

An Aesthetics of Prolepsis

Sven Lütticken

In memory of Thomas Elsaesser

This Makes Me Want to Predict the Past is a black-and-white film by Cana Bilir-Meier, with a voiceover that includes the titular phrase as well as the line ‘This makes me want to remember the future’, along with many other variants of ‘This makes me want to...’ taken from the YouTube comments for Childish Gambino’s song *Redbone*.¹ Bilir-Meier’s short film shows young women in and around the Munich shopping mall where nine people were killed in a racist attack in 2016. In total, more than 200 people have been killed in Germany for racist motives since 1990. There is a memorial right outside the mall, opposite the Saturn electronics store, dark and grainy images of which can be gleaned in Bilir-Meier’s film.

Through photos and performed reenactments the film also references the 1982 play *Düşler Ülkesi* about migrant *Gastarbeiter*, on whose production the artist’s mother, Zühal Bilir-Meier, had worked. Whilst shown as a digital video, *This Makes Me Want to Predict the Past* was originally shot on Super 8 film stock, giving it not so much an aura of timelessness as of ‘out-of-timeness’. While the film does not dissolve chronology as such, it instills doubt about the direction of time’s arrow. The past has a habit of being all too predictable – or does it? What if there are historical genealogies to be unearthed that disrupt conventional narratives and formatted forms of commemoration? And what if the future, in turn, can already be remembered, and indeed commemorated, as a future of inequity, oppression, murder and massacres?

Contemporary art is marked by a profound interest in historiography and counter-history, in memory and commemoration – and in the decolonisation of institutional memory.² I will approach these matters here indirectly at first, by rereading a set of literary and cinematic practices from the 1960s and 1970s. These are European and (more or less/somewhat) German practices, mostly by male and (to some extent/in certain milieus) canonical writers and/or filmmakers. This might seem a slightly conservative constellation, but I hope to show that the works in question matter profoundly *now* – if we are attentive to anachronic resonances and disturbances in the canon. In the West Germany of the 1960s and 1970s, artists such as Peter Weiss or Alexander Kluge challenged the Cold War consensus by re-excavating the avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s and its

¹ The YouTube comments say ‘This song makes me want to...’; Bilir-Meier left out ‘song’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kp7eSUU9oy8> accessed 4 August 2020

² Among the discussions of this ‘historical turn’, see Mark Godfrey, ‘The Artist as Historian’, in *October*, No 120, Spring 2007, pp 140–172; Susanne Leeb, ‘Flucht nach nicht ganz vorn: Geschichte in der Kunst der Gegenwart’, in *Texte zur Kunst* no 76, December 2009, pp 29–45; and Eva Kernbauer’s forthcoming book *Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions Since 1990* (Routledge).

accompanying debates about artistic autonomy and political activism – debates that had intensified as fascism emerged triumphant. Just as these historical practices and discussions echoed in the post-war Bundesrepublik, haunted by the disavowed memory of Nazism and the Holocaust, so I am interested in the ways in which such post-war artistic production and discourse can disturb the all too German present.



Cana Bilir-Meier, *This Makes Me Want to Predict the Past*, 2019, film still from digitized Super 8 film, courtesy of the artist

Permanent Pergamon

On 19 October 1965, Peter Weiss's play *Die Ermittlung* (The Investigation) premiered simultaneously in a number of West and East German venues, including Erwin Piscator's Freie Volksbühne in West Berlin, and across the Wall in the Volkskammer – the German Democratic Republic (GDR)'s parliament.³ Based in Stockholm since 1939, Weiss was present in the cultural and intellectual spheres of both countries, although arguably his most important forum was provided by the West German Suhrkamp publishing house and the liberal and leftist media landscape in which it was such an important actor. For *Die Ermittlung*, Weiss condensed the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials into a spoken 'oratorio' in eleven 'cantos' in which witnesses present a chilling tableau of life (or of survival rather) in the extermination camp, including their own implication in the necropolitical system. If the play is documentary in nature, Witness 3 speaks for the author when, in the 'Gesang von der Möglichkeit des Überlebens' (chant of the possibility of survival), he elaborates on how the guards

³ On the reception of *Die Ermittlung* in East and West, see the documentation and analysis in Christoph Weiß, *Auschwitz in der geteilten Welt: Peter Weiß und die 'Ermittlung' im Kalten Krieg*, St, Ingbert, 2000 (two volumes); in 1966, the play was televised (in different stagings) in both East and West Germany

and inmates were both part of the system, how they shared a cultural heritage and had fought for the same nation – until some of them had been ‘appointed’ inmates instead of guards. *Die Ermittlung* is a staged, carefully composed re-enactment of a trial that turns the theatre into a Schillerian *moralische Anstalt* (moral institution), but with a Brechtian political twist. As Witness 3 emphasises, the camp felt oddly at home as a prolongation of the very society which had created its conditions, and that this can happen again, in even more ‘efficient’ future institutions.⁴

Going beyond a ritualistic ‘Never Again’, Weiss takes aim at the structural antinomies and historical continuities of capitalism, from the Third Reich to the Bundesrepublik. This made the play perfect for ideological exploitation by the GDR – a state in which Weiss desperately wanted to see a compromised form of socialism that might yet unfold its potential, as opposed to a sclerotic post-Stalinist regime.⁵ While *Die Ermittlung*’s reception got caught up in the Cold War, the play is not reducible to its GDR instrumentalisation – as is shown by its equally problematic transformation into a pillar of official post-1990 German *Erinnerungskultur* (memorial culture). As the artist Eran Schaerf notes, the verb *Erinnern* suggests forms of subjective and self-affirming remembrance or recollection, as opposed to a more critical, thoughtful and situational *Gedenken*, or commemoration.⁶ Readings of *Die Ermittlung* in the local parliaments of Lower Saxony (2009) and Bremen (2013) inadvertently recall the Volkskammer reading of 1965.

In the Cold War, capitalism was stabilised at the cost of neocolonial proxy wars in the ‘Third World’. In 1967, Weiss participated in the Russell Tribunal on the Vietnam War in Stockholm. Whereas *Die Ermittlung* (for which Weiss actually considered the title *Das Tribunal* at one point) was a theatrical re-enactment of the Auschwitz trials, the Russell Tribunal took aim at American military action and alleged war crimes through the *pre*-enactment of a justice to come, of an ‘actual’ trial with juridical agency.⁷ As a trial-by-media, this was a form of *Gegenöffentlichkeit* (counter-publicness). In Harun Farocki’s 1979 television portrait *Zur Ansicht: Peter Weiss*, the writer recalls his 1968 visit to Vietnam and the effects of witnessing the Vietnamese struggle on his own concept of art and on the conception of his monumental three-part novel, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (*The Aesthetics of Resistance*). Weiss noted how culture was part of daily life in Vietnam during the war, even during bombing raids; there would always be some poetry reading or a theatre troupe staging some play. One may scoff at this as a romantic-productivist fantasy, as an avant-garde wish fulfillment by a Western writer, but it is in keeping with a general problematisation of an institutionalised ‘autonomous art’, which had become ideologised as a unique selling point of the Free West in the context of the Cold War.

