

MANAS RAY



## The Many Bodies of History: The Cinema of Alexander Kluge between Marxism and Postmodernism

“No one, it seems, is happy with postmodernism”. Stanley Trachtenberg chose to begin his book, *The Postmodern Moment*, with this remark back in 1985 – i.e., in the heydays of postmodernism when its expansion as a cultural phenomenon had seemed irreversible. One reason for this unhappiness, we can speculate, is the acclaimed fuzziness of the postmodern terrain, one characterized by deliberate as well as unavoidable confusion and conceptual slippage, not to speak of its inexhaustible repertoire. From the high (even if, post-) philosophical texts of Jacques Derrida to the latest brand of shampoo – anything it seemed could be postmodern. Attempts to discipline postmodernism to one paradigmatic definition was a taboo, since such enterprise characterized a central irony: namely, the search for a constituting essence, a uniform rational calculus, the very approach that postmodernism problematized.

Tumultuous as the scene may be, on one issue however there did seem an uncanny concord. Right from its inception, postmodernism was viewed as an adversary of Marxism by both its supporters and disclaimers. Why does Jameson get involved with the polemics and passions of the postmodern? What

is really at stake? asks Douglas Kellner (1989: 2). No less than the status of Marxism and the project of radical politics, he answers. Kellner is not a lone traveller here. Robert Jauß (mimicking Marx's proleptic style though not necessarily his urgency), sees postmodernism as a spectre 'that haunts Europe today' (1988-9: 27). If Jauß is concerned about Europe, Fredric Jameson talks about the other side of the Atlantic, where postmodernism is the name of a 'whole series of different cultural phenomenon', replacing intensities by feelings, self by bodies, history by disjointed spaces (in Stephanson, 1989: 43-7). For Terry Eagleton, the typical postmodern artefact is playful, self-ironizing and even schizoid (1987).

Even as a regular whipping boy, however, postmodernism did earn something from these Marxist critics which not even all its advocates would have agreed to attribute to it: postmodernism earned for itself a space in the arena of history. Because of Marxism's commitment to chronopolitics, to historic-periodic trajectories, postmodernism did not remain a homeless entity. Even to its arch enemies, Marxism offers a space and a category. Accordingly, postmodernism was properly habilitated. It is the cultural logic, we are told, of the third stage of capitalism. To rescue culture from yet another 'disembodied critique', Jameson uses Ernst Mandel's *Late Capitalism* to decipher and historicize the specific logic of cultural production of contemporary postmodern times (1989: 379). Hence, even if Jameson like a good Marxist is out to strike the beast called postmodernism right on the head (Donougho, 1989: 79), like a good Marxist again he would not like to suffer from the illusion that it can be banished from contemporary life. To cure the situation, he meditates on applying 'homeopathic' means:

(T)o undo postmodernism homeopathically by the methods of postmodernism... (1987: 59).

To be sure, the champions of postmodernism were not sitting idle either. In a curious conflation, the charges levelled against modernism by extension became charges against Marxism and vice versa – humanism, geneticism, teleology, historicism – seldom pausing to ask how far and to what extent such epochal objections can characterize the entire enterprise of either, spread as they are over long historical periods. Instead, in a spirit of 'war against totality', Lyotard defines postmodernism as incredulity toward totalizing metanarratives (1984) – implicating Marxism as much as modernism – where agonistic replaces the (repressive) desire for consensus.

Alas, the cultural gadflies have long shifted their gaze elsewhere – all that frenzy, all those gung ho attacks and counterattacks are now largely a matter

of the past. After the bold attempt of Ihab Hassan in the 60s to define and frame postmodernism as the new paradigm shifter (Hassan will keep updating his table of schematic differences between modernism and postmodernism over the decades), postmodernism gained popularity in the 70s in architecture and subsequently in visual culture at large. Charles Jencks's analysis of Philip Johnson's AT&T highrise as an abrupt stacking of a neoclassical mid-section, Roman colonnades at the ground level and a Chippendale pediment at the top became the hallmark of postmodern architecture, a valorised style of haphazard nostalgia that Jencks would posit against the machine metaphor and production paradigm of the Bauhaus, of Miles and Le Corbusier. On the other side of the Atlantic, Joseph Beuys – the celebrated German architect – launched an exhibit in the summer of 1982 in Kassel, a concrete nightmare of a city after recovery from the World War II devastations. Beuys put together thousands of basalt blocks in a triangle formation, the smallest angle pointing to a newly planted tree nearby. The architect appealed to the citizens of Kassel to plant a tree with each of his 7000 'planting stone' (see, Huyssen: 1984). Andreas Huyssen's comment is succinct: "Sculpture as monument or anti-monument, art for climbing on, and ultimately, art for vanishing – far removed from the old notion of art: no touching, no trespassing." (1984: 7)

