

ON NEGATIVITY AND AESTHETICS: ALEXANDER KLUGE'S FAREWELL TO ADORNO

SOBRE NEGATIVIDADE E ESTÉTICA: O ADEUS DE
ALEXANDER KLUGE A ADORNO

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Resumen:

De acuerdo con Theodor W. Adorno, la relevancia del arte yace en su capacidad de develar, mediante su construcción formal, la apariencia de una realidad falsa, participando así en la auto-trascendencia de la razón. Sin embargo, el negativismo, la conceptualización de la reconciliación, y el formalismo estético de Adorno dificultan ver cómo puede el arte tener un rol en la transformación social. El objetivo del presente artículo es mostrar que el trabajo de Alexander Kluge puede ayudarnos a superar estas limitaciones. El arte, Kluge afirma con Adorno, debe apuntar al cambio social mediante la generación de una consciencia crítica. Sin embargo, contra Adorno, Kluge insiste en que esto no depende de la correcta interpretación de las obras. Para Kluge, se argumenta, el potencial emancipador del arte yace, más bien, en su posibilidad de activar las capacidades de los espectadores y de permitirles tener sus propias experiencias. Es esto lo que hace al arte participe de la reconfiguración de la razón y de la esfera pública.

Palabras Clave: *Theodor W. Adorno; Alexander Kluge; Estética de la recepción; Experiencia; Montaje.*

Abstract:

For Theodor W. Adorno, the relevance of art lies in its capacity to penetrate, through its formal construction, the semblance of a false reality, thereby participating in the self-transcendence of reason. This article argues that, despite the timeliness of this insight, Adorno's negativism, his conceptualization of reconciliation, and his formalist understanding of art have made it difficult to see how this account can explain art's relation to social change. Alexander Kluge's work, it is then argued, can help transcend such limitations in Adorno's aesthetics. Art, Kluge agrees with Adorno, should work toward social change through the construction of a critical consciousness. Yet, this is not to happen through their correct interpretation, as Adorno thought. Art's emancipatory potential, instead, lies in the power to engage the spectators' capacities, enabling them to have their own experiences. With this, Kluge contends, art participates in the reconfiguration of rationality and of the public sphere.

Keywords: *Theodor W. Adorno; Alexander Kluge; Reception Aesthetics; Experience; Montage.*

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INTRODUÇÃO

In 1962, Alexander Kluge, still a young civil servant, wrote the short fictional story of Anita G., a restless middle-class woman whose thieving and frauds lead her down a bureaucratic rabbit-hole— which takes her to prison, to a psychic breakdown, and ultimately to her (and her child’s) death.² Anita G. was to become the main character of Kluge’s first feature film, *Yesterday Girl* [*Abschied von Gestern*], premiered in 1966—a film whose title is better translated as ‘Farewell to Yesterday,’ and which skyrocketed Kluge’s career as a filmmaker. In one of the opening scenes of the film, Anita is caught stealing a co-worker’s sweater. This apparently unnecessary theft takes her to court, where a baffled judge, unable to comprehend her motives, asks: “Why did you have to steal a sweater at this time of year?” To this, Anita responds: “I’m cold even in the summer.”

That scene was interpreted by Theodor W. Adorno—Kluge’s friend and mentor—as speaking to the question of coldness, something that Adorno had written about and planned to expand on in a future essay that never materialized: “That incomparable scene from *Yesterday Girl* where Lexi says, in response to the reproaches of the examining magistrate, “I’m cold even in the summer,” has stayed with me. I’m deadly serious. This is what all of this is really about...”³

With this reference to ‘coldness,’ Adorno was implicitly pointing to one of the central ideas of his philosophy, one that was expressed in its most complete version in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the book he co-wrote with Max Horkheimer. There, Adorno and Horkheimer trace the origins of the modern forms of rationality—exemplified by the identity principle and the principle of exchange—back to a drive for self-preservation and a need to control and dominate the natural world. For Adorno, reason emerges through an engagement with the world in which, by

² HABERMAS, Jürgen. ‘The Useful Mole that ruins the Beautiful Yard.’ In **The Liberating Power of Symbols**. Philosophical Essays, trans. Peter Dews. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001, p. 116.

³ This is documented in a letter from 1967 Adorno sent to Kluge, reproduced in KLUGE, Alexander. ‘Straw in the Ice: Stories.’ **Grey Room** 53, (Fall 2013), p. 89.

applying concepts or by exchanging them as ‘equals,’ objects are reduced to their abstract, universal, and quantitative properties. The world becomes ‘knowable’—which here means predictable, controllable—because we filter every object encountered through conceptual patterns that, nevertheless, hide their qualitative differences and particularity. For Adorno, the price paid is the poverty of experience, and the coldness of a measurable reality. Coldness is how both Kluge and Adorno characterize an all-too rational world—one where rationality has been reduced to an empty shell that makes life abstract and predictable, and where people (unable to apprehend the qualitative nature of reality) are neither the owners of their own experience, nor the guides of their own history.

It is noteworthy that Adorno is speaking here about a film, a medium that throughout his career did not occupy a prominent place in Adorno’s aesthetics. Indeed, it is infamously known that Adorno frowned upon film, believing it to be captured by the ‘culture industry’ and thus unable to instantiate critique. As it is made clear in his debates with Benjamin—and the latter reflections in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and ‘On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening’—Adorno mainly believed film to be unsuitable as a medium for reflection because of its dependency on capital and because of its dependency on mechanical reproduction.⁴ However, the work of Miriam Hansen has shown that Adorno actually came to consider that, even within the current social and economic conditions, film could reach its critical potential.⁵ Adorno’s 1966 essay, ‘Transparencies on Film,’ is the best evidence for this. Crucially, Hansen notes that this ‘change of mind’ was not accidental, but was owed to Adorno’s discussions with Kluge.

Art occupies such a central role in Adorno’s Works because he considered it one of the last practices that could foster the capacities necessary for subjects to fight against coldness. Through the experience of art, Adorno believed, we would be able to recover the abilities—Adorno calls these ‘mimetic’—required to be surprised by

⁴ SAMANIEGO DE LA FUENTE, Ricardo. ‘Adorno’s Magic Lantern: On Film, Semblance, and Aesthetic Heteronomy.’ **New German Critique** 143, Vol. 48, No. 2, pp. 147-175. August 2021, p. 148.

⁵ HANSEN, Miriam B. “Introduction to Adorno, ‘Transparencies on Film’ (1966).” **New German Critique**. Nn. 24–25. pp. 186–98. 1981–82, p. 187.

the world, to experience it from new perspectives and thereby disclose it anew. Mimetic comportments, as preserved in art, could allow us to experience that which refuses to be subsumed under pre-conceived concepts or ideas. In so doing, individuals would be developing rationality further, something that would allow them to reach a more adequate comprehension of reality. Indeed, for Adorno art was eminently ‘rational,’ precisely because it showed the limits of conceptual or ‘identity’ thinking, and in doing so, already pointed beyond them. Through art, Adorno contends, individuals can transcend the semblance of a false reality, and orient their thinking against suffering and alienation.⁶ Hence why, as Albrecht Wellmer argues, for Adorno art “virtually becomes the last residue of reason [that is, for a *full* reason] in a rationalized world.”⁷

The understanding of art as a critical striving against the negativity of the world was highly influential for Kluge, one of today’s most prominent representatives of what we could call a ‘post-Adornian’ aesthetics. With Adorno, Kluge is aware that we live in an antagonistic society and of the necessity to reconcile theory and praxis, the individual and society. Yet, I speak of Kluge’s work as ‘post-Adornian,’ and not simply as ‘Adornian,’ because, in spite of the notable influence that Adorno had on Kluge’s thought, many of the presuppositions that ground Adorno’s work are problematized by Kluge. This is shown not least by the fact that Kluge’s preferred artistic medium was film. Indeed, as noted above, Adorno came to problematize his own assumptions regarding film because of Kluge. Kluge’s work showed Adorno that film’s dependence on technologies of mechanical reproduction did not mean that it uncritically reproduced the semblance of reality.⁸ Through techniques like montage film could actually depict reality’s underlying human relations.⁹

⁶ ADORNO, Theodor. **Aesthetic Theory**. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. London: Continuum, 2011, pp. 174: “What is in need summons [art’s] fulfilment and change...the fact that artworks exist signals the possibility of the nonexisting. The reality of artworks testifies to the possibility of the possible.”