Around 1968–1970, many artists and theorists looked back at Brecht, Benjamin, Tretyakov and Heartfield to develop a neo-productivist notion of art as transformative avant-garde practice; art as

⁴ See Peter Weiss, *Die Ermittlung: Oratorium in 11 Gesängen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1965, pp 85–86

⁵ See Weiß, *Auschwitz in der geteilten Welt*, op cit, Vol 1, p 210

⁶ See Eran Schaerf, ‘Verblendet beim Erinnern der Gegenwart? Frag Franz’, in *Merkur*, 3 January 2021 <https://www.merkur-zeitschrift.de/2021/01/03/verblendet-beim-erinnern-der-gegenwart-frag-franz/>

⁷ The *Das Tribunal* title is documented by Weiß in *Auschwitz in der geteilten Welt*, op cit, p 123; with Peter Limquico, Weiss edited the Russell Tribunal’s proceedings: *Prevent the Crime of Silence: Reports from the Sessions of the International War Crimes Tribunal Founded by Bertrand Russell*, London/Stockholm/Roskilde, London 1971

engine of a cultural revolution in the context (and in the service) of a social and political revolution. Weiss, who was part of those milieus, was likewise infected with revolutionary fervour.⁸ By the time the first volume of *The Aesthetics of Resistance* came out, in 1975, it was no longer tenable that the situation in the West was (proto-) revolutionary, or that guerilla tactics from the global South could be transplanted to Europe. *The Aesthetics of Resistance* resonated in part because it was anything but sloganesque, and because it was a painstaking inquiry into the failure of the antifascist leftist vanguard of the 1930s. It is certainly partisan, but it sides first and foremost with memory itself, performing a properly materialist *Gedächtnisarbeit* (memory work) that seeks to keep the dialectic in motion and the future open – all defeats, suicides and genocides notwithstanding.

The novel's narrator is a displacement of the author. The son of a Hungarian-Jewish factory owner, Weiss had opted for the life of an artist as a young man in the 1930s and become proletarianised in the process. In contrast, Weiss's first-person narrator was born a proletarian; he and his comrades are workers who try to educate themselves, who read voraciously and debate constantly. The famous first 'block' of text sees the small group visit the Pergamon Museum in Nazi Berlin, on the 22nd of September in 1937, to study and debate the Pergamon Altar with its frieze depicting the battle of the gods against the giants – a writhing allegory of Pergamon's rulers' victories, of 'the victory of the aristocrats over an earthbound mix of nations'.⁹ The first pages are



Pergamon Museum, Berlin, GDR postcard from the 1960s

⁸ See, for instance, Peter Weiss, 'Che Guevara!', in *Kursbuch* no 11, *Revolution in Lateinamerika*, January 1968, pp 1–6

⁹ Peter Weiss, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, Suhrkamp, Berlin, 2016, p 15. My references are to the first volume, which appeared in West Germany in the Suhrkamp Verlag in 1975. Volumes two and three followed in 1978 and 1981, respectively – later to be combined into a single volume. A somewhat diverging complete edition in one volume appeared in the GDR in 1983, in the Henschel Verlag. While Weiss's descriptions of Stalinist politics during the 1930s was sensitive stuff for the East German Communist Party (SED), the book was not censored, and shortly before his death Weiss was able to correct questionable edits made by Suhrkamp, in the third volume in particular. The 2016 single-volume Suhrkamp edition has been compiled on the basis of these two prior versions. English translations here are from Peter Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, Joachim Neugroschel, trans, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2005, p 8.

an *ekphrasis* that brings the mythical scenes into the antagonistic present. The Hellenistic *Pathosformeln*, to use Aby Warburg's term, encapsulate a transhistorical event that is the very principle of history itself: what the frieze shows the workers, as opposed to what it showed bourgeois or fascist publics, was a perpetual class struggle. Weiss's leftist reading of the frieze was, of course, also an intervention in the monumental work's reception history since its rediscovery and transport to the capital of the new German Empire, where it went on public view in the early 1880s, to be housed in the current Pergamon Museum by 1930. Having been moved to the Soviet Union at the end of World War II, the frieze was restituted to the Pergamon Museum, now situated in the GDR, in 1959. This is the site where it remains in the reunified country, calls for restitution to Turkey notwithstanding.¹⁰

Later blocks of Weiss's novel see an ongoing conversation about Greek mythology and ancient as well as modern art, about art's ideological instrumentalisation, and about emancipatory study ('From the very outset, our studying was rebellion').¹¹ The content of *The Aesthetics of Resistance* is shaped by its context: the 1930s attempt to forge an anti-fascist Volksfront or Popular Front, which saw the Moscow-led Comintern enter into coalitions and alliances with moderate left-wing parties. Throughout, this endeavour is shown to be fraught with difficulties that have deep historical roots; at one point, the fatal opposition between anarchists and communists in the Spanish Civil War is traced back to the Marx/Bakunin opposition and the split in the First International. Even if this project was politically doomed, however, it is intellectually productive for those workers who refuse to become doctrinaire ideologues: 'It was by fighting out conflicts, contradictions that we found what we had in common. There had been rejections, difficulties, and always the striving to pass through thesis and antithesis in order to achieve a condition that was valid for both of us. Just as divergences, disagreements gave rise to new ideas, so too did every action emerge from the clash of antagonisms.'¹²

This is also an apt characterisation of the discussions about art that run through *The Aesthetics*, with speakers taking different positions on modernism, for example. Was the autonomisation of modern art a refusal to take political responsibility?¹³ Did modern artists claim artistic independence so that they could remain in the service of the powers that be, even while seemingly keeping their hands clean?¹⁴ Such suspicions notwithstanding, the Nazis' attacks on modern art suggested to some that modern painting ('Max Ernst, Klee, Kandinsky, Schwitters, Dalí, Magritte') could be seen as a 'dissolution of visual prejudices', an act of aesthetic sabotage with profound political implications.¹⁵

¹⁰ For this reception history, see, for instance, Lionel Gossman, 'Imperial Icon: The Pergamon Altar in Wilhelminian Germany', in *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol 78, No 3, 2006, pp 551–587; Alina Payne, 'Portable Ruins: The Pergamon Altar, Heinrich Wölfflin, and German Art History at the fin de siècle', in *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No 53/54, Spring/Autumn, 2008, pp 168–189; as well as an earlier article by Max Kunze that includes a discussion of Weiss's *Aesthetics*: 'Wirkungen des Pergamonaltars auf Kunst und Literatur', in *Forschungen und Berichte* 26, 1987, pp 57–74

¹¹ Weiss, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, op cit, p 67; English translation from *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, op cit, p 45

¹² Ibid, p 157; translation from *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, op cit, p 109

