

Introduction

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Born in the German town of Halberstadt in 1932, Alexander Kluge is a polymath of twenty-first-century globalization no less than he is a twentieth-century polymath of European modernity, one whose wide-ranging creative and critical work in literature, film, television, music, sound, history, digital media, and social theory turns on relationships between hope as an antirealist feeling and real historical catastrophe. Both with and beyond his friend and muse Theodor W. Adorno, to whom, among many others, Kluge repeatedly tells us he remains indebted, this antirealist hope is oriented and akin to what Adorno once called “a future without life’s miseries.”¹ As I have argued in a recent study of Kluge’s experimental approach to literary narrative, his configuration of hope in relation to real catastrophe lays claim to real experiential effect without devolving into mere illusion, ideology, faith, empiricism, or deferral.² How does this approach to antirealist experience work in the vast body of Kluge materials that lies outside the purview of my critical practice or personal ken? Blazing new trails of imaginative insight and what I would call proliferating sense perception since the 1960s, Kluge continues to probe complex as well as changing relationships between culture and society from many new perspectives for the world today. Three commonplace associations

1. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 398. For extended thoughts on Kluge’s relationship to Adorno through a legacy of counterfactual hope rather than pessimism, see Adelson, *Cosmic Miniatures and the Future Sense*.

2. Adelson, *Cosmic Miniatures and the Future Sense*.

attach to the German word *Perspektive*, one of which the word's English double lacks and all of which Kluge's creative and critical work in any medium bedevils. These three associations assign a determining role to vision as the arbiter of standpoint and orientation, assume a familiar anthropomorphic subject who sees, and posit future time in linear terms as just beyond the reach of experience. Kluge may not be the first to question and unsettle such assumptions, and neither is Adorno, who in the final entry of *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, in the mid-twentieth century, already favored a "standpoint of redemption" in explicit terms of "perspectives" that must "displace and estrange the world" as we know it.³ The English word *perspective* appears to lack a relationship to futurity altogether, but Kluge's many associative labors on old and new perspectives on lives that would and should be free of catastrophe give us much to chew on—in epistemological and sensory terms, too—beyond what is merely available to sight or predictably anthropomorphic in form, and more than what lies forever outside the reach of experience in time.

As Kluge is fond of saying, no one ever writes books alone, and one quickly learns from him that no one can properly think alone either. For three days in October 2018, I convened an international conference at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, under the rubric "Alexander Kluge: New Perspectives on Creative Arts and Critical Practice." Cosponsored by *New German Critique* and diverse programs within Cornell University, this conference was a gathering of curious critical minds. Its main goal was to encourage scholarly innovation and shared reflection on new perspectives on hope and catastrophe that Kluge himself develops in his approach to creative arts and critical practice, and new perspectives on selected aspects of his oeuvre that scholars with disparate specializations and disciplinary backgrounds can make available to Kluge studies and critical theory for the twenty-first century. With the exception of a keynote address by Michael W. Jennings based on a critical biography of Kluge in preparation, primary presentations represented a mix of well-established scholars who agreed to work on Kluge for the first time in their careers and early-career scholars developing their own incisive perspectives on Kluge's multifaceted work. They were joined on the conference program by Kluge live via remote technology from the Frankfurt Book Fair, where he was, as it happened, also presenting a book project coauthored with Ben Lerner, an American writer and MacArthur Fellow who gave his literary reading of *The Snows of Venice: The Lerner-Kluge-Container* in Ithaca. One of Kluge's Skype presentations for the conference featured a conversation with

3. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247.

Kevin Ernste, an avant-garde musical composer, about “the music of history” and “the polyphony of things,” inspired by a collection of Kluge’s counterhistories and “opera stories” published in English in 2018.⁴ Other special interlocutors included Susan Buck-Morss, well known for, among other things, her seminal insights into Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory; Richard Langston, one of the founding editors of the *Alexander Kluge-Jahrbuch*, author of a forthcoming Verso book on Oskar Negt and Kluge’s collaborative work “in defiance of catastrophic modernity,” and editor of *Difference and Orientation*, a stunning collection of Kluge essays, many of which Cornell University Press made available for the first time in English in 2019; and a host of respondents, moderators, and audience members brought together by heterogeneous disciplinary and experiential interests. Except for Lerner’s literary reading and a discussion surrounding a special screening of Kluge’s “Ithaka Program” of experimental minute-films, audio and video recordings of all the conference events are available online at Cornell University Video on Demand, vod.video.cornell.edu/channel/channelid/106742121.