The 80s was the time when postmodernism colonized the print space of the academia. Though the examples cited of postmodern literature would always remain somewhat on unsure grounds, its impact of literary theory was prominent, but nothing to exceed its pervasive sway on cultural and social theory based on a perceived but undertheorized 'homology' between the avant-garde in theory and the avant-garde in literature and the arts. (This was also the time of early incarnation of cultural studies, and the *bonhomie* of the two avatars was remarkable, a tie that would only be strengthened by the arrival on the scene of postcolonial studies later in the decade.) The climax for postmodernism had to wait for the Berlin Wall to fall in '89, the grand collapse of a century-long grand narrative under the enthusiastic gaze of the electronic media. A month later, the London-based advertising agency Saatchi and Saatchi would put up a banner stretched over a generous expanse of the truncated Wall, entrusting political emancipation to borderless enterprise: SAATCHI FIRST OVER THE WALL. (see, Bennett 1990) In a tacit reference to Baudrillard's idea of copy as more authentic than the original, David Bennett cites the case of an Australian company selling chips of the Wall around that time 'encased in perspex bubbles and accompanied... by signed affidavits testifying to their authenticity' (259) – a parodic enactment of postmodernism's own self-

parody: ‘a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers’.

The post-Wall international arrangements, however, did not follow the path laid out by Francis Fukuyama, the Rand Corporation thinker and a darling of one variant of postmodernism (that I will later characterize as ‘neo-conservative’, borrowing from Hal Foster). The contracting zones ‘still in history’ did not contract. This gave the world of post-history reason enough to discipline the unruly tides of history through food-packets and bombs (often disguising one for the other), even as in its own secure doorsteps the ‘vices’ of ethnicities, religions, minoritarianisms – all those remnants of history – proved increasingly unyielding. It was soon clear that the world we live in is very much a world of modernity. However, it is important not to forget that our mode of understanding modernity changed drastically as theoretic gains made in the 70s and 80s, far from being debunked, went through a process of continuous elaboration – the juxtapositions and networking of spaces rather than the earlier glacial schemes of time, the contingent and meteorological in favour of the projective and chronological, the body and its drives rather than the self and consciousness – precisely all those departures that had once made an enthused Linda Hutcheon comment, ‘the air we breathe is postmodern’. (1988)

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The reason for this long excursus as a preamble to a retrospective understanding of Alexander Kluge’s films is this: in terms of outfit, Kluge’s films would richly qualify to be called postmodern; nonetheless, they offer fresh departures that take the debate beyond the Marxism/postmodernism binary and associated facile typologies and periodizations. Postmodernism for him is not a negation but a series of complex transformations of modernism, an ever-increasing web of relations that lead us back to the in-built anti-thesis of modernism (and, in that larger sense, to Marxism). Hence, the way Kluge frames the problematic is not in terms of break or continuity but through a radicalization of their constitutive tendencies, where one discourse becomes the supplementarity of the others, and together they lay bare the ‘unacknowledged, repressed, and effective bourgeois heritage’ (Nagele, 1987: 3) of each. Clearly, Kluge’s postmodernism is a carry-over of all the major modernist concerns and strategies: its self-reflexive experiments, its ironic ambiguities, its contestation of realistic representation, its confused response to a centre that no longer holds, etc. He amplifies these traits to the point where the text looks disorderly,

offering no dialectical resolution even at a considerable remove and the signifying power of the interpretative machine seriously debunked. Similarly, with Marxism. Marxism, Kluge argues, while acknowledging negation and opaqueness as central features of life under capitalism, also huddles to limit and master them by situating in its midst a projective, rationalist view of history, guided by a transparent telos. This is true of the Marx of Manifesto; this is also true of the 'post-industrial' Marxism of Jameson:

(W)e all want to "master" history in whatever ways turn out to be possible: the escape from the nightmare of history, the conquest by human beings of control over the otherwise seemingly blind and natural "laws" of socio-economic fatality, remains the irreplaceable will of the Marxist heritage, whatever language it may be expressed in. It is therefore not to be expected to hold much attraction for people uninterested in seizing control over their own destinies. (Jameson, 1989: 372)

One of the ways Kluge problematizes the two discourses - Marxism and postmodernism - is by questioning such dreams of mastering history in Marxism, while trying to historicize postmodernism. Marxism without a grand narrative of history is also a Marxism without an agent of history. Following the trace-routes of Marxism's anchorage to the idea of a global metanarrative of history ('the untranscendable horizon' which, however, is dissolved with the coming of communism) and of postmodernism's reduction of history to 'just gaming' (Lyotard) is to actually an attempt at re-reading the two discourses for politics. And this is what constitutes the core of Kluge's contextual, theme-oriented cinematic interventions into postwar Germany's public life.