¹³ The phrase is '*Verselbstständigung und Isolierung*'; ibid, p 91

¹⁴ Ibid, p 91

¹⁵ Ibid, p 71

Both concerning art and relating to other matters, Weiss's narrator distinguishes between a party line decreed from above and the reality on the ground, where the militants are far less consistent and prone to doubt and generosity – even if, as the military situation in the Spanish Civil War gets more desperate and as Stalin's Moscow trials unfold, as former heroes of the Revolution and the Soviet avant-garde are sentenced and silenced, a climate of uncertainty and fear takes hold. Mayakovsky's suicide looms large. Even so, with the major capitalist democracies busy either appeasing Hitler or staying studiously neutral, the party appears to be the last bulwark against fascism. 'We are expecting a world war, so no word that I utter can allow doubts about absolute agreement with our strategy.'¹⁶ There is no lack of forebodings, as in a passage about hearing the ominous sounds of the *Anschluss* on the radio: 'That night we began to understand what vast temporal expanses the fight would cover.'¹⁷ Then, as the Popular Front or People's Front in Spain collapses, there is the half-repressed awareness of the unimaginable: that the war is already lost (or that this episode of the ongoing war is already lost), as the beleaguered Soviet Union is about to withdraw its support.

These are moments of prolepsis; the narrator and other characters see the catastrophe coming because they know they are already in it.¹⁸ The literary device of prolepsis is a foreshadowing of events before their chronological occurrence; a 'flash-forward'. The proleptic temporality of *The Aesthetics of Resistance* also informs its debates about art. As the narrator puts it right in the beginning, discussing the Pergamon Altar: 'We looked back at a prehistoric past, and for an instant the prospect of the future likewise filled up with a massacre impenetrable to the thought of liberation.'¹⁹ Towards the end of the first volume, the narrator, about to leave Spain, visits the ruins of an ancient Temple of Diana. What could be a standard exercise in cultural tourism becomes a meditation on Ancient Greek colonialism in the Mediterranean, on history as a succession of wars and conquests and the rise of Rome, on the Greek gods surviving only as images on coins, on the ancient origins of capitalism and industrialism.²⁰ The return to Greek antiquity, then, almost closes the first volume, in a callback to the discussions about Pergamon at the outset.

Weiss's play *Marat/Sade* (1963) already had a deeply proleptic structure: in 1808, during the Napoleonic Empire, the incarcerated Marquis de Sade and his fellow inmates at the Charenton Asylum stage a play about the assassination of Jean-Paul Marat during the French Revolution, in 1793, with Weiss's Sade gloating at his fictional Marat and his vain hopes of a better future. While *Die Ermittlung* was a seemingly more straightforward documentary work of witness-bearing, here, too, Weiss inserted brief proleptic statements, and he inserted them into a trial taking place *in the audience's present*: Witness 3, for example, speaks in the now of the 1960s about a potential future,

¹⁶ Ibid, p 346; English translation from *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, op cit, p 245

¹⁷ Ibid, p 375; English translation from *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, op cit, p 266 (adapted by the author)

¹⁸ Robert Buch briefly comments on the proleptic traits of *The Aesthetics of Resistance* in *The Pathos of the Real: On the Aesthetics of Violence in the Twentieth Century*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland, 2011, p 115

¹⁹ Weiss, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, op cit, p 17; English translation from *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, op cit, p 9

²⁰ Ibid, pp 396–409

about even more ‘efficient’ future genocides – and perhaps these words are at least as resonant and disturbing today, in the present of 2021.²¹

Weiss’s narrator in *The Aesthetics of Resistance* is entangled in the mess of history and prone to illusions about the Party, but he has a clear-eyed sense of the gravity of the situation, of the immanent logic and ultimate program of fascism. Throughout the book, art returns as an ambiguous agent. The two final blocks of Volume I, after the excursion to the Temple of Diana, focus on Picasso’s *Guernica* (which the narrator and Ayschmann see as a reproduction in *Cahiers d’Art*), on Goya’s *The Third of May 1808*, Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People* and Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa*, as well as Robert Koehler’s 1886 canvas *The Strike*. Can modern art – compromised and contradictory, autonomous and *fait social* – be part of the historical process of self-emancipation?²² Can it help to put an end to the permanence of Pergamon? Failing that, is its task to bear witness to doomed forms of resistance?

Space Nazis at the New Bauhaus

Between January 1969 and April 1970, Alexander Kluge made a number of science fiction films, largely recording them at the Hochschule für Gestaltung (HfG) in Ulm.²³ In contrast to Weiss, the older exile, Kluge had experienced the collapse of Nazi Germany from the inside as a young teen. In post-war West Germany he became part of several artistic and intellectual networks with links to the pre-Nazi era and which had been profoundly marked by the fascist terror. In Frankfurt, during the 1950s, he served as legal counsel for the Institut für Sozialforschung (Institute for Social Research). In some of his later stories, he recalls Adorno’s and especially Horkheimer’s fear of the West German version of McCarthyism, and their attempts to hide the Marxist roots of Critical Theory. As one of the leading figures of the Neuer Deutscher Film, Kluge became one of the founders of the Institut für Filmgestaltung (Institute for Film Design) at the HfG in Ulm – the so-called ‘New Bauhaus’ founded by survivors from the milieu of the Weisse Rose resistance group who sought to reconnect with Weimar-era modernity.

The historical Bauhaus had exemplified a Western form of Productivism, with painters such as Kandinsky and Klee teaching not new generations of painters but the future designers of the modern world. With Max Bill guaranteeing a genealogical link to the pre-war Bauhaus, the HfG became a temple of precisely the kind of technocratic instrumental reason that Adorno and Horkheimer criticised: modern design and production methods were regarded as intrinsically good, democratic and progressive.²⁴ The Institut für Filmgestaltung, however, had a certain degree of autonomy. Kluge and Edgar Reitz insisted that film could not be organised along the same formal