⁷ WELLMER, Albrecht. ‘Reason, Utopia, and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.’ In **Habermas and Modernity**. Edited by Richard Bernstein, 35-66. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991, p. 48.

⁸ Cf. HANSEN, 1981-2; HANSEN, Miriam B. **Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno**. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

⁹ Cf. KLUGE, Alexander. ‘On Film and the Public Sphere.’ In **Alexander Kluge**. *Raw Materials for the Imagination*. Edited by Tara Forrest, 33-49. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012a, p. 46. Cf. ADORNO, Theodor, ‘Transparencies on Film.’ **New German Critique**. Trans. Thomas Y. Levin. No. 24–25, pp. 199–205. 1981-2, p. 203.

Furthermore, Kluge also problematizes (i) Adorno's belief that the current state of society is irrational and oppressive; and (ii) Adorno's dependence on a strong notion of truth and the correlated possibility of reconciliation—especially that between humans and nature—which appears as a possibility outside of history, instead of as a practically realizable goal. Kluge's aesthetics, as we will see, aim to reconnect art—and thus its promise of reconciliation—with social and political praxis.

Kluge therefore positions himself in an ambivalent relation to Adorno. Kluge insists—with Adorno—that our present understanding of reason is limited, and that we need to reconstruct rationality by making room for the sensual and material capacities of individuals. Art is so central to Kluge's thought because it can tap into the imagination and engage sensuous perception, putting these capacities at play with our logical and conceptual abilities. Kluge also retains from Adorno the emphasis on the need for critique to engage with reality—“Critique for Adorno is ... active and consequential repair work”—but gives it a more directly political turn, insisting that critique should become productive. Critique, argues Kluge, “does not solely happen in the annals of intellectual history.”¹⁰

Kluge's work shows nothing of Adorno's skepticism vis-à-vis the possibility of achieving a radical social transformation. This is because Kluge believes that just as there is a ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ in which reason turns into its opposite, there is also a dialectic—missed by Adorno—where the focus is the potential for rationality contained in the imagination and in the “spontaneity of sensuous perception.”¹¹ With this, however, Kluge parts ways with the more pessimistic moments in Adorno's thinking—those moments where the negativism blocked Adorno from unleashing the full potential of his theory. For Kluge, works of art stop being ‘messages in a bottle,’ as Adorno often referred to them, and become

¹⁰ KLUGE, Alexander. **Difference and Orientation**. An Alexander Kluge Reader. Ed. Richard Langston. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019, p. 453.

¹¹ KLUGE Alexander and EDER, Klaus. ‘Debate on the Documentary Film: Conversation with Klaus Eder 1980.’ In **Alexander Kluge**. Raw Materials for the Imagination. Edited by Tara Forrest, 197-208. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012, p. 203.

media with a much more practical (and yet no less transformative) goal: the reconfiguration of the public sphere.

This article introduces Kluge's work, and traces both the lines of continuity and the breaks between his and Adorno's work. I begin with an introduction to Adorno's aesthetics, focusing on three elements crucial for its comprehension: Adorno's negative depiction of reality and the corresponding contrast between instrumental and aesthetic reason; his formalist defense of aesthetic autonomy; and, finally, his account of truth and reconciliation. I then provide a criticism of Adorno's aesthetics, and argue that while we need to let go of Adorno's negative philosophy of history, we still need to insist, *with* Adorno, that art should aim at transgressing the instrumental logics of identity and exchange that structure our (false) societies. The latter should be done through a change in consciousness rather than through a direct intervention in politics or on the social structures.¹² I then analyze Kluge's work as a critique and reconfiguration of Adorno's philosophy and aesthetic theory. Kluge parts ways with Adorno's negative philosophy of history by positing a need for 'self-regulation' that runs parallel (and counterbalances) what Adorno saw as a drive for self-preservation. With this, Kluge can reinterpret the notion of 'reconciliation' in terms of the 'public sphere,' and is also able to unearth a new understanding of the emancipatory role of art. Art's emancipatory potential, according to Kluge, lies not in its capacity to formally criticize a negative reality, but in its ability to connect, through an appeal to the imagination, the spectators' conceptual and sensual capacities. Art can enable its spectators to have their *own* experiences and to engage critically and rationally with reality. In so doing, art participates in the reconstruction of rationality and the public sphere.

1. NEGATIVITY AND RECONCILIATION

¹² "Artworks," Adorno argues, "exercise a practical effect, if they do so at all, not by haranguing but by the scarcely apprehensible transformation of consciousness." ADORNO, 2011, p. 316.

One of the most influential and contested aspects of Adorno's philosophy is what has been called his 'negativism.' This position implies, in short, that existing reality is so 'evil,' so 'wrong,' that "we cannot know or even imagine what the good, reconciliation, utopia or a free society would look like."¹³ "The whole is the untrue," Adorno writes categorically in *Minima Moralia*.¹⁴ This means, as Werner Bonefeld argues, that "[n]either the capitalist nor the banker, nor indeed the worker, can extricate themselves from the reality in which they live and which asserts itself not only over them but also through them and by means of them."¹⁵ The interpretation of Adorno's negativism is, however, in dispute. Seen by some as a strategy that led Adorno away from politics, it is understood by others to be the only correct theoretical position within a society filled with contradiction and governed by the exchange abstraction. Regardless of the position one takes, the dispute itself points toward the fact that Adorno's negativism *is* crucial for understanding both the general orientation of his philosophical and aesthetic theories. Because of this, I briefly touch upon the philosophical grounds that justify Adorno's negative perspective on reality and the role of theory therein, captured by Adorno when, for example, he speaks of our "wretched existence," when he describes reality as "evil,"¹⁶ or when he speaks of the "chasm separating praxis from happiness."¹⁷

Adorno's negativism—i.e. his idea that reality is permeated by falseness—is derived from his philosophy of history, and the related characterization of capitalist society as antagonistic and contradictory—societies where the commodity form has become the organizing principle.¹⁸ According to his philosophy of history, expounded mainly in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the process through which the

¹³ FREYENHAGEN, Fabian. 'Adorno's Critique of Late Capitalism: Negative, Explanatory and Practical.' In **Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy**. Karin de Boer and Ruth Sonderegger (eds.), 175-192. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 178.

¹⁴ ADORNO, Theodor. **Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life**. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. London: Verso, 2005, p. 50. Translation amended.

¹⁵ BONEFELD, Werner. 'Negative dialectics and the critique of economic objectivity.' *History of the Human Sciences* Vol. 29(2), pp. 60–76. 2016, p. 63.

¹⁶ ADORNO, Theodor. **Negative Dialectics**, Translated by E.B. Ashton. New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 404; p. 218.

¹⁷ ADORNO, 2011, p. 15. Cf. Adorno, 2004, p. 11: "dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things."