The postmodern signature of Kluge's films is unmistakable: a montage composed of images appropriated from the other films (or paintings, or news photos, or posters), set off by a title (may be spoken, but more often written, as intertitles were in the silent film era), while the distinctive but at times self-contradicting voice of a narrator speaks over strains of a forgotten piece of popular music or fragments from an opera, a text punctuated by some bit of aphoristic wisdom (lifted and worked up from a variety of sources, known and obscure). It is *cinema impur*, a cinema of heteronomy, anything but the 'pure' products of the great modernist auteurs. Yet his inspiration remains Brecht, Surrealism, Bloch and, supremely, Benjamin – i.e., the avant-garde figures in the modernist canon. He marshals the vast array of formal experiments not to debunk history but on the contrary to reflect on the aporia of post-War

Germany's specific historical situation. Gerard Raulet generalizes this aporia beyond Germany in the following: "It is no longer so certain that reason and history must be rejected, nor even that this transformation of rationality can still be incorporated within a historical dialectic that realises reason." (1986: 67)

As Mariam Hansen and Thomas Elsaesser – two important commentators of the New German Cinema – have in their own different ways argued, Kluge's films can be read as an instance of deviation from dominant classical narrative, but, in the same move, also as a deviation from postmodernist, semiotic modes of cinema and the theoretical apparatus supporting them. Short of piling pastiche on pastiche or devoting to a highly cerebral exercise of text-spectatorship decoding, the crucial project of Kluge's cinema has been the forwarding of discourse in the face of ready-made history, the unmastered past. Central to Kluge's production is a fundamental desire to understand and grasp history, coupled with a profound awareness of all that prevents this desire from being realised. In itself, such a desire is nothing exceptional: it is, in a way, the guiding force for much of postwar German creativity. Kluge, however, draws unique formal and praxeological perspectives from it. Cinema, Kluge maintained, is a dying animal, 'a 20th century love-affair' (1990). His project, of necessity, thus takes the form of a re-invention of cinema's lost possibilities, lost in the habitual grooves as it were. Film is perhaps the only industry in (Western) Germany yet to come out of the devastations of World War II. If Hollywood's characteristic mode, argues Miriam Hansen (1984), of ravaging the mainstream postwar German cinema is through the language of universalization, Kluge's cinema demands a space for the dimensions of history, memory and experience, discourses in the 'combat zone' between public and private spheres. This calls for nothing short of liberating the film in the heads of the spectators flowing for 10,000 years – in other words, a radicalization of the cinema-spectator axis, a rethinking of the 'image', an image whose crisis is linked to the crisis of divided Germany<sup>1</sup>.

*From Oberhausen to Munich: Dilemmas of a State sponsored political cinema*

One watches Kluge's films today, long after they were made, on a note laden with despair. They are like archival assortments from the past. Their contemporaneity has not diminished but the trend of international cinema has changed its course. Not only has Kluge had to stop making films due to financial constraints and lack of distribution channels, the new cinema of Germany in general today is either in the process of dying or already dead, depending on what the parameters are. "Shall we do away with the cinema and

explain the pictures over the telephone?” asks Kluge in the last ‘feature’ film he made, *The Blind Director* (1986)<sup>2</sup>. By the last quarter of the 80s what was, however, emphatically dead is the early dreams of the Oberhausen Manifesto (February 1962), when 26 aspirant filmmakers got together to spell out a new cinema bent on questioning the dominant trend in image-making in Germany as well as Germany’s unresolved past as it existed in the present. These two aspects were seen as inter-implicated. The Manifesto promised a contextual, interventionist, theme-oriented cinema that would comment on the grey seriality of everyday life of (West) Germany’s post-war limbo existence. If the narrative of the life of New German Cinema begins with the Oberhausen Manifesto’s brash pronouncement of death of papa kino, the first big halt is June 21, 1983 when at the first Munich Film Festival Wim Wenders, on behalf of the same signatories of Oberhausen (by now some of them international celebrities), read out a text spelling the deep disease that has set in and from which the new cinema could barely escape. Precisely when Wenders was reading out the obituary of this movement, the American campuses (and here in India we were no exception) were singing panegyrics of this cinema.

We get the source of this crisis if we try to understand New German Cinema as a force-field, a triangle made up of a weak native film industry, an aggressive hegemony of Hollywood over Germany, and an ambiguous media policy of the Federal government, that funded this cinema largely to profile itself as a democratic polity and a multicultural society to the international audience. In keeping with the variations of institutional policy of the government, the career of the new Cinema got chequered. At the heart of the New German Cinema lay a debilitating paradox: this is a cinema which at the same time as harbouring radical dreams, depended almost wholly on the State for finance. (Elsaesser, 1985)

A difficult question faced the new filmmakers: how to combat repression of the past with a medium so vehemently implicated in fostering public pacification? How to counter images of a past whose own images dominated attempts to imagine that past? In trying to answer this question the new cinema reached its creative heights. Equally, it is in trying to sidle through such questions that this cinema displays the rot that has now set in. It is not that this cinema no more is State financed, but what has changed is the direction of subsidy, fostering a kind of cinema that consoles and recasts questions of guilt and responsibility in terms of fascination and pity. In short, a cinema that is no more a history of the present – i.e., one that brings the crises of the past and present in interrogatory configurations.