²¹ Weiss, *Die Ermittlung*, op cit, p 86

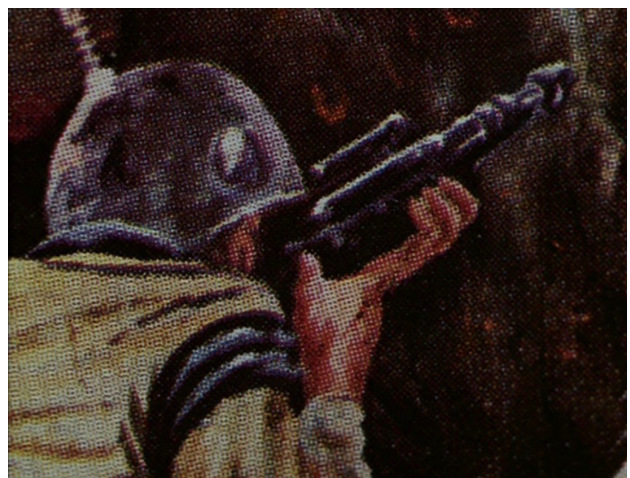
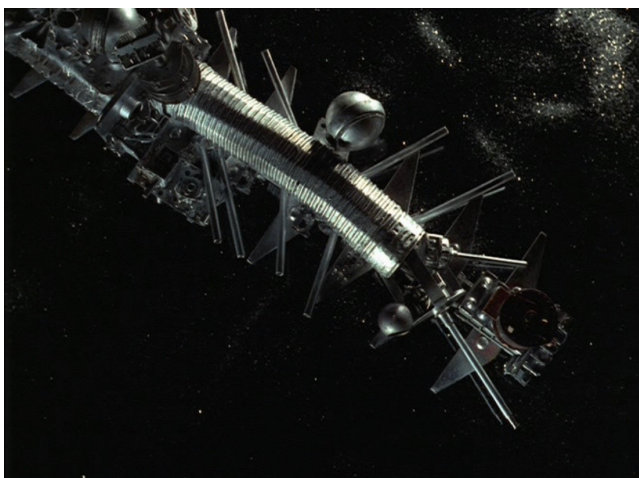
²² See Weiss, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, op cit, pp 409–446

²³ See Peter C Lutze, *Alexander Kluge: The Last Modernist*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, Michigan, 1998, p 225 (note 9); Kluge continued to tweak the films or make new items for his television programmes on the basis of the material well into the 1990s

²⁴ On Adorno’s contacts with the HfG, see Christiane Wachsmann, *Vom Bauhaus beflügelt: Menschen und Ideen an der Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm*, aedition, Stuttgart, 2018, pp 73–74

principles of design. In 1967, the Institute became an independent foundation (*eingetragener Verein*), which allowed it to function after the state of Baden-Württemberg closed the HfG in December of 1968.²⁵ For a certain period, the building on the Kuhberg subsequently became a commune run by (former) students, and Kluge's institute still used the workshops and facilities.²⁶ Production on his sci-fi films started in January 1969, in the ex-HfG.

This was the period that saw the first moon landing (20 July 1969) as well as a thriving production of sci-fi in various media. In Germany, where the *Perry Rhodan* series of pulp novels was virtually synonymous with science fiction, the genre had a profoundly reactionary reputation among the (New) Left.²⁷ A 1970 episode of the left-wing television programme *Monitor* attacked the titular character of *Perry Rhodan* as a thinly disguised Hitler, as a space imperialist set on conquering the galaxy. Kluge did not countenance such blunt exercises in ideology critique, delivered with dour-faced self-righteousness.²⁸ While acknowledging the reactionary tropes in pulp fiction, Kluge insisted on the need to engage with and to reimagine them. Hence, in the feature-length films *Der große Verhauf* (The Big Mess) and *Willi Tobler und der Untergang der 6. Flotte* (Willi Tobler and the Decline of the 6th Fleet), as well as in a number of short films and in the related, slightly later book *Lernprozesse mit tödlichem Ausgang* (Learning Processes with a Deadly Outcome), he incorporated images from *Perry Rhodan* as well from the *Landserhefte* – hugely popular far-right dime novels that glorified the 'heroic sacrifices' of German soldiers in World War II.²⁹



Film stills from Alexander Kluge's *Willi Tobler und der Untergang der 6. Flotte*, 1969–1972

Rather than creating an alternate universe, Kluge presents the future as a continuation, an exacerbation; rather than inserting moments of prolepsis, prolepsis becomes the structuring principle. If Ursula Le Guin famously argued that science fiction is not about extrapolating from

²⁵ Ibid, p 215; see also pp 218–237 on the HfG's closure and the subsequent use of the buildings

²⁶ Alexander Kluge, email to the author, 28 March 2019

²⁷ See, for instance, the dossier compiled by Jürgen Holtkamp, 'Die Eröffnung des rhodesischen Zeitalters oder Einübung in die freie Welt: Science Fiction-Literatur in Deutschland', in *Kursbuch* no 14, August 1968, pp 45–63; a somewhat more ambiguous fascination can be discerned in Hartmut Sander and Ulrich Christians, eds, *Subkultur Berlin – Selbstdarstellung, Text- Ton- Bilddokumente, Esoterik der Kommunen Rocker subversiven Gruppen*, März Verlag, Berlin, 1969, pp 42–51, 82

²⁸ Kluge, email to the author, 28 March 2019

²⁹ Ibid

the present, that it is not about the future but about imagining alternative worlds, the basic plot as outlined by Kluge at various points in the novel and films is practically a parody of extrapolation. After Earth has been blown up in the ‘Schwarzer Krieg’ (the Black War, 2011–2015), the military-industrial complex continues doing what it does best in outer space. ‘The Suez Canal Company survived the Black War only as an idea, since neither documents nor people found refuge in space; in 1956, it had already been dispossessed of its original capital object, the Suez Canal.’³⁰ This colonial corporation has thus made a transition to a galactic financial capitalism with the loss of its original investment; the process of accumulation hops from host to host, from the Isthmus of Suez to the metallic planet Dubna (via Russia), as the value-form colonises countries and then alien planets. Evoking the Institut für Filmgestaltung’s emancipation from its institutional host, the company became a Platonic entity. As a juridico-financial idea, it could go on to extract materials and value from different worlds.



Film still from Alexander Kluge’s *Willi Tobler und der Untergang der 6. Flotte*, 1969–1972

As *Lernprozesse mit tödlichem Ausgang* elaborates, a number of Nazi Generals – veterans of Stalingrad with medically prolonged lives – were instrumental in taking the war off-planet. Since they’d already lost the *Heimat*, losing planet Earth in the Black War was no big deal.³¹ The *Kessel* of Stalingrad is a motif that returns throughout Kluge’s oeuvre, to the point where it becomes uncomfortable: it is as though for this former assistant of Adorno’s it was not Auschwitz, but the fate of Germans in Stalingrad that was the haunting event needing to be revisited time and again. However, in the context of Kluge’s space opera, the role of the *Ostfront* veterans produces a compelling if ambiguous

³⁰ Alexander Kluge, ‘Lernprozesse mit tödlichem Ausgang’ [1973], in *Chronik der Gefühle, Band II: Lebensläufe*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2004, p 876; translation by Christopher Pavsek, *Learning Processes with a Deadly Outcome*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 1996, p 55

³¹ Ibid, p 842

engagement with history as continuity – the continuity of the master–slave dialectic, of exploitation and extermination. The use of images from ideologically dodgy schlock suggests the stifling presence of the past, of *Ewiggestrigkeit*, as the order of the day.