¹⁸ Cf. ADORNO 2004, p. 189-192.

modern subject and the rationality that structures modern societies were constituted is irremediably linked with reification, i.e. with a process through which the subject loses its capacity to fully experience reality, which becomes something that can only be ‘measured’ quantitatively, a process that affects both the subject and the ‘known’ object, whose particularity is eclipsed.¹⁹ According to Adorno, the self-destruction of reason is part of a dialectical process that is triggered by humans’ instinct toward survival, which he usually refers to as the drive for ‘self-preservation.’²⁰ Driven by the need for survival, humans develop intellectual and practical tools—such as conceptual thinking or the principle of exchange²¹—that allow them to comprehend and control everything that that appears threatening or unknown.²² Because these mechanisms allow humans to better control and predict natural phenomena, they prove to be more effective for self-preservation than other forms of behaviour such as mimesis—a relation in which subjects imitate what stands opposed to them without trying to control it, and where there is an *affinity* with the ‘other’ which preserves its difference.²³

Mimetic comportments lose their legitimacy as forms of social organization, something that affects their power to raise truth claims or make moral evaluations. In order to survive, mimesis—which is also associated with the sensual and bodily forms of perception and thus with the ‘aesthetic’—becomes part of the *sui generis* sphere of art, which progressively also loses its potential to speak about truth or morality. The price paid for this separation between instrumental reason and the ‘aesthetic’ or mimetic is an ever-increasing tendency to subsume particularity under universal concepts and relations of exchange, thereby losing sight of the qualitative moments of experience.

¹⁹ O’CONNOR, Brian. **Adorno’s Negative Dialectic**: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004, p. 45-50.

²⁰ See, e.g., ADORNO, 2004, p. 179.

²¹ ADORNO, 2004, p. 146: “The barter principle, the reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification.”

²² Cf. ADORNO and HORKHEIMER, Max, **Dialectic of Enlightenment**. Philosophical Fragments. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 11: ‘Nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of the “outside” is the real source of fear.’

²³ ADORNO, 2004, p. 45.

Humans learn to relate to the world through the use of a conceptual apparatus and a means-ends rationality and an abstract principle of exchange whereby what remains ‘outside’ the subject (including the subject’s own labor) is tendentially reduced to its universalizable components, and so rendered abstract. At the historical level, this movement triggers a gradual reduction of reason to instrumental reason, and turns reality into a rationalized system of domination guided by abstract principles.²⁴ As Dirk Braunstein notes, with the hegemony of identity and exchange, reality socializes individuals through its conflict and antagonisms.²⁵ At the subjective level, then, the capacity for knowledge and the ability to fully experience the world are also hindered. Consciousness—forgetful of its mimetic aspect—becomes reified, that is, unable to perceive other human beings and human relations as anything more than ‘things,’ as means to a certain end.

For Adorno, the subject *does* develop through this process, yet, he contends, this development cannot be deemed truly rational since the subjects’ inner drives, desires, and needs are sacrificed, thereby blocking the possibility for happiness and self-realization. Humans are objectified, turning their impulses into “formally commensurable variations of the exchange relations.”²⁶ The subject that was supposed to be preserved, ends up being its own victim. The process that was supposed to end up in enlightenment and autonomy, ends up with oppression and alienation: “Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity.”²⁷

The instrumentalization of reason—through the principles of identity and exchange—has led to the present state of pervasive negativity.²⁸ However, in order to fulfil the promise of enlightenment what is needed is *not* to bypass rationality

²⁴ FREYENHAGEN, Fabian. **Adorno’s Practical Philosophy**. Living Less Wrongly. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 31. Cf. ADORNO, 2004, p. 251.

²⁵ BRAUNSTEIN, Dirk. **Wahrheit und Katastrophe: Texte zu Adorno**. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2018, p. 45-46. My translation.

²⁶ BONEFELD, Werner. Emancipatory Praxis and Conceptuality in Adorno. *In*: HOLLOWAY, John (ed.). **Negativity and Revolution**. Adorno and Political Activism. London: Pluto Press, 2009. p. 122-150. Here p. 123.

²⁷ ADORNO and HORKHEIMER, 2002, p. 1.

²⁸ ADORNO, 2004, p. 189-190.

writ-large, but to ‘enlighten enlightenment about itself.’ The guiding principles of rational thinking, i.e. the aforementioned identity and exchange principles, are not to be abstractly negated, but made to live up to their ideal.²⁹ But this cannot be achieved by positing a false synthesis or by claiming that the world is already rational. For Adorno, it is necessary to work through the split between instrumental rationality and the mimetic forms of thought that the former has repressed. Only if we, as a society, convict reason, identity, and exchange, of their own “nonidentity” with themselves, would it be possible to speak emphatically of civilization as a rational process, and of ‘enlightenment’ in the true sense of the word.³⁰ This would involve both a self-reflection of reason, where conceptual thinking comes to terms with its own materiality, and a re-organization of society where there would no longer be suffering and need. This self-enlightenment would reveal, as Lambert Zuidervaart notes, “that the goal of thought is not to continue the blind domination of nature and humans but to point toward reconciliation.”³¹ Note, however, that for Adorno, given the actual social conditions, this self-enlightenment cannot happen through what Braunstein calls a ‘constructive’ social criticism, but can only take place through negation: “Adorno sees that the only possible way to lead beyond what already is through determinate negation.”³²

The idea of ‘reconciliation’ appears in Adorno’s thought as the possibility of a self-transcendence of reason, or as he puts it in his essay on ‘Progress,’ as a “self-limitation of nature-dominating reason.”³³ As Peter Uwe Hohendahl has argued, this demands a dialectical movement “in which the gain of freedom is not paid by the submission to the domination of nature and the human subject.”³⁴ It

²⁹ ADORNO, 2004, p. 10; 147.

³⁰ Adorno characterizes this process as a self-transcendence of reason whereby conceptual reason is brought together with its aesthetic or mimetic counterpart, contained in forms of behaviour and relationships that are non-controlling, expressive, and sensual. ADORNO, 2004, p. 14-15; 147.

³¹ ZUIDERVAART, Lambert. ‘Theodor W. Adorno.’ In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta. Winter 2015.

³² BRAUNSTEIN, 2018, p. 50.

³³ ADORNO, Theodor W. Progress. In: ADORNO, Theodor. **Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords**. Trans. Henry W. Pickford. New York, 2005, pp. 143–60, p. 152.

³⁴ HOHENDAHL, Peter Uwe. ‘Progress Revisited: Adorno’s Dialogue with Augustine, Kant, and Benjamin.’ *Critical Inquiry* 40, p. 242-260. Autumn 2013, p. 254.

therefore implies a synthesis between the conceptual-instrumental and the mimetic-aesthetic moments of reason, and hence between . A reconciled *rationality* would transcend its inherent compulsion to dominate, and liberate sensibility and particularity. A reconciled *society* would be one where justice, equality, and the lack of material scarcity would coexist with the self-fulfillment of individuals. Therefore, the concept also points toward a change in the relation between theory and praxis: Reconciliation “is meant to lead to praxis rather than self-contemplation.”³⁵ For Adorno, thus, a reconciled reason would penetrate and transform reality, and therefore in a reconciled society critical thinking would converge with praxis:³⁶

The smallest trace of senseless suffering in the empirical world belies all the identitarian philosophy that would talk us out of that suffering: “While there is a beggar, there is a myth,” as Benjamin put it ... what is specifically materialistic converges with what is critical, with socially transforming praxis.³⁷

Reconciliation means, for Adorno, the synthesis of our cognition with our sensual and material nature, as well as the non-violent togetherness of humanity and nature, and of humans themselves. However, Adorno also insists that currently, because of the wrongness of the world, what can be done to keep the promise of reconciliation alive—to show that reconciliation is possible—is to expose its impossibility.

2. THE UTOPIAN PROMISE OF ART AND THE LIMITS OF ADORNO’S AESTHETICS

What is special about art, according to Adorno, that links it to the idea of reconciliation? Does this have to do with the experience of art, which can teach us to see beyond the ‘falseness’ of reality? Does it have to do, rather, with the potential that art has for conveying a message in a sensual form, and steer people into political activism? For Adorno, the answer does not have to do with our experience of art

³⁵ HOHENDAHL, 2013, p. 256. Cf. ADORNO, 2005, p. 153: “the anti-mythological element in progress cannot be conceived without the practical act that reins in the delusion of the spirit’s autarky. Hence progress can hardly be ascertained by disinterested contemplation.”