*Kluge: imaging history*

Kluge's films are like writings on time, contextual interventions to some crises in German life. The textual strategies the films employ



*Germany in Autumn*

- their stylistic heterogeneity, openness, incompleteness, their collaboration with the subterranean films flowing in the spectator – work to accentuate the combat-character these films. They tell stories about the difficulties of telling stories in the ruffled context of postwar Germany. It would, however, be wrong to characterize the discussion of his films now, far away from the political time and cultural soils as an instance of cultural fetishism; rather, watching his films today offers an occasion is to re-read them in terms of our own political urgencies. Take, for instance, *Germany in Autumn*, a collaborative film made as a response to the events that ruptured the surface continuity of the West German democracy in the fall of 1977 and threatened to abduct public life in a spiral of terrorism resulting from the encounter of the State and the Radical Army Faction, a far left outfit. Under the supervision of Kluge, Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus edited the different contributions of individual filmmakers, intercut various episodes and documentary footage with scant respect for auteurial signatures. What emerged was a scrambled anthology, a collective textual document of the crisis of left subjectivity – a method of collaboration that Kluge would cryptically call, radically private through radically public means. I have often thought in anguish, why couldn't we produce our own versions of *Germany in Autumn* as a response to Babri or Godhra or, if you like, Nandigram.

The dependency of his films on a performative context is no doubt enhanced by the fact that the filmmaker in this case is also a writer, theorist, teacher, lawyer, and organizer. The reason for privileging Kluge, however, is not simply an act of homage to his wide spectrum of activities. Just as his cinema does not offer any scope for dialectical resolution of multiple axes, the different departments of his activities don't fuse into a towering epochal expression. The task that he sets for himself is to re-invent cinema's lost possibilities – not merely through textual means but also through persistent institutional campaign. With time, Kluge's work changes from international art-film style of interruptive narrative to what might be called, collage films: a cluster of

films anchored by a theme and a voiceover, which takes the proportion of a polyphonous character that does not mind even contradicting itself. To radicalize the cinema-spectator axis for Kluge is also to work on the borders between the public and the private. The point is not to expand the subjective but render inextricable the public and historical on the one hand and the private and biographical on the other. Young Kluge was a witness to the bombing of his house in the last days of the War and also, almost simultaneously, to the divorce of his parents – the two events in their mutuality helped Kluge appreciate the inter-implicated reality of the broad structures of history (*Öffentlichkeit*) and the innumerable ‘counter-histories’ of individuals (*Erfahrung*). Take *Yesterday Girl*, Kluge’s first feature film (1965-6), as an instance. The German title is *Abschied von Gestern* meaning, ‘Goodbye to Yesterday’ – an ironic way of saying that there is actually no goodbye to yesterday. Truly enough the protagonist Anita G (enacted by his sister, Alexandra) survives in pockets of past that frame a callous present, challenging the myth of zero-hour. Or, *Part-time Work of a Female Slave* (1973), spun on the Brechtian trope of having to work in an abortion clinic in order to have more children (Kluge’s feigned childlike surmon: ‘its warm inside, its cold outside’). Or, the protagonist of *The Woman Patriot*, Gabi Teichert, an image-pun, a satire on the notion of unfragmented subjectivity in Germany’s ruffled postwar context, and her Nietzschean insistence amidst hectic politicking of SDP convention that history be changed here and now.

Quite often, Kluge’s films are followed by lengthy literary reconstructions (in the case of *The Woman Patriot*, the excursus ran into more than 400 pages). This might be taken as an example of Kluge’s attempts to ‘literalize’ the cinema; by equal measure, however, he also foregrounds cinema’s infinite (and indeterminate) registers of figurative language. The figurative verges on the sensuous and together produce a reworked notion of the specular much beyond its conventional



*Yesterday Girl*



*Part-Time Work of a Female Slave*

use in narrative cinema where character-look predominantly serves to stitch spaces under the laws of diegesis. In *The Woman Patriot*, we find Gabi Teichert in a rather quixotic exchange with the Peeping Tom who works for the Federal Intelligence Bureau during the day and as pastime, peeps into ladies' bedrooms at night with his

powerful binocular. Gabi finds an affinity between their occupations - his as an observer of the present, hers of the past. Through this sardonic conflation, Kluge manages to heighten the difference between two registers of the viewing subject: the Peeping Tom as a State spy is a classic panoptic subject while Gabi Teichert (whose obsession for alternative sources of history makes her drill through books, shovel the earth and measure people's limbs) could possibly lay claim for being a far-reach candidate of the spatially dispersed cartologic grid that Svetlana Alpers posits against the mathematical uniformity of the Renaissance perspective in her book, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*. That the Peeping Tom is also, at another register, a transmogrified update of the 19<sup>th</sup> century flâneur, sharing the latter's anonymity and also insatiable interest in the ongoing panorama albeit for a completely different purpose, can only complicate the opposition between these two registers. Soon after Gabi nabs him at his nocturnal adventure, we find them sitting in a restaurant next to a window with the walls displaying large posters of Hollywood amidst soft rack lighting. She resorts to cinematic metaphor in advising him on how best to relax: by blinking. The whole episode (and the play around opposed-complementary professions) is implicated in a sensuous circuit, the realm of fantasy and imagination, one that works for Kluge as history's storehouse of energy and where he locates the work of cinema.