In the 1972 theoretical volume *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung* (Public Sphere and Experience), Kluge and Oskar Negt counter Habermas's idealisation of the bourgeois public sphere with an investigation into proletarian forms of publicness, defined in terms of the 'autonomous, collective organization of the experience specific to workers'.³² Negt and Kluge put Marx back into the Frankfurt School even while going against the orthodox Marxist focus on abstract labour power by foregrounding the libidinal dimensions of labour and the role of fantasy. Under capitalism, 'fantasy' becomes a form of false consciousness, as in the *Perry Rhodan* dime novels, but fundamentally fantasy is a 'specific means of production' that can never be fully appropriated by capitalism; it pushes to change relations among people and between humans and nature, and to reappropriate history.³³

In their 1981 follow-up volume, *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (History and Obstinacy), Kluge and Negt analyse the human being as a self-regulating '*Mangelmutant*' – a defective mutant, or mutant of lack, incapable of autonomous being and hence requiring constant social exchange.³⁴ Like Weiss, they engage with the historical *longue durée* in a manner that goes against the orthodox Marxist focus on modern capitalism as a specific system of production and exploitation. What ultimately gets reduced to abstract and alienated labour-power ('*Arbeitskraft*') is capital's always incomplete capture of a volatile aggregate of different labour-capacities ('*Arbeitsvermögen*').³⁵ Such labour-capacities keep emerging and transforming under the impact of social and technological change. In the sci-fi register of Kluge's *Lernprozesse*, one motif is the emergence of such new labour-capacities through posthuman mutation: to be able to work on the metal planet Dubna, where gravity is much higher than on earth, women develop 'reinforced lower legs', and their heads and necks are pressed down into their shoulders. Customs inspectors develop protruding eyes that see everything. Meanwhile, since it is forbidden to hunt for slaves and to traffic in humans, and since no alien life has been found, mutinying units of the fleet are declared 'non-human life-forms', so they can be enslaved – in a galactic repetition of a historical process on earth.³⁶ Kluge presents pithy speculative comedies in which the '*Mangelmutant*' keeps branching off and spawning new mutations, from bio-enhanced space Nazis to forced labourers with massive ankles. This is Hegel's (or Kojève's) master–slave dialectic as cosmic comedy.³⁷

³² Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung: Zur Organisationanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer Öffentlichkeit*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1972, p 59; English translation by Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel and Assenka Oksiloff, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward and Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1993, p 28

³³ Ibid, p 67; see also pp 290–294. In the context of the post-war West-German welfare state, Kluge – the lawyer – sought to create conditions in which such a reappropriation could take place, in however compromised and imperfect a form, using public subsidies and legal loopholes, and taking advantage of the situation at the ex-HfG.

³⁴ Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, Frankfurt am Main, 1981, p 23; for an extensive comparison of *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* and *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, see Richard Langston, 'The Work of Art as Theory of Work: Relationality in the Works of Weiss and Negt & Kluge', in *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, Vol 83, No 3, 2008, pp 195–216

³⁵ See Negt and Kluge, *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, op cit, pp 88–114

³⁶ See Kluge, 'Lernprozesse mit tödlichem Ausgang', op cit, pp 864–865, 878–881

³⁷ A related book, *Projekt Groß Weiss-Afrika*, charts an inept last-ditch effort to consolidate white colonial holdings in Africa in what was then the just-future of the mid-1970s; *Projekt Groß Weiss-Afrika* was part of the original publication of *Lernprozesse mit tödlichem Ausgang* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1973), which, to confuse matters, contained much more than just 'Lernprozesse mit tödlichem Ausgang'

In keeping with what Thomas Elsaesser has called the ‘patchwork *Gesamtkunstwerk*’ of Kluge’s overall practice, as well as with the Ulm film institute’s interest in hybridity, Kluge’s space films are jumpy montages of disparate materials.³⁸ Both the space films and the *Lernprozesse* novel contain appropriated images, which suggests that readers and viewers might be regarded as authors in their own right, as activated and productive spectators who may go on to appropriate the Klugean work in unpredictable ways.³⁹ Nonetheless, Elsaesser has critiqued Kluge’s conception of authorship as being ultimately monological, and as marked by a compulsive repetition of similar plots performed by readymade, schematic characters who are barely more than names.⁴⁰ Bad outcomes seem preordained; learning curves end fatally. In Kluge’s extrapolatory work, the future has already always happened, which robs it of its proper futural dimension. In keeping with this, *Lernprozesse* is written in the past tense; this is a future that has always already happened.

The intertitles of the films tend to be in the present tense, suggesting that we are eye-witnesses. However, as they are not only composed of intertitles and of cheap and charming special effects (spaceships, alien planets) made in the HfG’s workshops, but also largely revolve around improvised scenes featuring a menagerie of bohemian actors, the science fiction films do introduce a sense of genuine collaboration and improvisation.⁴¹ The traces of the ‘relatively lively’ environment of the ‘autonomous’ ex-HfG are all over the films.⁴² In *Der große Verhaul*, footage of a performance by the band Amon Düül II (a product of the left-wing commune scene) is ‘integrated’ in what passes for the narrative through a title card stating that the band are playing on a spaceship destined for the Planet Krüger 60.

Willi Tobler und der Untergang der 6. Flotte is far superior to *Der große Verhaul*, thanks to a stronger narrative and Alfred Edel’s magnificent half-bewildered performance as the titular character – a cybernetician caught up in the galactic war. The film is marked throughout by a strong sense of joyful improvisation; Edel and Hark Bohm give the scenes with the leaders of the Sixth Fleet strategising against the *Geschichtstöterflotte* (history-killing fleet) a sense of possibly intoxicated chaos while clinging on to clipped snippets of Prussian phraseology. In sending a Krautrock band into space, Kluge’s extrapolatory sci-fi patchwork is loyal to a moment of lived utopia, intense and frequently draining as it no doubt often was – suggesting that there may yet be ways of making history otherwise, or of surviving ‘against the direction of the movement of history’.⁴³

³⁸ Thomas Elsaesser, ‘The Stubborn Persistence of Alexander Kluge’, in Tara Forrest, ed, *Alexander Kluge: Raw Materials for the Imagination*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2012, p 28

³⁹ As Kluge rather wonderfully puts it, ‘all people relate to their experience like authors – rather than managers of department stores’ (Alexander Kluge, ‘On Film and the Public Sphere’, in Forrest, *Alexander Kluge: Raw Materials for the Imagination*, op cit, p 34)

⁴⁰ Elsaesser, ‘The Stubborn Persistence of Alexander Kluge’, op cit, p 27

⁴¹ Even if there is no doubt that Kluge is the one trying to manage and structure the production, the very fact that he has kept re-editing *Willi Tobler* over the decades suggests that these films represent a limit case for his practice

⁴² Kluge, email to the author, 28 March 2019

⁴³ Kluge, ‘Lernprozesse mit tödlichem Ausgang’, op cit, p 829; English translation from Pavsek, *Learning Processes with a Deadly Outcome*, op cit, p xiii