Curiosity and attentiveness to new perspectives, including pressing critical perspectives on the changing status of experience, inform Kluge’s work in any medium. This is both evident and explicit in his essay “The Poetic Power of Theory,” which appears here as conceived in dialogue with the Ithaca conference on new perspectives in creative arts and critical practice.⁵ Beyond Niklas Luhmann’s second-order observation, Kluge writes, the “labor of intelligence” and sense perception, too, must now also be grasped in relation to a “second-order transfer of experience,” for in his assessment all experiences are heterogeneous at their root and have “the character of a chameleon,” capable of transformation oriented to freedom at any moment. Curiosity about the radical heterogeneity of experience is echoed and cultivated throughout Kluge’s oeuvre, as one snippet of a story called “Can One Find Anything at All without Hope?” allows readers to taste.⁶ This is a tale of life-and-death stakes involving an Australian ski center, a massive landslide, and desperate rescue operations

4. Kluge, *Temple of the Scapegoat*.

5. Kluge’s essay “The Poetic Power of Theory” has been translated by Leslie A. Adelson with the author’s permission for *New German Critique*. At two junctures in this essay, previously published English translations by Isabel Cole are used, also with the author’s permission, and tagged. The English translation of Kluge’s short story “Plugging Up a Child’s Brain,” which appears as a boxed insert in Kluge’s essay, was first undertaken by Adelson in the late 1970s and published by Cornell University Press in 2016.

6. Kluge, “Kann man ohne Hoffnung irgend etwas finden?,” quotations from which are rendered here in my English translation.

to save as many victims as possible who are buried under rock, mud, and snow. A fictional narrative that seems headed straight for either a happy or a tragic end shifts midway to an extended dialogue on hope, beyond decisionist planning or mere chance, between a television journalist and the head of the rescue team, pointedly described as “a man of experience.”⁷ After sixty-five hours and one measly rescue to report, the team leader tells the journalist, “We have no hope left,” a pronouncement the journalist keeps trying to squeeze into a mode of causal thinking about hierarchical structures of decision-making.⁸ This is dialogue without dialectics, and the conversation spins, characteristically for Kluge, out of rational control as hope is reclaimed (but not explained) as an effective aspect of life-and-death experience. The team leader only appears to contradict himself when he tells the frustrated journalist: “We succeeded in maintaining hope. The team member who rescued someone wasn’t used up yet by what had happened and believed that he could hear something [under the surface]; this functioned like a credit on the account called hope.”⁹ “What are you calling hope?” the journalist wants to know. “Unbelief,” comes the reply. “Unbelief in what?” the interviewer asks in what sounds like a Karl Valentin cabaret quip from the Weimar Republic. “Unbelief vis-à-vis probability,” the indecisive but now-hopeful team leader replies. The woman questioning him grows more agitated: “At this point you had spent 54 hopeless hours on duty. Weren’t your hopes used up by then? You are, after all, an *experienced* man.” “Here’s what I do,” her counterpart says. “I don’t let any particular thoughts in.” “Strangely noteworthy,” she finds. “Yes,” he says. “It’s a matter of experience.”¹⁰

Experiencing Kluge’s work from both the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries anew, with the aid of insights presented at the 2018 Cornell conference and reworked for publication in either *New German Critique* in the United States or the *Alexander Kluge-Jahrbuch* in Germany, yields novel perspectives at the crossroads of Kluge studies and critical theory. This bifurcated publishing strategy seems especially appropriate to Kluge’s own approach to polyphonic, heterogeneous, and newly constellated experience, including that of reading alone and thinking together. While both journal issues include Kluge’s current thoughts on the poetic power of theory as a kind of counter-algorithmic force in a world dominated by “Silicon Valley”—with the present

7. Kluge, “Kann man ohne Hoffnung irgend etwas finden?” 111.

8. Kluge, “Kann man ohne Hoffnung irgend etwas finden?” 111.

9. Kluge, “Kann man ohne Hoffnung irgend etwas finden?” 113.

10. Kluge, “Kann man ohne Hoffnung irgend etwas finden?” 113.

issue of *New German Critique* featuring the first English publication of this powerful essay and the *Alexander Kluge-Jahrbuch* the German version completed in February 2019—Kluge’s essay is joined here by three additional essays from the Ithaca gathering. Dorothea Walzer probes how “a Marxian model of writing” inspires and informs Kluge’s aesthetic approach to critical commentary, notably through particular modes and textual structures of questioning. By focusing on the poetics of Kluge’s literature and theory alike, she analyzes the transformative epistemological status of his quirky questioning, so prevalent throughout his oeuvre in many different forms. Walzer’s essay on the “metagenre” of commentary in this diverse body of work opens up new perspectives, not only on Kluge’s formal indebtedness to Marx, but also on Kluge’s critical practice of questioning perspective itself, including the perspective that any given “model” affords. Tara Hottman turns to Kluge’s extensive recent work in the multimedial formats of art installation and museum exhibition to evaluate historical as well as formal developments in his approach to transmediality as distinguished in his artistic practice from remediation. Her article demonstrates in descriptive and conceptual detail how Kluge’s installation and exhibition work reconceives both montage technique and reception aesthetics in the trajectory of his practice since the 1960s. Hottman explains how Kluge’s “white-cube” aesthetic creates experiential perspectives that are better suited to the twenty-first century than “the black box of the cinema, the late-night television screen, or the internet.” Sabine Haenni opens up entirely new perspectives on Kluge’s aesthetic relationship to the historical avant-garde, urban capitalist modernity, and the cinematic trajectory of time-lapse technique over time through rich analysis of one short film from the late twentieth century, Kluge’s *Chicago im Zeitraffer* (*Chicago in Time Lapse*). Both borrowing and departing from László Moholy-Nagy’s approach to the mobility of urban vision in the early twentieth century and Bertolt Brecht’s understanding of a “‘cunning’” capitalist system, Kluge retools time-lapse cinematography and an aural-visual nexus, Haenni shows, to redirect contemporary orientations and create a paradoxically embodied critique of modernism, posthumanism, and “imperial globalization.” As this article demonstrates, the filmic device of the urban traffic “loop” and Kluge’s use of transnational techno music become points of entry for critically rethinking both the cinematic genre of the city symphony film and transatlantic “loops” of “racial histories” in capitalist regimes of vision, sound, and erasure.

