

Conclusion

The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.

*Walter Benjamin*¹

There is a line in our time, and in every time, between those who believe all men are created equal, and those who believe that some men and women and children are expendable in the pursuit of power. There is a line in our time, and in every time, between the defenders of human liberty and those who seek to master the minds and souls of others. Our generation has now heard history's call, and we will answer it.

*George W. Bush, The 43rd President of the United States of America*²

Among the some five hundred (hi)stories contained in Kluge's 2003 book, *Die Lücke, die der Teufel läßt*, is a short, but nonetheless, significant account of a series of events that transpired at the 39th international conference on security policy which took place in Munich in February, 2003. As is the case with most of Kluge's work, the story – which is entitled “*Wenn es hart auf hart kommt, braucht Politik das Unmögliche*” (“When it comes to the crunch, politics needs the impossible”) – is constructed out of a diverse collection of fragments, among which is included a short piece which recounts a heated exchange about the then im-

1. “On the Concept of History”, in: Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol. 4, ed. by Howard Eiland/Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England 2003, p. 392.

2. “President's Remarks to the Nation” (Ellis Island, New York: September 11, 2002). Speech available online at the Office of the Press Secretary at the White House: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020911-3.html> (Last accessed May 21, 2007).

pending war against Iraq between US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and German foreign minister Joschka Fischer.

As described by Kluge (who attended the conference to gather material for his television programs), this heated exchange sprang from Rumsfeld's refusal (upon the invitation of Fischer) to join him on stage while he delivered his report. The German foreign minister, Kluge writes, was so irritated by this refusal "that he could not control the pitch of his voice".³ Abandoning his prepared speech, Fischer (in an attempt to gain the attention of Rumsfeld) broke into English – stating of the defence secretary's case for war against Iraq: "I am not convinced. That is my problem. I cannot go to the public and say these are the reasons because I don't believe them".⁴ According to an observer named Becker (whose thoughts and observations are quoted by Kluge), Fischer's response was delivered in a "pleading', 'imperious', 'incredulous' tone, all of which [...] is appropriate for a discussion in the personal sphere", adding, however, that it is "totally inappropriate when PERSONAL PRONOUNCEMENTS of this type are rejected by the opposition".⁵

What is significant about Becker's analysis of the inappropriateness of Fischer's comments (which received broad coverage in the international media) is the extent to which they corroborate Kluge's delineation of the degree to which "politics" has come to be understood as a "specialized area" that is divorced from the everyday beliefs, concerns, feelings, and experiences of individuals. Elaborating on this point in 1979 in a speech entitled "The Political as Intensity of Everyday Feelings", Kluge argues that the delayed emotional reaction experienced by Germans in relation to events which took place in Auschwitz is a symptom of this perceived split between the political and personal spheres:

You see, it is thoroughly unpractical if the emotional shock of German families, which would have meant something important for the victims of Auschwitz in 1942, is made up for in 1979; for today it is an essentially useless, that is, timeless form of shock. The fact that we in our country are always shocked at the wrong moments and are not shocked at the right ones – and I am now talking about

3. Alexander Kluge: *Die Lücke, die der Teufel läßt*. Im Umfeld des neuen Jahrhunderts, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2003, p. 616.

4. Fischer quoted in Anonymus: "Germany, France work on plan to avert Iraq war", ABC News Online: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200302/s779900.htm> (Last accessed May 21, 2007).

5. *Die Lücke, die der Teufel läßt*, p. 616. This emphasis is contained within the text.

something very bad – is a consequence of our considering politics as a specialized area which others look after for us and not as a degree of intensity of our own feelings.⁶

For Kluge, it is the highly abstract manner in which political decisions and events are packaged for public consumption that is largely responsible for the maintenance of this perceived split between political and personal spheres. In a similar vein to the “*aestheticizing of political life*”⁷ undertaken by the fascists (whose heinous crimes were, “in the name of progress”, viewed as “a historical norm”⁸) George W. Bush’s justification of violence and war on the basis that he is answering “history’s call” not only naturalises the war against Iraq, but provides the public with the impression that it is not possible to do anything to prevent or change the situation. For within the paradigm outlined by Bush and his cohorts, the US government and its allies are merely the torchbearers of a war that is but a stepping-stone in history’s so-called march of progress toward the future.⁹

For Kluge, what is problematic about the historicisation of political events (which regularly takes place in the mainstream media) is not only the extent to which it naturalises their occurrence, but the degree to which it subsumes their specificities under abstract categories (such as “civilization”, “freedom”, and “progress”) about which “our direct senses tell us very little”.¹⁰ In an attempt to illustrate this point, Kluge com-

6. Alexander Kluge: “The Political as Intensity of Everyday Feelings”, *Critical Inquiry*, No. 4 (Fall, 1986), p. 126.

7. Walter Benjamin: “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility”, in: Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, p. 269.