History Lessons

Frequently working in Germany during the 1960s and 1970s, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet engaged with the German-speaking avant-garde of the early twentieth century in a number of film projects. Their short film *Einleitung zu Arnold Schoenbergs Begleitmusik zu einer Lichtspielszene* (Introduction to Arnold Schoenberg's Accompaniment to a Cinematographic Scene, 1972) takes its cues both from Schoenberg's 'autonomous' composition for a hypothetical movie scene, and from the composer's irate letters to Wassily Kandinsky. Schoenberg's 1929/30 'movie score' evokes 'drohende Gefahr, Angst, Katastrophe' in the tradition of *Programmusik*. Straub-Huillet suggest this mood reflects the composer's awareness of the rising fascist threat, and the extracts from two 1923 letters constitute a highly direct and chilling document of Schoenberg's visceral experience with antisemitism, and his sense of where this was leading Germany and Europe. Read out by the filmmaker and writer Günter Peter Straschek as a harangue in a somewhat halting diction, reflecting his and Straub-Huillet's engagement with Brecht's notion of acting not as emoting but as citing or quoting, Schoenberg's letters eviscerate Kandinsky. While Kandinsky had invited him to join the Bauhaus, Schoenberg could not turn a blind eye to Kandinsky's antisemitic outbursts, which he regarded as legitimising and announcing pogroms.

Straschek's own 1970 short *Zum Begriff des 'Kritischen Kommunismus' bei Antonio Labriola (1843–1904)* was produced with financial and material support from Jean-Marie Straub and Alexander Kluge's Institut für Filmgestaltung. Straschek would go on to produce the five-part television documentary *Filmemigration aus Nazideutschland* (Film Emigration from Nazi Germany, 1975), on the exodus of (mainly Jewish) filmmakers during the Nazi era. As with Weiss's *Die Ermittlung*, witnesses speak in a future they were not meant to see, a future thankfully different from what was scripted at the Wannsee Conference, yet hardly devoid of unsettling continuities. In contrast to the official, idealising narrative about the post-war European unification, the European Union started out as an attempt to consolidate the various countries' colonial holdings.⁴⁴ Continuities with historical fascism came to the surface when the Paris police, led by Vichy collaborator Maurice Papon, massacred protesting Algerians in 1961, throwing the bodies into the Seine. And of course the Western European nations had little compunction in supporting any number of American neo-imperialist wars by perfecting the fine art of looking the other way.

Having perfected the art of whataboutism, the GDR exploited such continuities by branding its wall of infamy an 'antifaschistischer Schutzwall' (antifascist bulwark). In the West, a similar sense of persistence – to the point of identity between the pre-war and the post-war – fuelled the RAF (Rote Armee Fraktion). Straschek was a student at the Berlin film academy in 1966/67, together with Harun Farocki, Hartmut Bitomski and Holger Meins – the latter would later join the RAF and die in Wittlich prison in 1974. In the milieus in which Straschek moved, it was not always clear whether the urgent critique of the capitalist basis of fascism and of the *Nachleben* of Nazism in Germany, as well as the ongoing export of violence to the (post-)colonies and minorities, did not lead to a total

⁴⁴ See Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson, *Eurafrica: The Untold Story of European Integration and Colonialism*, Bloomsbury, London, etc, 2014

collapse of distinctions.⁴⁵ Straschek, however, went beyond slogans and sought out historical witnesses. The 2018 exhibition ‘Here and Now: Günter Peter Straschek’ at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne dedicated an exhibition to Straschek.⁴⁶ In a spatial setting designed by artist Eran Schaerf, the *Filmemigration* series and other films by Straschek were screened at the thin end of wedge-shaped rooms. The scenography was precise and precarious, like unfinished constructivist stage sets, foregrounding their temporary nature even while revealing archaeological layers of depth; displays with documents were inserted into some of the walls. Schaerf’s design thus constituted an ephemeral memorial for memory-work that had been lost to history. Among the films was Straub-Huillet’s *Einleitung zu Arnold Schoenbergs Begleitmusik zu einer Lichtspielszene*, which made Straschek’s vocal channelling of Schoenberg as strong a presence in the exhibition as the (often deeply affecting) elderly talking heads in *Filmemigration*.



Straub-Huillet’s *Einleitung zu Arnold Schoenbergs Begleitmusik zu einer Lichtspielszene* (1972) in the exhibition ‘Here and Now: Günter Peter Straschek’ at Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 2018, image courtesy of Eran Schaerf

As clear-eyed as Schoenberg’s analysis of antisemitic *Ressentiment* was, in the *Einleitung* film Danièle Huillet and Peter Nestler pit his refusal to address the capitalist roots of fascism against Brecht’s communist analysis. Schoenberg *saw it coming*, but in contrast to Brecht he did not arrive at a practical, actionable understanding of the underlying political and economic logic. It could be argued that Brecht was all too eager to use ‘capitalism’ as the monocausal magic word that explains everything, while Schoenberg may have had a clearer sense of the deep time of antisemitism.

⁴⁵ While increasingly one-sided and one-eyed in his anti-Achtundsechziger crusade, Wolfgang Kraushaar has provided valuable accounts of antisemitic elements in German left-wing terrorism; see in particular his *Die Bombe in jüdischen Gemeindehaus*, Hamburger Edition, Hamburg, 2005

⁴⁶ See *Hier und Jetzt im Museum Ludwig: Günter Peter Straschek*, Julia Friedrich, ed, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne, 2018

Nonetheless, a Brechtian analysis could provide a basis for accounting for the modern biopolitical or necropolitical operationalisation of antisemitism in the framework of ‘scientific’ modern race theory. In any case, for Straub-Huillet – who end their short film by accompanying Schoenberg’s *Lichtspielszene* music with images of atrocities from the massacring of the Paris Commune via Nazi gas chambers to Vietnam – Brecht’s left-wing critique did not in any way negate the composer’s achievements, instead serving to bring out the productive problematics of his work.

The duo’s 1974 film version of Schoenberg’s unfinished opera *Moses und Aaron*, shot in a Roman arena in Italy, presents the people of Israel as a small chorus, often compactly grouped rather than arranged in a ‘cinematic’ manner. This Moses is the quintessential rarified intellectual or artist, a Schoenberg in antique drag. He thinks and sees higher truths, but he cannot talk to the people, for which he needs Aaron – and, as the episode of the Golden Calf shows, it can be dangerous to have to rely on translators, on mediators. Gilles Deleuze sought to encapsulate the political dimension of Straub-Huillet (and Resnais) with the phrase ‘the people are missing’,⁴⁷ arguing that ‘Third world and minorities gave rise to authors who would be in a position, in relation to their nation and their personal situation in that nation to say: the people are what is missing. Kafka and Klee had been the first to state this explicitly.’⁴⁸ If the reference to Klee – as opposed to Kafka, for instance – may seem surprising, Deleuze refers to a striking comment in a 1924 lecture by Klee: ‘*uns trägt kein Volk*’, there is no people to carry us. Although Klee added that at the Bauhaus, they were ‘looking for a people’.⁴⁹