Volume 6 of the *Alexander Kluge-Jahrbuch* brings Kluge’s reflections on the poetic power of theory together with other contributions from the Cornell

conference devoted to this polymath's work.¹¹ Alan Beyerchen illuminates previously uncharted reasons for the manifold presence in Kluge's oeuvre of Carl von Clausewitz, the nineteenth-century author of the most widely cited European theory of war, an experienced soldier and military strategist reputed above all to be a realist in orientation, including in war as the "continuation" of politics "by other means."¹² Yet as Beyerchen's analysis reveals, what Kluge derives from Clausewitz is not merely the brutal realism of historical wars but the pivotal "importance of imagination in dealing with the shape-shifting nature" of reality more broadly construed. To understand Kluge's well-known predilection for the generation of counterhistories, this article teaches us, we have to read both Clausewitz and Kluge again more deeply for interactive elements in productive "friction," as Clausewitz put it, rather than contingent experience or even dialectical thinking alone. For Erik Porath, revisiting Kluge's "text-image-combinations" in the medium of print both widens and deepens critical perspective on his aesthetics of montage and "anti-realism of wishes," notably by uncovering an operative psychoanalytic perspective in the artist's work. This innovative analysis of text and image sharpens the profile of relationality (*Zusammenhang*) that prevails in this work. Focusing on twentieth-century montages in print, Porath renders visible, for the first time, core structures of Kluge's aesthetic approach to Freudian concepts of perception, wish fulfillment, and movement as transformative image making—embodied and psychically shifting, too—beyond conceptual, pictorial, or even intermedial frames. If Beyerchen opens up new perspectives on Kluge's imaginative relationship to Clausewitz, Porath does the same for Kluge's working relationship to Sigmund Freud. Ulrike Vedder turns in her eye-opening article to Kluge's museum-based poetics of the recent past to contemplate a conundrum: How can it be that an artist whose most radical work was long associated with film as the art of the moving image and with storytelling in a nonlinear vein now turns to museums, associated in European modernity with cultural memory, historical continuity, and aesthetic canonization rather than social critique? As Vedder establishes through analysis of Kluge's contemporary storytelling *about* museum collections, including one literary collection dedicated to King Kong, film's "living figure" of obstinate resistance to colonial collection,¹³ Kluge's many museum writings share a Foucauldian critique of modern museums as well as Benjamin's dual passions for collecting and

11. Langston et al., "Poetic Power of Theory."

12. Clausewitz, *On War*, 87.

13. Kluge, *Kongs große Stunde*.

the essential “incoherence” or difference potential of every collection. Beyond Benjamin and Foucault, Vedder further shows, Kluge’s museum stories, scattered across several of his text collections written for the twenty-first century, narratively cultivate “enlivening” through a poetic perspective on musealization as process: “experience and utopia at once.” Vedder’s insights into Kluge’s contemporary storytelling about museums and their imperialist histories can be read in productive resonance with Hottman’s perspectives on the white-cube aesthetic of Kluge’s three-dimensional museum work. While the conference-related contributions to *New German Critique* and the *Alexander Kluge-Jahrbuch* shine new light on key facets of Kluge’s work from the 1960s on, Hans Jürgen Scheuer illuminates the “apocryphal modernity” of Kluge’s miraculous storytelling in our time by tracing emphatically medieval inspirations for and in his writing. This is no mere matter of medieval motifs and story lines, though angels and devils abound. As Scheuer details in revelatory examples drawn from both thirteenth-century writing by Caesarius of Heisterbach and Kluge’s story collection about “the gap the devil leaves us” in 2003,¹⁴ Kluge’s indebtedness to Caesarius’s “monastic perspective” as an intellectual forerunner of Critical Theory pivots on a temporal constellation of “paradoxical simultaneity” made legible through storytelling form. For both writers, albeit to different ends, this simultaneity concerns the copresence of “noteworthiness and imperceptibility,” an oscillating gap in perception through which miraculous transgressions of canonical thought—and for Kluge, radical perspectives of modern experience—can enter the world. If Kluge’s essay on “the poetic power of theory” encourages us to tend to the “labor of intelligence” and the transformation of human senses anew, the “intelligence of the miracle” as an aesthetic form, Scheuer teaches us, is also—imperceptibly perceptible—close at hand. For this new perspective and a host of others on modern and contemporary experience, we are indebted to Alexander Kluge and his critical theory as a poetically powerful practice.

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14. Kluge, *Die Lücke, die der Teufel läßt*.

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