³⁶ Cf. BONEFELD, 2009, p. 124-125.

³⁷ ADORNO, 2004, p. 203. Translation modified.

or with political ‘commitment’ but, rather, has to do with the artwork’s formal construction or what he also calls its ‘import,’ that is, with the way the material is organized into a coherent form, and with the techniques used to constitute the internal organization of a certain work.

Without going into the details of Adorno’s construal of the relation between form and content, it suffices to say that, for him, for a work to be successful—and thus to participate in the self-transcendence of reason—the synthesis of material and technique (of what is usually known as content and form) must be achieved in such a way that it follows *only* the internal laws of the work. Adorno describes this *aesthetic synthesis* as the arrangement of the material through rational construction. Within a successful work of art, the material—which is necessarily extracted from the empirical reality—loses its heteronomous character and be allowed to express itself. Technical reason, for its part, loses its compulsive and controlling character when learning to follow the demands of the material, instead of imposing itself rigidly and blindly.³⁸ In this sense, artworks can be said to objectify mimesis and to liberate instrumental reason, and hence to oppose the (violent, reductive) social integration of universal and particular carried through identity thinking and the exchange principle.³⁹ Aesthetic synthesis is, as Wellmer comments, “markedly different” from the repressive logic through which the social structures are organized.⁴⁰

“As eminently constructed and produced objects, works of art, even literary ones, point to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life;” Adorno writes in his essay ‘Commitment.’⁴¹ In *Aesthetic Theory*, he makes a similar statement: “[T]he fact that artworks exist signals the possibility of the nonexisting. The reality of artworks testifies to the possibility of the possible.”⁴² What these claims imply is that, for Adorno, the possibility to create an artwork where instrumental and

³⁸ As Paddison comments, according to Adorno “[t]he total domination of material is at the same time the self- domination of the expressive subject. . . [This] results in the subject’s loss of freedom.” PADDISON, Max. **Adorno’s Aesthetics of Music**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 267. Cf. ADORNO, 2011, p. 356.

³⁹ ADORNO, 2011, p. 152; p. 335.

⁴⁰ WELLMER, 1991, p. 48.

⁴¹ ADORNO, Theodor. ‘Commitment.’ *New Left Review* I/87-88, (September-December 1974): 75-89, p. 89.

⁴² ADORNO, 2011, p. 174.

mimetic reason are related in a non-controlling, non-violent way anticipates something *that is not yet*, and shows that rationality could be otherwise.⁴³ Furthermore, in line with Adorno's understanding of dialectics as a negative and critical process, the work of art also has a critical thrust. Its role is that of negating the semblance of meaning of a meaningless reality, therefore disclosing the falseness of a world filled with contradictions and suffering. Artistic form, writes Adorno, "disenchants the disenchanted world."⁴⁴

Authentic art, just like critical theory, exposes that every form of social activity within the present reified world can only be "reified activity."⁴⁵ Its logic, however, also attests to a real possibility: that of a different type of practical rationality in which not everything must serve as empty means; of a non-violent social synthesis where different points of view are respected, and where a plurality of life-forms can flourish.⁴⁶ We can therefore say that, for Adorno, the primordial way in which art can intervene in an emancipatory project is related to its truth content, which a work of art possesses when (i) it instantiates a critique of reality and (ii) acts as a safeguard of the possibility of transforming it by exposing its historicity and contingency. By putting these two together, art would be able to show that the real is irrational, but also that it can be transformed.⁴⁷

Crucially, aesthetic critique does not happen through a direct engagement with praxis or politics, activities that (in their present form) are caught in the web of reification and rationalization. In order to avoid furthering repression and the atrophy of thought—and thus to preserve their truth (the meaning of which will be expounded below)—works of art have, indeed, to *oppose* society, Adorno contends,

⁴³ Note, however, that this does not imply that it shows a better organizing principle. This is why, contrary to what Wellmer argues, aesthetic truth does not mean that art models the relations between humans in a liberated society. Rather, they only expose that a different way of relating is possible: whether these relations would be similar to those between the elements in the work of art is not something that Adorno contends anywhere in his aesthetic theory.

⁴⁴ ADORNO, 2011, p. 75.

⁴⁵ BONEFELD, 2009, p. 124.

⁴⁶ As eminently constructed and produced objects, works of art, even literary ones, point to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life." ADORNO, 1974, p. 89.

⁴⁷ "Radical modern art is hated . . . because it reminds us of missed chances, but also because by its sheer existence it reveals the dubiousness of the heteronomous structural ideal." ADORNO, 2004, p. 95. Cf. ADORNO, 2004, p. 397.

but not through explicit political dogma. Rather, their autonomy is the standard for such opposition. This *does not* mean that artworks should act under the belief that they were ‘outside’ society, but rather implies their transgression of the “social contract with reality.”⁴⁸ The successful work of art must refuse to follow the demands for functionalism and effect; it “must close its eyes and ears against” society.⁴⁹ Only the complex, fragmentary, and open forms of autonomous art, Adorno argues, can resist and criticize reality. This begs the question, however, of how can this ‘critique through form’ be socially transformative. How can art work toward the fulfilment of the promise that—through its specific type of synthesis—it makes? And most importantly, how can we define the relation between the formal critique deployed within works of art, and the practical—and *transformative*—critique as performed by social movements or political agents?

For Adorno the possibility to ‘grasp’ this truth is tied to the correct interpretation of the artwork, which could then generate a true knowledge about reality. But this presupposes a subject capable of decoding such truth—a subject that, given the demand for such a high degree of knowledge and rationality, cannot be construed from within Adorno’s own account of modern subjectivity. In a nutshell, the problem is that the possibility of grasping aesthetic truth presupposes an *already rational* subject. Yet, according to Adorno, the subject of capitalism is virtually liquidated.⁵⁰ It therefore becomes almost impossible to conceive of any significant social agent that could be the addressee of art’s promise of redemption. It is at this point that one senses the price paid by Adorno for holding on to a negative depiction of reality where there seems to be no room left for subjective resistance.

If art is construed as a site where resistance to the so-called ‘course of the world’ happens “solely through artistic form,” then its utopian promises must remain unheard, unseen, impossible to read.⁵¹ But Adorno has no other alternative than to make this claim because, since he presumes society to be ‘totally administered,’ he is prone to dismiss the relevance of reception, which takes the back seat, giving

⁴⁸ ADORNO, 1974, p. 77.

⁴⁹ ADORNO, 1974, p. 89.

⁵⁰ Cf. ADORNO and HORKHEIMER, 2002, p. 170. Cf. ADORNO, Theodor. ‘Sociology and Psychology.’ *New Left Review* I/46, (November-December 1967): 67-97, p. 95.

⁵¹ ADORNO, 1974, p. 80.

priority to whatever is already within the work. Hence why, for example, Adorno insists that the sociology of art should not focus on reception, but on the immanent content of the work which “can be deciphered from the form and technique of the work,” as Hohendahl rightly puts it.⁵² To claim, as Adorno often does, that the immanent social content can be read off without “recourse to the empirically derived or contingent reactions of reader or audience” is problematic, especially when one wants to claim that ‘politics’ has migrated into the work of art.⁵³ Let me put this differently. Adorno’s demand for a negative dialectics and for a critical aesthetics exposes that, within a wrong world, theory should not be subordinated to an unreflective, immediate praxis,⁵⁴ and that actually critique can be conceived as what Bonefeld calls a “conceptualized praxis.”⁵⁵ And yet, in so doing, Adorno modifies the meaning of praxis in such a way that it “leads him right back to theoretical thought because only in its form as critique can praxis maintain its proper [place].”⁵⁶ If we add to this Adorno’s defense of a form of critique (be it theoretical or aesthetic) that necessarily remains impermeable to comprehension,⁵⁷ it is very difficult to see how this conception of praxis *qua* theory can be materially or socially transformative.