‘The people’ are even more strikingly absent from more explicitly political Straub-Huillet films, among them *Geschichtsunterricht* (History Lessons, 1972), based on the unfinished Brecht novel *Die Geschäfte des Herrn Julius Caesar*. If Weiss goes against Marxist orthodoxy by stressing the ‘deep time’ of oppression over the historical specificity of capitalism as a distinct system, Brecht’s dressing-up of modern capitalism and imperialism in Roman garb can be read as a *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), even if it suggests a historical pattern of repetition. *Geschichtsunterricht* further adds another anachronic layer by showing a young man driving a car through the Rome of the 1970s in order to interview Ancient Romans played by actors in antique garb, delivering or citing Brecht’s monologues about the rise of Julius Caesar, who is seen as having risen to power in alliance with the ‘City’ of Rome, its business elite.⁵⁰ While a peasant who participated as a soldier in Caesar’s campaigns is also interviewed, and while the car drives through a cross-section of Roman quarters, the dominant monologues represent the speech of the victors, of masters – as written by an exiled communist playwright in the late 1930s.

⁴⁷ See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, trans, Athlone Press, London, 1989, p 216

⁴⁸ Ibid, p 217

⁴⁹ This 26 January, 1924, Jena lecture was posthumously published as ‘Über die moderne Kunst’ (Benteli, Bern-Bümpliz, 1945); see p 53. Using an imperfect translation, the English edition of Deleuze’s *Cinema 2* (p 215, note 41) renders the phrase as ‘the people are not with us’, whereas the French translation used by Deleuze says ‘Faute d’un peuple qui nous porte’; see Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L’image-temps*, Minuit, Paris, 1985, p 283. In 2009, ExtraCity in Antwerp organised a Straub/Huillet exhibition under the Deleuzian title ‘Of a People Who Are Missing’.

⁵⁰ Brecht’s incomplete *Die Geschäfte des Julius Caesar* (1938–1939) has a complex structure; in the *Rahmenhandlung*, a young lawyer seeks out witnesses of Caesar’s rise; in ‘Geschichtsunterricht’, this Roman lawyer has been turned into a young man in contemporary dress who anachronistically interviews ancient Romans



Film still from Straub-Huillet, *Geschichtsunterricht* (History Lessons), 1972

There is little conventional acting in Straub-Huillet films; often, speech consists of *cited* words. While their written sources are usually from the twentieth century, they may refer back to Ancient Rome or the biblical Middle East. The citational speech acts often take place in or against layered landscapes – the result of centuries of (agri)cultural toil, exhibiting the languid clamour of being. As Deleuze noted, Straub-Huillet's films are marked by a stratigraphic, archaeological, telluric image.⁵¹ In *Fortini/Cani* (1976), such landscapes accompany the Italian communist writer Franco Fortini's reading from his own 1967 book about the Six Day War, a soaring indictment of McCarthyite attacks on those who refused to join in the obligatory support for Israel. In contrast to America's neo-colonial war in Vietnam, the settler-colonial nation state in Palestine seemed to represent a form of unassailable, 'good' imperialism that one critiqued at one's peril. His family background showing some similarity to Weiss's, Fortini reminisces in his text about his bourgeois-democratic Jewish father, a French-oriented Enlightenment liberal who was blindsided by the introduction of antisemitic policies under Mussolini. The distance from his father and the Judaic religion, to which his father at least paid the tribute of outward adherence, contributes to the understated pathos of *Fortini/Cani* – as does the fact that the writer is reading from his 1967 text at the end of the 'red decade', when it had become highly doubtful that the proletariat would live up to its foreordained role of Revolutionary Subject.

'Uns trägt kein Volk': this equally chilling and liberating diagnosis evokes the autonomous modern artist's isolation and possible descent into a minoritarian bohemianism from which the Party (which has History on its side) may offer temporary and dubious respite at best. To be sure, even in its

⁵¹ See Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p 243

negative mode, Klee's dictum still evokes the nineteenth-century reactionary, essentialising discourse on *das Volk*, as emblazoned in the Reichstag motto '*Dem deutschen Volke*', which Hans Haacke, for his installation in the Bundestag, replaced with the more inclusive '*Der Bevölkerung*' ('population', rather than unified 'people'). To little avail: the toxic discourse on *Volk* that was unleashed in 1989–1990 has propelled a rise of identitarian and neofascist movements. Constantly updated new normals legitimise daily violence. In this situation, Klee's dictum might be blended with a famous 1989 slogan to assert *Wir sind kein Volk*, but a population intent on unlearning the myths of national identity that have long been misused in history lessons.

Germany is a Room Full of Elephants

On the evening of 17 May 2019, visitors positioned themselves in front of a long white wall, illuminated by spotlights, in the large exhibition space of the Akademie der Künste in the Tiergarten, Berlin. Eran Schaerf's performance *Schnappschuss* (Snapshot) took the form of a disembodied voice seemingly coming from (behind) the wall, a voice claiming to be Walter Benjamin's *Storyteller*. Noting that soldiers in the American Civil War spoke of combat experience as 'seeing the elephant', the narrator muses that this elephant now seems to have morphed into another proverbial pachyderm: the 'elephant in the room'. When Israeli soldiers try to share their experiences of 'seeing the elephant', of dehumanising others and dehumanising themselves, and when the organisation Breaking the Silence tries to exhibit their photographs from the Occupied Territories, they are shut down by governments under pressure from – as the narrator sardonically puts it – 'Friends of Israel who don't have any Israeli friends'.⁵² The wall of the white cube becomes a projection screen for mental images evoked by the narrative about images that exist but must not be seen.

By coincidence, *Schnappschuss* was first performed on the same day the Bundestag condemned the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) movement – a symbolic act with toxic consequences for critical Israeli artists and intellectuals based in Germany, such as Schaerf, and for German public discourse in general. On the one hand, today's fascists relativise the Holocaust out of existence (cf AfD politician Alexander Gauland's infamous '*Fliegenschiss*' or 'flyspeck'); on the other hand, little McCarthy re-enactors in the political and cultural establishment tar artists and thinkers such as Walid Raad and Achille Mbembe with the brush of antisemitism for any perceived or real support for BDS. The effect is a disturbing taboo on any serious investigation of the industrial mass murder of the Holocaust in the context of the wider necropolitical project of modern 'scientific' racism in the colonial era, and of Germany's role in a post-World War II and post-1989 world order that is only seemingly post-colonial.