8. “On the Concept of History”, p. 392.

9. See also the speech delivered by Bush at a national prayer service in Washington three days after the events of September 11, 2001: “Just three days removed from these events, Americans do not yet have the distance of history, but our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil”. Available online: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss3.html> (Last accessed May 21, 2007). In his 2002 “State of the Union Address”, Bush also states something very similar: “History has called America and our allies to action, and it is both our responsibility and our privilege to fight freedom’s fight”. See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/2002012911.html> (Last accessed May 21, 2007).

10. “The Political as Intensity of Everyday Feelings”, p. 121. In his “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History’”, Benjamin states something similar: “In

pares Friedrich Hölderlin's highly evocative description of a piece of earth in his poem "The Autumn" ("Der Herbst") with the account of a section of forest ground contained in a biology textbook; the latter of which (with its description of "16 x 10 to the 57th lice", "10 to the minus 7 foxes and twice 10 to the minus 6 deer"¹¹) serves to illustrate what Benjamin describes as the highly abstract, "'scientific' character"¹² of historicist accounts of history.

As Kluge makes clear, what you notice very quickly is that we are dealing here with two very different kinds of languages:

One is the language of statistics: we deal with our surroundings in an *unsensuous* way, exactly as we do with the real relations in history. And we deal with lyric poetry in a *sensuous* way with our direct sense for what is near. The two fall apart. The big decisions in history are not made in the realm of what we can experience close at hand.¹³

In each of the chapters in this book, what I have endeavoured to demonstrate (via an analysis of topics as diverse as literature, film, photography, historiography, and television) is the extent to which the work of Benjamin, Kracauer, and Kluge is driven by a desire to "fan [...] the spark of hope"¹⁴ in the role that a political film/literary/historiographical/television practice could play in reigniting the link between the world of politics and that which "we can experience close at hand".¹⁵ In contrast to the aestheticisation of politics undertaken by the Nazis (a practice

order for all the moments in the history of humanity to be incorporated in the chain of history, they must be reduced to a common denominator – 'culture', 'enlightenment', 'the objective spirit,' or whatever one wishes to call it". p. 403.

11. "The Political as Intensity of Everyday Feelings", p. 122.

12. "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History'", p. 401.

13. "The Political as Intensity of Everyday Feelings", p. 122.

14. "On the Concept of History", p. 391.

15. As Christopher Pavsek has argued, Benjamin's capacity to ignite this link between the political and personal spheres is partly responsible for the appeal of his work. "Benjamin", Pavsek writes, "attracts so many reverent readers because he can, with such poignancy, make politics [...] seem to be a matter of such great personal, emotional concern. And vice-versa, by telescoping the universal into the particular, he manages to evoke the political imbedded in small, personal, everyday matters". See "The Storyteller in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Alexander Kluge's Reworking of Walter Benjamin", *Found Object*, Vol. 1, Issue 2 (1992), p. 90.

which is alive and well in the contemporary media) the role of the filmmaker/writer/historian/television producer is, within this context, not only to put us *back in touch* with the political sphere but, in doing so, to encourage us to draw on our own capacity for imagination and experience in an attempt to rethink the possibilities of both the past and the future outside of the evolutionary conception of history propagated by both historicists, and those in positions of power who seek to naturalise their choices and decisions.

As I hope to have made clear in these concluding remarks, although the concerns and ideas of Benjamin, Kracauer, and Kluge were (and, in Kluge's case, continue to be) profoundly shaped by their experiences of Nazi Germany, their ideas are no less relevant for a world in which – at the start of the twenty-first century – wars are waged, and lives destroyed, in the name of the progress of humanity.