For Kluge the individual senses and the body parts have their own residual or emergent histories. He argues that the roots of war lie in a malignant combination of individual labour capacities. What people essentially do in war is no different from what they do in time of 'peace' - only that the activities are combined and carried out differently (Kluge, 1989a). Take, for instance, the walking knee which assumes the proportions of a character in *The Woman Patriot*. Kluge borrows the trope from the poem of Christian Morgenstern (1871-1914), *The Knee*<sup>3</sup>, and puts to completely different use. He tells the

story of the knee of a soldier killed at Stalingrad. The soldier might have been dead long back, but that does not mean his knee has to be dead too. In fact, the Knee hovers around Europe both spatially and temporally and gives its running commentary infused with qualities such as curiosity, memory, stubbornness and an insatiable hunger for seeing and hearing. For Kluge, the Knee is the metaphor of what he calls, *Zusammenhangs* – i.e., correlating – which acts in his scheme of things as the crux of history as well as the process of filming – i.e., editing, assembling disparate parts into a mobile joint. The Knee is the trope for oppositional discourse, one that advocates the subversion of educationally inculcated hierarchies of perception and works for the liberation of the ‘suppressed classes’ of the human senses, including the subterranean flow of cinema in the heads of the spectator.

Gabi Teichert, like the knee, is also an oppositional trope. Like the knee, she too stands for the spectator’s suppressed capacities, which Kluge’s programmatically calls female mode of production. Qualities such as curiosity, memory, stubbornness, an insatiable hunger for seeing, hearing, and correlating, and a degree of irrationality are embodied by this female protagonist who acts them out in the course of the film’s rather rudimentary stories. Theorizing this mode of production, Kluge remarks :

In the forms of interaction that define the successful mother/child relationship, a mode of production is maintained which can be viewed as a residue of a matriarchal means of production. It is much more the case here that a female means of production which is aimed at satisfaction of needs (“handling the child” is the instance Kluge gives) is vindicated in opposition to the patriarchal and capitalist world surrounding it. This mode of production is absolutely superior to the mechanisms of that world, but is isolated from the degree of socialization of overall social communication. (Kluge: 1993; reproduced in Heide Schlupmann and Jamie Owen Daniel, “Femininity as Productive Force: Kluge and Critical Theory”, *New German Cinema*, No 49, PP. 69-78)

To the extent that Kluge’s representations of femininity merely illustrates his theoretical location (what he calls, female mode of production), they admittedly participate in an essentializing discourse. However, the issue of Kluge’s sexual politics at times threatens prematurely to foreclose a more comprehensive reception of his body of work. He has been accused of being a patriarchal modernist since, so goes the argument, under the cover

of modernist devices such as voice-over the female subject was once again 'spoken' by a male narrator/author. The point however is authorial voice-over in Kluge's films neither presents a consistent, authoritative commentary nor is it always identified with the filmmaker's voice : the polyphony of male/female voices in *Artists At the Top of Big Top, Perplexed* (1968), the female protagonists' voice-over in *Middle of the Road is a Very Dead End* (1974), obvious streaks of contradictions in voice-over commentary and its frenzied speed at one point in *The Female Patriot*, use of child voice, etc. furnishes examples to the contrary.

The polyphonic nature of Kluge's films and the multiple borrowings from disparate sources that go into them might give us the mistaken impression that his work belongs to what in the heydays of semiotics – the 70s – was known as 'politics of form'. The term used to characterize a certain kind of counter-cinema of professed aggression towards conventional strategies of narration and aimed at making its admittedly limited clientele acutely aware of the ideological underpinnings of representation. The problem of identification could be, it was assumed, epistemologically dealt with through formal innovations - i.e., through restructuring of modes of representation/perception. Such restructuring was taken as the primary site of cultural politics. The Realism- Humanism- Historicism trio got marked out as the key to metaphysics of presence.

Let us take Stephen Heath's piece, "Lessons from Brecht" (1974), as an instance of the prevalent semiotic-psychoanalytic appropriation. Heath first draws a contrast of Western pictorial representation with Chinese painting, suggests that multiple perspectivism of the latter offers no representation as such but its displacement. From this, Heath moves to a notion of fetishism where it denotes a structure focusing a centre, an absent-present subject, that is. This, in its turn, paves the way for Heath for a 'modernist' appropriation of Brecht, who in this combined articulation becomes a kind of metaphor for the practice of punctuating representation with 'formulation'.