⁵² See Eran Schaerf, 'Schnappschuss', in Schaerf, *Mischmasch der Elefant*, published in the context of the exhibition 'Der Elefant im Raum', Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 2019, unpaginated; the first performance took place on the evening of 17 May 2019 during the opening and was repeated over the coming days



Eran Schaerf, *Schnappschuss*, Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 17 May 2019, photo courtesy of the author and Eran Schaerf

Seeking to assert their ideological submission to *Bundesrepublikanische* consensus on the backs of others, many German (ex-)leftists have become enthusiastic cheerleaders for imperialism, and help to make Germany a country where decolonial voices from the Middle East or Africa are silenced.⁵³ The once-respected art magazine *Texte zur Kunst* decided to accelerate its descent into intellectual, ethical and political bankruptcy with an ‘anti-anti-semitism’ issue that was in fact largely an anti-BDS issue, with the editors choosing to ‘target the marginalized struggle of a defeated people at a time when the far right is growing more capable, well-connected and audacious in Germany, accompanied by a resurgence of antisemitic tropes that need to be urgently and responsibly addressed’, as a number of artists and writers put it in a response.⁵⁴ Indeed, this year, in 2021, the vegan-chef-turned-antisemitic-QAnon-conspiracy-theorist Attila Hildmann tells his more than 100,000 followers on Telegram that the Pergamon Altar is in fact the Throne of Satan, and that Rothschild-trained Zionist Satanists such as Angela Merkel – who lives near the Pergamon Museum, in the heart of the capital of the reunified Germany – and other members of the elite gather there for nocturnal rituals involving human sacrifice and child abuse.⁵⁵ In such a situation, some deem it apposite to discredit any left-wing criticism of human right abuses, and to perpetuate an identification of Israel with ‘the Jewish people’ that benefits only the right.⁵⁶

⁵³ See Dominic Johnson, ‘Zum Schweigen gebracht’, in *die tageszeitung*, 3 May 2020 <https://taz.de/Debatte-um-Achille-Mbembe/!5679782/>; and ‘Rassistische Vorstellungen hängen nicht nur an Hautfarbe’, an interview with Mark Terkessidis by Jörg Häntzschel, in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 16 June 2020 <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/rassismus-deutschland-mark-terkessidis-1.4940017?reduced=true>

⁵⁴ See Dani Gal, Emily Jacir, Sami Khatib, Jumana Manna, Natascha Sadr Haghighian, Marc Siegel, ‘Response #1 to the postscript’, 18 September 2020, in *Texte zur Kunst Docs* <https://tzkdocumentation.wordpress.com/2020/09/24/reply-1-to-postscript-invitation/>

⁵⁵ See the screenshot of Hildmann’s Telegram account, 24 October 2020 <https://www.bz-berlin.de/berlin/mehr-als-70-objekte-auf-museumsinsel-beschaedigt>. In certain American far-right evangelical circles, the obsession with the Pergamon Altar as ‘Throne of Satan’ linked to Godless/liberal/socialist politicians goes back at least to the Obama years; see <https://stop-obama-now.net/obamas-shrine-to-satan/>

⁵⁶ As Eran Schaerf put it in his response to the *Texte zur Kunst* issue: ‘to characterise any boycott of Israel as an updated *Judenboykott* perpetuates the conflation of Israel and “the Jews”, with pontificating German politicians and opinion leaders denying the specific position(s) of Jews living outside

Nonetheless, there are those academics, activists and artists who are actively re-examining European and German history. For example, in *Marseille's Pyramid & The Devil's Garden: Part I (Pyramid)*, Heba Y Amin uses a Nazi pyramid in Egypt to investigate the African theatre of World War II: here, the war was a fight over colonies between European imperial powers. In fact, if 8 May 1945 is celebrated as the end of World War II, and if there is now a (justified and long overdue) effort to make it the official German Liberation day, it should be remembered that this very same day saw French colonial troops massacre Algerian protesters in Sétif and Guelma. To celebrate the one without commemorating the other is an exercise in hypocrisy.

For the NSU-Komplex Auflösen Tribunal, Cana Bilir-Meier produced the short film *Best court/En iyi mahkeme/Bestes Gericht*. NSU-Komplex Auflösen was a 'people's tribunal' in the tradition of the Russell Tribunals, taking issue with the way in which the German state apparatus tried to reduce the Neo-Nazi terrorist NSU – responsible for a racist killing spree that took ten lives – to a tiny cell, disavowing the role played by a support network and by the secret service. For a long time, the police had refused to consider the possibility that these were racist murders, as it fit a narrative about immigrant clans and gangs killing each other. In the video, Bilir-Meier watches episodes from the courtroom television show *Richter Alexander Hold* with an actress who played stereotypical 'migrant woman' roles in these fictionalised courtroom dramas. If people's tribunals are pre-enactments of a future justice that is as yet unattainable in the legal system, television shows such as *Hold's* prepare the ground for violence to come. The present is a continuous rehearsal of the future.



Cana Bilir-Meier, video still from *Best Court/En iyi mahkeme/Bestes Gericht*, 2017, courtesy of the artist

of Israel. As Schaerf avers, Germany needs Israel as "the state of Holocaust survivors" in order to keep perpetuating a rhetoric of *Wiedergutmachung* [reparation] that remains stuck in a loop, as if the course of history can be stopped through sheer rote repetition' (translation by the author); see Schaerf, 'Verblendet beim Erinnern der Gegenwart?', op cit

Several catastrophic accelerations ago, way back in 2009, Isabelle Stengers acerbically noted that those who insist that fighting capitalism is pointless are effectively saying that barbarism is our destiny.⁵⁷ As the social contract that underpinned the post-war *soziale Marktwirtschaft* ('social market economy') collapses under the neoliberal onslaught, with no new narratives after 'permanent growth and wealth for all' in sight, and the chickens of permanent war on the planet and subaltern populations coming home to roost, it is once again fascist movements and parties who seem to offer the most successful ideological product. Such movements – which we must *of course* always refer to with euphemisms such as 'right-wing populism' – proffer the alluring promise of saving privilege, however relative that privilege may be. It is a too-good-to-be-true offer: others can be made to pay so that you can stay on the right side of the divide between masters and slaves. Remembering coming barbarism may yet help us to rehearse differently, to introduce deviations that fork into different futures.

This is the complete version of an essay written for the catalogue of the exhibition '*Tell me about yesterday tomorrow*' at the NS-Dokumentationszentrum München (Munich Documentation Centre for the History of National Socialism), 28 November 2019–18 October 2020, curated by Nicolaus Schafhausen. At the request of the editors, the catalogue will contain a shortened version shorn of 'controversial' passages. The author nonetheless wishes to thank the editorial team of '*Tell me about yesterday tomorrow*' for their work, as well as the Harun Farocki Institut, Alexander Kluge and Eran Schaerf, and *Third Text Online* for documenting the full version.

Sven Lütticken teaches art history at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. He recently co-edited the volumes *Futurity Report* (with Eric C H de Bruyn, Sternberg Press, 2020) and *Deserting from the Culture Wars* (with Maria Hlavavojá, The MIT Press, 2020). Forthcoming are the book *Objections* (Sternberg Press) and the critical reader *Art and Autonomy* (Afterall).

⁵⁷ See Isabelle Stengers, *Au temps des catastrophes: Résister à la barbarie qui vient*, La Découverte, Paris, 2009, pp 61–62