Regardless of the problems with Adorno’s aesthetic theory and their relation to politics, we should not be too quick to dismiss every piece of Adorno’s theory, or to attempt to filter his aesthetics by ‘translating’ it into the framework of “a post-utopian philosophy of communicative reason”, which is the strategy carried out by Albrecht Wellmer.⁵⁸ Wellmer’s critique and reinterpretation of Adorno raises some very relevant issues and is able to locate some of the most problematic aspects of his work. And yet, his call for a post-utopian aesthetics and his attempt to define the contribution of art as a part of communicative reason can occlude some of

⁵² HOHENDAHL, Peter Uwe. ‘Introduction to Reception Aesthetics.’ *New German Critique*, No. 10, (Winter, 1977): 29-63, p. 31- 32.

⁵³ HOHENDAHL, 1977, p. 32. Cf. ADORNO, 1974, p.

⁵⁴ Cf. ADORNO, Theodor. ‘Resignation.’ In **Critical Models**. Interventions and Catchwords. Trans. Henry Pickford, 289-294. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, p. 290-291: “Within absolutized praxis only reaction is possible and therefore false.”

⁵⁵ BONEFELD, 2009, p. 135.

⁵⁶ HOHENDAHL, 2013, p. 259.

⁵⁷ ADORNO, 2004, 41.

⁵⁸ See WELLMER, Albrecht. ‘Introduction.’ In **The Persistence of Modernity**. Translated by David Midgley, i-iii. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007, p. 1.

Adorno's most important contributions. Even while Adorno might have failed to show just how aesthetic truth can have any real impact on society, his insistence that art should not aim to give a 'message' or to influence directly in politics is still valuable for an aesthetic theory that aims to be critical of the current social structures.⁵⁹ It is those moments where Adorno argues that artworks "exercise a practical effect, if they do so at all, not by haranguing but by the scarcely apprehensible transformation of consciousness" that we should hold onto.⁶⁰

If we agree with Adorno that art (or any critical practice for that matter) should act upon consciousness, then we *also* agree with Adorno's contention that society needs to be significantly transformed. *Contra* Habermas or Wellmer, society is not already rational nor "post-utopian."⁶¹ While we do not want to posit a metaphysical notion of reconciliation that makes the task of social change appear out of historical reach, then, neither do we want to give up on the possibility of a radical transformation of the social structures. Making this possibility a historically realizable goal is the reason why it is necessary to move beyond Adorno's negativity. This move does not imply a rejection of Adorno's critical stance. Neither does it imply renouncing one of Adorno's most valuable insights regarding art: namely, that it has the potential to transgress the normativity of our everyday-practices.⁶² It does imply the need to link it to the political practices of real oppressed subjects.

Today, a *critical* aesthetic theory must be able to conceptualize art as a transgressive practice that can link its critique of society to the reality of historical practices, as well as an artistic practice that, without foregoing the fact that its *being* art is what makes it critical—and not only its content—it does not turn its back on its receivers. In this sense, we must move *beyond* Adorno. Yet, this participation should still

⁵⁹ ADORNO, 1974, p. 88: "The notion of a 'message' in art, even when politically radical, already contains an accommodation to the world."

⁶⁰ ADORNO, 2011, p. 316.

⁶¹ "Habermas," Wellmer writes, 'has "translated" the project of critical theory of society . . . into the conceptual framework of a theory of language and of communicative action.' Wellmer thus speaks of modernity as a "collective learning process" and of the "idea of a rational organization of society" that is "already embodied and recognized" in the institutions of modernity. (WELLMER, 1991, p. 51-52.) It is to the merit of authors like Bonefeld or Braunstein to have held on to Adorno's radical critique of modern capitalist societies in spite of the hegemony of the Habermasian position.

⁶² Cf. CACHOPO, João Pedro. 'Truth and Enigma: Adorno and the Politics of Art.' *New German Critique* 135, Vol. 45, No. 3, (November 2018): 73-95, p. 83.

happen indirectly, i.e., by affecting people's consciousness, something that remains in line with Adorno's theory. An emancipatory aesthetic practice, then, should avoid being absorbed by the abstract, means-ends logic of an oppressive society, and yet retain its relation to the agency of its recipients. Art would thus appear as an activity that can interfere with alienation, without being itself alienated from reality. In this way, art and aesthetic theory would become part of a project that participates in collective resistance and liberation. Is it possible to think of a critical aesthetics and an artistic practice that—in achieving this—is, at the same time, Adornian *and* Post-Adornian? In what follows, I turn to the work of Alexander Kluge, in order to provide an answer to this question.

3. BEYOND ADORNO'S NEGATIVISM: KLUGE'S OBSTINATE PRAGMATISM

As Stuart Liebman notes in an early essay on Kluge, the concept and the legacy of the 'enlightenment' have been one of the recurring and central concerns of Kluge's oeuvre. From his 1966 film *Yesterday Girl*, to his magnum literary opus *Chronik der Gefühle* (2004), and going through his theoretical interventions with Negt, Kluge has been concerned with reassessing "the utopian promise immanent in reason's ambiguous legacy."⁶³ Kluge's conclusion, as Liebman notes, is that to fulfil the promise of the enlightenment it is necessary to, first, reconstruct reason as "a modality of sensory, imaginative experience."⁶⁴ Second, it is necessary to restructure the 'public sphere'—a term Kluge borrows from another of his mentors, Jürgen Habermas—in such a way that there is as much room for unconstrained interaction and debate, as for creativity, imagination, and the free unfolding of our capacities and abilities. The public sphere—Kluge calls it the 'social horizon of experience'—

⁶³ LIEBMAN, Stuart. 'Why Kluge.' *October* 46, (Fall 1988): 5-22, p. 7.

⁶⁴ LIEBMAN, 1988, p. 7.

must become an active, inclusive, and dynamic space where individuals come together to collectively decide the course of their history.⁶⁵

Kluge's work thus shows close proximity with Adorno's, to the extent that he is also aware of the need to reconstruct a 'rationality' that is currently torn in two: the logical and conceptual moment, on the one hand, and its repressed aesthetic and sensory counterpart, on the other. With Adorno, Kluge insists that this has to be achieved not by bypassing 'rationality,' but by synthesizing the capacity for conceptual and abstract thinking with sense perception. In this vein, Kluge likes to appeal to a famous dictum by Immanuel Kant, which states:

Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind. Hence it is as necessary for the mind to make its concepts sensuous (that is, to join to them the object in intuition), as to make its intuitions intelligible (that is, to bring them under concepts).⁶⁶

With Kant, Kluge believes that 'knowledge' depends on both the sensuous faculty to receive impressions—or in other words, the capacity to be *affected* by external reality—as well as on the faculty to use and manipulate those representations, to produce concepts and therefore cognition.⁶⁷ With Adorno, however, Kluge also believes that in modern (capitalist) societies, the capacity to produce knowledge has been hindered. The rise of what Kluge calls the 'consciousness industry' (which stands for what Adorno similarly termed the 'culture industry') is largely to blame for this. Capitalist mass media, Kluge argues in an Adornian spirit, function by blocking the movement of our sensuous perceptions toward consciousness, steering them away from the possibility to think autonomously, and toward the commodities it sells and the promises these make—which act as pre-given schema to which our perceptions are attached. The subjects' capacities and faculties, instead of leading to autonomous thinking, once enmeshed within this system, Negt and Kluge contend, get locked inside the (metaphorical) "prison walls" of the mass media: "What one is allowed to feel, express, communicate as a realistic person is

⁶⁵ NEGt, Oskar and KLUGE, Alexander. **Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere.** Trans. Peter Labanyi, et. al. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 2.

