re-explored.

In more general terms, what is significant about the rejuvenation of the capacity for imagination cultivated by Kluge's film and literary work is not only the degree to which it can free us from conceiving of the past and the present as two points bound together by "necessity" but, moreover, the extent to which this capacity for imagination can be brought to bear on the exigencies of the present itself – a present within which the

63. See the section entitled "Construction Site" in "One-Way Street", in: Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 1, ed. by Marcus Bullock/Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press 1996, pp. 449-450.

64. "Interview", in: Rainer Lewandowski: Die Filme von Alexander Kluge, p. 42.

65. Bevers, Jürgen et al.: "Eine Baustelle ist vorteilhafter als ganze Häuser: Ein Gespräch mit Alexander Kluge", Spuren: Zeitschrift für Kunst und Gesellschaft, No. 1 (Februar/März, 1980), p. 17.

66. "The sharpest ideology", p. 24.

destruction of lives and the demolition of cities is too often described as an “unfortunate side-effect” of history’s so-called march of progress toward a better world.