What such marshalling of complex theoretical position conveniently occludes is the fact that Brecht was interested in the question of textuality only to address problems beyond the text. After all, as Dana Polan once sardonically commented, the operations of Duck Amuck are after all not Brechtian (1985). In a way, the anti-realists of the 70s made the same mistake that arch realists from Lukacs onwards are tempted to do: judging texts 'radical' on the basis of style rather than their location in the triangle: Text - Reality - Readers. Ironically, the telos of the self-deconstructing subject is ultimately indistinguishable from

the disincorporated, dehistoricized subjectivity of Cartesian rationalism. For Kluge, the formal experiments of cinema are not designed to give 'lessons' to the spectators that will transform them into expert decoders; instead, the crucial project of this cinema has been bringing the body of the cinematic text, the body of the nation ('stories upon stories upon stories making for the surface of the nation' 1981-2) and the body human on one plain.

Understandably, Kluge's project of history centres around his investigations of the public sphere as it functions in the most intimate spheres of the private. If it holds the key to the origins of the collapse of 1933, Kluge would argue that it also allows speculations and work on reality's optimistic end. Miriam Hansen (1988) has elaborated the specific connotations of the German word, *Öffentlichkeit*, which along with contestation of meaning and formation of the public, also indicates an ideational realm, a glasnost or openness. Hence, it holds the potential for a site of utopian redemption. To counter the bourgeois public sphere's principle of exclusion and the new, industrialized public sphere and the vertically integrated consciousness industry's attempts to function through hegemonizing the raw experience of everyday life, Kluge (and Negt) coined the utopian concept of proletarian public sphere. Proletarian here designates not merely the alienated labour characteristics of the industrial proletariat, but 'all similarly restricted productive capacities' (1993). These alienated capacities form the realm of fantasy and imagination and reside in the interstices of contradictory, non-linear social and historical processes. The task is make them politically relevant forms of resistance. It is here that Kluge's project aligns with surrealism but, crucially, read with and from Benjamin.

### *Many bodies of history?*

Natalie Davis in her essay, 'The Two Bodies of History', reads the course of history as a combination of disciplinary drive and a proliferation of unstable, fragile, if repressed, bodies. She argues that in a way, History throughout its practice could actually never dispense with its other bodies. When the French royal historiographer, Nicolas Vignier, was arguing in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century for 'reducing' many chronicles and annals into one universal history 'as in one body', he was pushing a new idea of history as a discipline as against the then dominant idea of history as art. Half a century later, Etienne Pasquier was posing diametrically opposite views, upholding 'contradictions and silences' instead of the 'one body' approach to history (see Davis, 1988). As history went through a process of disciplining (from the eighteenth century onwards), the numerous bodies of history became less and less visible but they did manage to

escape total occlusion. Retrospectively, it seems that such alternative streams increasingly made room within the main body of History, getting embedded as subversive moments. Kluge's films – especially, the later ones – can be read as genealogical configurations of those marginalized bodies, as excavations into the innumerable histories of the nation, the many bodies of history to speak against the very repressions of History itself: History which is one long chronological, causal linearity; History which is imperial in its grandeur and in its disdain for whatever is marginal, History which acts as a tomb to hide its own atrocities. With time, Kluge's films look more like clusters or patches. The two hour long seamless linearity of feature films, Kluge maintains, is the antithesis of human communication, a fantastic imposition naturalized through practice (1989b).

Benjamin in his famed *Artwork* essay comments: "Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came up the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second." (1969) Film is this contemporary mode of travel for Kluge, through different zones of time and space, and disparate sources of borrowings. Benjamin's valorization of the new barbarism initiated by mechanical reproduction that would liquidate the decaying aura of bourgeois artworks has however been put to one-sided interpretation in cultural and media studies. (Here, it may be noted that the literal translation of the German title is significantly different: 'The Artwork in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' see, Susan Buck-Morss, 1992.) What is very often forgotten is the other axis of Benjamin's thought elaborated in his essay 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire', 'One Way Street', *Moscow Diary* and the *Arcades Project* where he laments the decline in experience, synonymous with the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock. As the last century progressed, it was clear that if Taylorized labour disciplines the events of everyday, mechanical reproduction, as a corollary, remorselessly spectacularizes them by inflating their points of aggression – a relation that Susan Buck-Morss (1992) analyzes as a dialectical relation between anaestheticization and phantasmagoria. For Benjamin, in this relation is captured the decline of experience which for him is inseparable from that of memory, as the faculty that connects sense perceptions of the present with those of the past, and enables us to remember both past sufferings and forgotten futures. Needless to say, the imprint of Benjamin in the structural organization of Kluge's later films is unmistakable. Neither narrative nor anti-narrative, Kluge's films are located at the hinge point of these two axes to

exploit the maximum tension. (1989b) Therefore, the principle of assemblage is not anarchic, but more like acts of remembering, at once involuntary and assiduous. For Benjamin, this is mimetic faculty, the capacity to relate to the external world through not so much the standard principles of verisimilitude but the ability to be something else. "A child plays at not only being a grocer or a teacher, but also a windmill or a train", observes Benjamin (1986). This ability to be something else is for Kluge the secret to the cinema flowing in the heads of the spectator. The analeptic and proleptic shapings of Kluge's meandering narratives travel in and through those abducted memories and constructs an archive of pain and anguish, far beyond the pale of cause and effect time of psychological accounts.