⁶⁶ KANT, Immanuel. **Critique of Pure Reason** (1781). Translated by J. M. D. Meiklejohn. London: Henry G. Bohn, 1855, p. 46.

⁶⁷ KANT, 1855, p. 45.

molded by the mode of interaction in the factory, in everyday life, and above all, transmitted by the mass media.”⁶⁸

Despite the seemingly bleak diagnosis, however, Kluge reaches very different conclusions from Adorno. This is because Kluge, contrary to Adorno, grounds his theoretical convictions in the belief that neither the capacities for thinking and gaining knowledge, nor the capacities to come together and act collectively can be vanquished or eliminated.⁶⁹ Adorno’s entwinement of reification with rationality, and his contention that reason’s ‘irrationality’ is the product of a compulsion—the drive for self-preservation—*constitutive of reason itself*, are nowhere to be found in Kluge’s thought. Kluge, instead, grounds the constitution of the modern subject in what him and Oskar Negt call a law of ‘self-regulation.’

To define the notion of ‘self-regulation,’ Negt and Kluge go all the way back to Karl Marx’s ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts’ of 1844. There, Marx defines alienation as a disturbance in the relations between individuals and their capacities, the products of their labor, and the world writ-large.⁷⁰ According to Marx, it is through the objectivation and appropriation of their capacities that the subjects are able to give meaning to their reality as well as to their places and spaces within reality. The relevant point here—and the one that informs the idea of ‘self-regulation’—is that through their productive activity, human beings are able to provide meaning to their reality and to find self-fulfillment. Crucially, then, Negt and Kluge insist that *human beings do not labor only for self-preservation*. Indeed, humans need to produce, control and predict reality in order to survive, but there is also a just-as-vital need to produce the idea that one’s capacities and one’s powers are part of a meaningful reality. And as Andrew Bowie notes, this need for meaning is ‘generally stronger than any supposed “instinct for self-preservation.”’⁷¹

⁶⁸ NEGTT and KLUGE, 1993, p. 30-31.

⁶⁹ Cf. NEGTT and KLUGE, 1993, p. 186.

⁷⁰ Cf. MARX, Karl. “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts.” In MARX, Karl and ENGELS, Friedrich. **Karl Marx Friedrich Engels Collected Works** 3:229–348. New York: International, 1975, p. 275.

⁷¹ BOWIE, Andrew. Review of *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge. *Telos* 66, (December 1985): 183-190, p. 186.

The impulse to survive and to control reality, Negt and Kluge argue, is counterbalanced by the need to construct a meaningful reality and the feeling of belonging. In *History and Obstinacy*, Negt and Kluge draw from sources as different as Aristotle, Sigmund Freud, Arnold Gehlen, and Marx, in order to argue that human beings are dependent on others, and hence require collective life for their survival.⁷² Without denying that there might be something like an impulse for self-preservation, then, Negt and Kluge insist that it cannot be the only drive that fuels history. Human beings are not self-sufficient beings, as the myth of Odysseus might have us believe, but are rather beings that need interaction, that need society. By insisting on this moment that was missed by Adorno, Negt and Kluge disentangle the entwinement between rationality and reification and call into question Adorno's negative philosophy of history: it is mistaken to trace a straight line between reason and unreason, and to think that human beings can simply be subsumed by the instrumental, means-ends logic that characterizes capitalism.

For Negt and Kluge, the process through which reason's sensual and conceptual moments were progressively separated was in no way a natural or seamless one. Actually, they believe that what led to a modernity pervaded by alienation and reification was not a compulsion within reason, but a history of unjust and unlawful separations of humans from their properties and capacities, a history of missed opportunities or of delayed reactions.⁷³ But these separations—which, with Marx, Negt and Kluge see as the cause of alienation—are always confronted with that willful desire to fill the world with meaning. Human history—including the history of the modern constitution of the subject—Negt and Kluge insist, has been and remains permeated by forces and counter-forces that are in constant struggle.

According to Negt and Kluge, individuals, as Devin Fore writes, “[meet] every abstract operation with a corresponding feat of concretion, every act of violent coercion with one of intransigent willfulness.”⁷⁴ This energy for protest, which Negt and Kluge call ‘obstinacy,’ is the subjective response to the persistent attempts to

⁷² Cf. FORE, Devin. Introduction to NEGt, Oskar and KLUGE, Alexander. **History and Obstinacy**. Trans. Richard Langston, et. al. York: Zone Books, 2014, p. 27-28.

⁷³ NEGt, Oskar and KLUGE, Alexander. **History and Obstinacy**. Trans. Richard Langston, et. al. New York: Zone Books, 2014, p. 218.

⁷⁴ FORE, 2014, p. 24.

separate humans from what belongs to them—to what is their property, in the sense of both material properties and capacities. Humans, they show, have responded to the imposition of logics that appear foreign to their own sense of balance, such as the abstract and instrumentalizing logic of capitalism. Obstinacy thus stands for those counter-actions to every attempt at reification, and is aimed at (re)establishing balance within the subject. “The stinger that wounds humans [is also what] gives occasion for protest against the injury of becoming industrial labor power,” Negt and Kluge write. “This is the motor behind the development of modernity.”⁷⁵

By complementing the drive for self-preservation with one for self-regulation, Negt and Kluge are able to change the terms of Adorno’s philosophy of history. If there is always a counter-reaction to reification, a resistance to becoming ‘cogs in the machine,’ this means that societies cannot be characterized as false totalities, nor can they be totally administered. Kluge thus insists that even within modern capitalist societies, where the capacities for thinking seem to have been appropriated and where the social structures apparently reduce human’s autonomy, there is always a way out, a potential for resistance against subsumption. The subject, Kluge insists, cannot be fully reduced by the interests of capital or by the process of commodification. Contrary to what Adorno (in his most dire moments) contended, societies—including the most voracious forms of capitalism—cannot be totally organized following a logic that functions automatically and without regard for human beings’ needs or interests.⁷⁶

For Kluge, every society is always constituted by representative and antagonistic elements, and however deep the latter are buried, there is always a possibility to change the course of history. History can thus be represented—contra Adorno—as a chain of uprisings which, however failed, no authority or abstract logic has been able to fully repress or to prevent their return. And this, Negt and Kluge write, “is an indicator of a potential for every society’s present, a possible indicator for the future, and in any case, the sum of all pasts.”⁷⁷ Habermas speaks of a “worldly

⁷⁵ NEGt and KLUGE, 2014, p. 218.

⁷⁶ NEGt and KLUGE, 2014, p. 85.

⁷⁷ NEGt and KLUGE, 2014, p. 221.

pragmatism” that separates Kluge from Adorno,⁷⁸ and we can now see that this pragmatism does not come from a blind faith in humanity or from a dubious teleology, but from the conviction—grounded in his theory of self-regulation and obstinacy—that neither human communities nor subjectivity can be vanquished or eliminated. With this, Kluge transforms Adorno’s negativity into what he and Negt call an “emancipatory positivity,”⁷⁹ which is not to be confused with an affirmation of history as a progressive advance toward enlightenment.⁸⁰ Suspicious of any account that totalizes reality—be it as wholly rational or as wholly false—Kluge insists that there is no necessary logic to history, and that even under the present state of the world, there are countless gaps and sites from which the energy to transform it can emerge.

However, Kluge insists that even if there are gaps in the social fabric, this does not, in any way, guarantee emancipation.⁸¹ Indeed, people’s obstinate reactions are persistent and cannot be uprooted, but they can be manipulated or contained, and even lead to “deadly outcomes.”⁸² As a subjective and material impulse, obstinacy lacks any sense of measure or any political orientation, and requires the complement of self-reflection and consciousness in order to guide the subject toward autonomy. How to elicit the sublation of this ‘somatic impulse’ into forms of autonomous thought, and eventually into an emancipatory political organization, becomes a pressing political question. The task of art is to locate the gaps in the social fabric from where resistance can emerge, and help orient people’s energies toward their emancipation. For Kluge, the sheer presence of those gaps and fractures implies that the possibility of a radical social change is not a utopian one, but something practically and historically realizable.

⁷⁸ HABERMAS, 2001, p. 113.

⁷⁹ NEGТ, Oskar and KLUGE, Alexander. **Geschichte und Eigensinn**. vol. 2 of **Der unterschätzte Mensch: Gemeinsame Philosophie in zwei Bänden**. Frankfurt: Zweitausendeins, 2001, p. 487.

⁸⁰ That is to say that Kluge lets go of Adorno’s negativity, but *not* of his negativism, as defined above.

⁸¹ NEGТ and KLUGE, 1993, p. 58.

⁸² The reference is to Kluge’s short science fiction novella, *Learning Processes with a Deadly Outcome*.

Kluge's theoretical outlook has immediate consequences for the Adornian conception of 'reconciliation.' Kluge shares with Adorno the idea that a reconciled society would be one where individuals could act collectively and determine the course of their history and the conditions for their experience. He *also* shares with Adorno the belief that modern capitalist societies are far from being 'rational,' and hence reconciled.⁸³ But whereas Adorno could see reconciliation only as a utopian horizon that, to paraphrase Wellmer, was separated from our historical reality by a 'chasm,' Kluge insists that this possibility is always already present—even if it often remains obscured by the discourses of the official public sphere.⁸⁴ Art, for Kluge, can do more than "[holding] fast to the promise of reconciliation in the midst of the unreconciled" through determinate negation.⁸⁵ Negativity—for Adorno the necessary outcome of the dialectical relation between reason and reification—is for Kluge nothing but the contingent product of missed opportunities and misdirected energies.

Kluge finds the wish and even the *need* to construct a meaningful, rational society in a diversity of social phenomena, including the two which for Adorno were the clearest signs of the individual's heteronomy: the capitalist 'culture industry' and Nazism.⁸⁶ How come, for example, the German citizenship supported and even fought for a regime—Nazism—whose interests were clearly not aligned with their own? According to Kluge, this is not because the individuals' preferences and needs had been vacated, but instead exposes the persistence of very real needs and wishes. Actually, Kluge insists, if people supported Nazism this was the product of the sense of loss created by the expropriation of the properties and capacities of thousands of peasants, that went back to the enclosures that had taken place since the twelfth century.⁸⁷ Those appropriations created needs (for community, for

⁸³ And in this sense, both Adorno and Kluge differ from other members of the Frankfurt school such as Habermas or Wellmer. See NEGT and KLUGE, 2014, p. 199, for a categorical statement in this regard.

⁸⁴ Cf. FORE, 2014, p. 53-54.

⁸⁵ ADORNO, 2011, p. 41.

⁸⁶ FREYENHAGEN, 2013, p. 33: For Adorno, "each labourer and each person becomes (potentially) replaceable. Structurally similar to what the Nazi machinery was designed to do with its victims, the individual is reduced by the capitalist system to a mere instantiation of a general property (in the latter case, bearer of human labour-power)."

⁸⁷ BOWIE, 1985, p. 187.

association, for a place to stand and work on) that the National Socialist regime tapped into. The ideological strength that this regime gained—as exposed in their appeals to ‘earth,’ to the ‘*Volk*,’ to the ‘*Lebensraum*’—was, as Kluge sees it, the result of a history of dispossession and loss, a history which, read against the grain, appears also as that of the desire to belong to a meaningful reality.⁸⁸

Could people’s needs, constituted out of historical separations, have led to different historical results? Could a process that ended up in false-consciousness also lead to awareness, to critical reflection? According to Kluge, this *was* possible, because what the Nazi regime provided was a false exit for needs that were, in themselves, not false or irrational, but only lacked the means to be articulated in a way that could have led to emancipation instead of to more repression and suffering. What was missing, then, was a force that could provide those needs and energies with the correct political orientation, namely one that would allow individuals to see themselves as the producers of reality that they already are.

Contrary to Adorno, then, Kluge does not believe that the human capacities for autonomous and critical thinking have all but virtually disappeared, or that human needs are now produced and catered by the social structures. These capacities, Fore writes, have been “rendered incomprehensible and dismissed as irrational. But they haven’t disappeared. It just requires a feat of imagination to realize their productive capacities.”⁸⁹ In this vein, Negt and Kluge write:

Through an improbable turn, the same facts [that led to today’s situation] could also be organized differently; if it were possible to translate individual wishes back into a context (into the collective body of wishes), they could be arranged into a successful life, not into catastrophe.⁹⁰

But how can the human wishes be translated back into a meaningful context? How can these wishes be rearranged so that our apparently ‘irrational’ society can be transformed? In order to provide an answer, Kluge borrows Habermas’ category of the ‘public sphere,’ but transforms it in such a way that it stops denoting solely

⁸⁸ NEGt and KLUGE, 1993, p. 174.

⁸⁹ FORE, 2014, p. 53.

⁹⁰ NEGt, Oskar and KLUGE, Alexander. **Maßverhältnisse des Politischen: 15 Vorschläge zum Unterscheidungsvermögen.** Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1992, p. 850.

the set of media, organizations and institutions that make possible the formation of public opinion. For Kluge, the public sphere should rather be understood as the social horizon where experience can be constituted, and as the site where individuals can organize their own experiences and contexts of living according to their self-defined interests and needs.⁹¹

The public sphere is, in Kluge's definition, also a dynamic learning process where social facts and everything that is considered to be socially relevant can be put into question or reconfigured.⁹² Kluge understands the public sphere as the 'factory of politics' because it is there—in public debate, but also in cultural and artistic expressions, in intellectual interventions, or in phenomena as diverse as Olympic ceremonies, elections, and film screenings—where the possibility for people to articulate their experiences is either crippled or increased.⁹³ The autonomous production of a public sphere where “no concrete interest remains excluded and unresolved” replaces the utopian (and at times abstract) idea of a reconciliation between humanity and nature.⁹⁴ With this, the possibility of reconciliation becomes, in Kluge's work, concrete and tangible: reconciliation appears now as the potential result of a political and cultural struggle in which artistic and aesthetic interventions are fundamental.

4. EXPERIENCE, IMAGINATION, AND THE PUBLIC ROLE OF ART

Kluge's aesthetic oeuvre has two main intentions that fit seamlessly with the joint philosophical project developed with Negt: First, to reconstruct a full, self-reflective rationality by bringing together the 'aesthetic' and the 'analytic' moments of reason. Second, to intervene in the reconstruction of the public sphere so that it can become an autonomously produced social horizon of experience. These two are clearly tied together, since only autonomous individuals with full access to their

⁹¹ NEG'T and KLUGE, 1993, p. 1-2; 177; 185-186.

⁹² NEG'T and KLUGE, 1993, p. 2.

⁹³ NEG'T and KLUGE, 1993, p. xliii.