*Cinema and the Public Sphere: Speculations and work on reality's optimistic end*

Kluge's project of history centres around his investigations of the public sphere as it functions in the most intimate spheres of the private, because in it are the origins of the collapse of 1933. Recently, Miriam Hansen has elaborated the specific connotations of the German word, *Öffentlichkeit*, which are not available in the English translation, public sphere. She points out several strands of meaning: as a spatial concept it refers to the social sites where meanings are articulated, distributed, and negotiated, as well as which is a process where collective bodies are constituted. It is also, and crucially, an ideational realm, a *glasnost* or openness (*offen*) which refers to larger deterritorial contexts. Kluge, she argues, utilizes this dialectical tension inherent in the term - a struggle and an openness, and frames it as a general horizon of social experience. It is a site, Kluge says, where struggles are decided by means other than war. Hence, of necessity, it is a site of utopian redemption.

Historically, public sphere designates the organization of public life mediating the changing forms of capitalist production and the cultural organization of human experience. As a realm of public life, it has a moral, a conscience. The bourgeois public sphere of the preceding centuries face a mortal threat in our century. Kluge, along with Negt, shows how the defunct structures of the bourgeois public sphere, based on the principles of exclusion, are now superseded by a new, industrialized public sphere and vertically integrated consciousness industry.

Though the bourgeois public sphere, due to its structural alliances, functioned mainly as a vehicle of bourgeois self-expression, its decay and rise of a new, industrialized public sphere signify new crises for the subject: on the one hand, the new public sphere exploits the living experience as its raw

material and on the other, it is in essence a conglomerate of competing public spheres where one does not understand the others (culture vs science, science vs sports, sports vs politics, and so on). The outcome is a communicative void (a situation Kluge characterises as the 'new Babylon' in *Blind Director* (1985). Negt and Kluge argue that this very crisis in communicative situation has in its turn given rise to the historical possibility of counter public sphere to materialize. This potential and emerging public sphere they call proletarian public sphere.

It is to be noted that Kluge and Negt's notion of public sphere is at a crucial remove from that of Habermas. While Habermas' 'Offentlichkeit' is a distributive 'Offentlichkeit', Negt and Kluge's notion proceeds from the sphere of production. As Kluge explains in a recent interview "I will interpret it via an example from jurisprudence. We say there is a law of production. When a worker works on something, it belongs to him... We, however, have the Roman law, which is based on distributive principles : who does it belong to, not who made it... If the public sphere, that is, the container for the political, was inadequate and therefore conquered by the Nazis, then it is useless to study the achievements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and to repeat and defend the old conception of the public sphere, as Habermas does, for no moral resistance was objectively possible within it. That means that we must look into the production sphere, where the potential for resistance is hidden." Incidentally, Negt and Kluge use the term proletarian in its most general but also significantly altered sense : Proletarian, i.e., separated from the means of production, designates not merely the labour characteristics of the industrial proletariat, but 'all similarly restricted productive capacities'. If the new public sphere attempts to function through hegemonizing the living experience, Kluge argues that the sources of alternative meanings must lie in the margins or peripheries of social-cultural life. Cultural socialization of human needs and qualities in an industrialized public sphere sets in motion a potential opposition which under present conditions can only resist alienated production by remaining in the realm of fantasy and imagination. Admittedly, proletarian public sphere is a utopian concept but one that already manifests itself in rudimentary forms, in the interstices of contradictory, non-linear social and historical processes and, hence, holds the promise of organizing real needs into politically relevant forms of consciousness and activity.

If the individual senses have their own residual or emergent histories, if the individual senses are like theorists, what also generates social pathology is their multiplicity, the ever-renewed possibility for harmful co-ordination.

In fact, Kluge argues that the roots of war lie in a malignant combination of individual labour capacities. What people essentially do in war is no different from what they do in time of 'peace' - only that the activities are combined and carried out differently.

Based as his social theory is on the libidinal drives, the multiferous 'capillaries', on the feelings and unconscious behaviour as modes of resistance, Kluge finds an easy route to align his notion of radical cinema with the concept of the proletarian public sphere. Any subversive practice of filmmaking, he argues, has to consider itself as an intervention in the organisation of the public sphere and therefore has to operate on as many levels and with at least the same degree of complexity as the existing media of experience. In Kluge's metaphor, cinema resides in the heads of the people with a history of 10,000 years - meaning by which the irresistible phantasy that film as a medium is inherently capable of. In this scheme of things, radical cinema is a potent site for organizing the emerging proletarian public sphere. Kluge's cinema becomes more and more a dialogue with psychoanalytic underpinnings of history and more and more take the shape of 'theoretical film' - I am tempted to characterise the course of Kluge's work as one from dialectics to dissemination. Desperately trying to speculate and work on reality's optimistic end, Kluge in his cinematic practice as well as theoretical writings avoids both Adorno's elitist distrust in the mass media and the Lacanian tendency to ontologize (and, thus, ahistoricize) the constitution of individual subject. Instead, combining nostalgic modernism and a radical, a-teleological eclecticism that can be called postmodern, Kluge aligns his paradigm to a longer, 'geological' kind of hope (Bloch), the urhistory of subterranean wishes, the could be axes of history. If the postmodern era is characterized by the atrophy of the historical, the end of history, Kluge's privileging of utopian imagination acquires a political urgency that need not be restricted to the ruffled context of Germany.

### *Conclusion*

Is Kluge's cinema an example of postmodernism? Peter Lutze in his book, *Alexander Kluge: The Last Modernist* critiques me for having placed Kluge's work closer to postmodernism than Brechtian political modernism in my monograph *Postmodernism/ Encounter with History: The Cinema of Alexander Kluge* (1989). Lutze reads my understanding of Kluge's work as a project of redemption that excavates the innumerable histories against the repression of History as relativism or, worse, another example of end of history (see Lutze, 1998: 141-2). Very much as in this paper, the notion of postmodernism that guided my

monograph is one that has been aphoristically spelt out by Lyotard: “A work can be modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism so understood is not modernism at its end but in a nascent state, and this state is recurrent” (1984), an insight to which he himself has not, however, been always true. The postwar culture industry’s generalized integration of aesthetic and intellectual production into commodity production not only took away the high ground from which modernism’s culture asserted its critical distance from bourgeois society but has also meant by the same token a need for reframing the avant-garde. Hal Foster, who had earlier (1985) divided the arena of postmodernism into neo-conservative and post-structuralist (the first characterized by a rapprochement with the market and the pop and produces art-historical kitsch, the second marked by numerous interventions into the centred subject of representation and history) reads in his article ‘Postmodernism in Parallax’ the course of modernism in terms of parallaxic double-binds of which postmodernism is the latest example. Foster argues that since the quintessential modern question is: ‘who are we?’, any attempt to radicalize the modernist framework can only take the form of parallax, which he also calls ‘the multiplying structures of deferrals’. In surrealism’s bid to answer the this quintessential question differently, what resulted, Foster argues, is a double search for the unconscious and the other. The surrealists announced that they too – as moderns given over to object desire – were primitives. Thus the cultural other was not examined but valorized. Later, the Nazis would turn around this valorization of the ‘primitive’ into sheer abjection (Foster, 1993). (Interestingly, much later – in the 1980s – Jameson made the same conflation of the unconscious and the third world. See, Jameson: 1984). Meanwhile, after its pronounced death in the 70s, the subject returned, initially as inner city and subsequently as different subjectivities, sexualities, and ethnicities – the closefisted other name of which is the ‘New World Order’. The mere recounting of the third world in the first and vice versa does not shock anymore, especially since hybridity and heterogeneity became favoured words of multinational capital itself. The Chinese script in Derrida, Chinese encyclopedia in Foucault, Chinese women in Kristeva, Japan of Barthes, the other space of nomadism in Deleuze: are these only the haunted symptoms of Europe’s own theatre? The clues for a dialogic possibility perhaps lie in the history of anticolonialism, which united the world as much as colonialism did but from a different ethical & political standpoint. To what extent is Kluge’s work open to such possibilities? Kluge would like to maintain that his formal experiments are guided by a new sense of ethics, an ethics that emerged

from the devastations of the wars and the worldwide triumph of capitalism. Can such programmatic conception of history, the present of the past in the present avoid the history of anticolonialism reframed for a globalized world and a postcolonial Europe? In this new mapping, hindsight is a privilege that we unlearn as our loss. The angels fly backwards over the ruins, facing us to the front.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> The cinematic apparatus, as contemporary film theory has persuasively argued, provides the illusion of a present as well as of a different, absent time. Jean-Louis Baudry describes the ‘artificial psychosis’ produced in the ‘cine-subject’ by the “simulation apparatus”. “It can be assumed that it is this wish which prepares the long history of cinema: . . . perceptions which are really representations mistaken for perceptions.” (1986: 311).

<sup>2</sup> The English title is a sentimental shorthand for the longer German title, *The Assault of the Present on all other Forms of Time*.

<sup>3</sup> *The Knee*

On the earth there roams a lonely knee

It’s just a knee, that’s all

It’s not a tent, it’s not a tree

It’s just a knee, that’s all.

In battle, long ago, a man

was riddled through and through

the knee alone escaped unhurt

As if it were a taboo.

Since then there roams a lonely knee

It’s just a knee, that’s all.

It’s not a tent, it’s not a tree,

It’s just a knee, that’s all.

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