⁹⁴ NEG'T and KLUGE, 1993, p. 208.

rational capacities would be able to constitute the public sphere as an “inclusive, dynamic and collaborative space where people participate in the meaning-making process.”⁹⁵ It also follows that, for the time being, the task of furthering autonomy and reflection holds priority. To achieve this, Kluge contends, an alienated consciousness has to be reconfigured by recovering the sensual and imaginative capacities that the current public sphere represses. With Adorno, Kluge believes that art has a crucial role to play in this regard. As Michael Bray has argued, art becomes such an important emancipatory medium because, according to Kluge, it has the ability to mediate between “the impulse to bring what is already experienced to public expression and the drive to produce new orderings of experience, more adequate to the socio-historical context and its transformation.”⁹⁶

In emphasizing art’s relation to cognition and experience, as well as its role in reconstituting the public sphere, Kluge touches on some of the fundamental insights of Adorno’s work but is able to drive them in a completely different direction. To recall, one of the central aspects of Adorno’s aesthetic theory was the insight regarding the *cognitive* function of art. Artworks should intervene in society, according to him, not by giving an ‘opinion’ or repeating a message, but by helping individuals develop their *own* opinions.⁹⁷ Art’s political role, for Adorno, is actually a *pre*-political one—namely, the generation of autonomous and critical individuals that could then participate freely and rationally in democratic processes. Kluge also considers that art’s function should be to further critical thought, and not to intervene directly in politics. Kluge’s work, indebted to Adorno’s thought, aims to encourage the spectators to experience more fully, and to gain a comprehension of the structural dimension of social oppression.

Kluge would not go as far as Adorno in claiming that the subjects’ autonomy within capitalism is virtually extinct,⁹⁸ but neither does he believe that subjects are *already*

⁹⁵ FORREST, Tara. ‘Editor’s Introduction.’ In **Alexander Kluge**. *Raw Materials for the Imagination*. Edited by Tara Forrest, 13-21. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012, p. 14. Cf. LIEBMAN, 1988, p. 7.

⁹⁶ BRAY, Michael. ‘Openness as a Form of Closure: Public Sphere, Social Class, and Alexander Kluge’s Counterproducts.’ *Telos* 159, (Summer 2012): 144–71, p. 150.

⁹⁷ “What is social in art is its immanent movement against society, not its manifest opinions.” ADORNO, 2011, p. 297.

⁹⁸ Cf. ADORNO, 1967, p. 80: “The subject is separated into the inner continuation of the

autonomous. Kluge, rather, contends that while people have material experiences of suffering and alienation, and thus can still sense their own oppression, they lack the resources to make sense or interpret these immediate experiences. The problem is that the latter, Kluge insists, tell us little of the movement of history, and of the structural conditions that determine the course of their lives: “In great novels and novellas,” Kluge writes, “the concrete life stories of people are dictated by social conditions – and people die of these conditions. That’s what we don’t have telescopes for, what we lack the perceptual tools for.”⁹⁹ This is why people’s experiences (those experiences that can be sensed with the fingertips, so to speak) need to be complemented with the capacity for abstraction: “A microscope for every natural scientist or a telescope for the astronomer only exists, as far as the experience of society is concerned, in the form of the human head’s capacity for abstraction, which simply isn’t as sensuous as an embrace.”¹⁰⁰

The idea of complementing sense perception—that is, the materiality of experience—with the capacity for abstraction—a capacity developed through logical and conceptual means—takes us back to the Kantian impetus in Kluge’s thinking. To recall, Kluge believes that emancipation requires making the mind’s “concepts sensuous (that is, to join to them the object in intuition), as to make its intuitions intelligible (that is, to bring them under concepts).”¹⁰¹ Just as Kant, Kluge considers the imagination—which he also calls ‘fantasy’—to be a capacity that could facilitate the mediation between concepts and intuitions. Art is so important for Kluge because he believes that it has the power to act as a medium for the spectators’ imagination.

In line with Kant, Kluge conceptualizes the imagination as a capacity that can help avoid both the blindness of pure sense perception and the impulse toward objectification that forgets its underlying sensual basis. And this means that the

machinery of social reproduction and an undissolved remainder which, as a mere preserve powerless in the face of the wildly expansionist ‘rational’ component, degenerates into a mere curiosity.”

⁹⁹ KLUGE, Alexander. ‘The Political as Intensity of Everyday Feelings.’ In **Alexander Kluge**. *Raw Materials for the Imagination*. Edited by Tara Forrest, 283-290. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012c, p. 285-286.

¹⁰⁰ KLUGE, 2012c, p. 286.

¹⁰¹ KANT, 1855, p. 46.

imagination, or fantasy, can work to generate a full experience of reality. According to Kluge, the consciousness industry has ‘colonized’ people’s imagination, making it lose its connection to reality and forcing it to operate using only pre-given schema.¹⁰² However, Kluge contends that instead of discarding the imagination as just another form of escapism, it needs to be put back in contact with both sensual and material reality and with our conceptual abilities, so that it can orient people’s thinking and their practices toward emancipation. If in fantasy the “obstacles of reality cease to exist,” then the question that guides Kluge is: “how can you, for the sake of whatever cause, encourage phantasy to develop such perspectives on [reality] (i.e. perspectives different from those inherent in things as they are)?”¹⁰³ The answer he gives is also indebted to Kant: namely, through art and aesthetic practices.

Art, Kluge argues, can help counter the colonization of people’s capacities—such as their imagination, their sense perception, their creativity—and allows them to “reorganize [their] fantasies in order to make [them] capable of self-organization,” as he and Negt write.¹⁰⁴ The possibility of reorganizing the imagination and gaining self-consciousness and self-awareness through the experience of art, however, will not emerge from the imposition of a ‘correct’ standpoint or by conveying (what the author believes to be) the ‘truth.’ For Kluge, autonomy will only come when individuals are able to draw *their own experiences* to decode the conditions of their reality. Hence why he insists that for a work of art to really count as working toward emancipation, it must oppose the ‘didacticism’ that characterizes, e.g., Brecht’s plays or Sergei Eisenstein’s films,¹⁰⁵ as well as the elitism and paternalism that characterizes works of art that attempt to present the ‘correct’ insights that the oppressed masses lack. This does not mean, however, that Kluge believes the work of art to be a site where the imagination should roam freely. If art should combat the colonization of consciousness by the mass media, it must also avoid that the imagination loses its connection to reality. The imagination, as Pavsek notes, “needs

¹⁰² NEGТ and KLUGE, 1993, p. 36.

¹⁰³ KLUGE, 2012a, p. 43.

¹⁰⁴ NEGТ and KLUGE, 1993, p. 176.

¹⁰⁵ For more on Kluge’s distinction to Eisenstein see LIEBMAN, 1988, and for a comparison with Brecht, see BRUCK, Jan. ‘Brecht’s and Kluge’s Aesthetics of Realism.’ *Poetics* 17, (1988): 57-68.

objects against which to work, and a film [or any work of art] must provide material to be worked on in the form of images and sounds and the relations between those images and sounds.”¹⁰⁶ Kluge’s works of art aim to encourage the imagination so that it can regain its relation to reality, without imposing a certain point of view or imposing his own interpretation. Kluge’s works are produced to function as forcefields where capacities can unfold, yet where these encounter friction—which appears in the form of audio-visual material.

Speaking of cinema, one of the aesthetic media Kluge believes is best suited to orient people’s fantasy, Kluge writes:

Understanding a film completely is conceptual imperialism which colonizes its objects. If I have understood everything then something has been emptied out. We must make films that thoroughly oppose such imperialism of consciousness. I encounter something in film which still surprises me and which I can perceive without devouring it. I cannot understand a puddle on which the rain is falling – I can only see it; to say that I understand the puddle is meaningless. Relaxation means that I myself become alive for a moment, allowing my senses to run wild: for once not to be on guard with the police-like intention of letting nothing escape me.¹⁰⁷

This passage, besides illuminating Kluge’s conception of the emancipatory role of art, also attests to another central difference between Kluge’s and Adorno’s understanding of art. While Adorno insists that art should not provide a message or give an opinion, his aesthetic theory still postulates that there is *one* correct truth that the work of art can embody. This means that, for Adorno, even if a work of art can only be emancipatory if it affects the recipient, because the artwork’s truth is tied to the formal organization of the work (and thus already contained within the work) then the role of the receiving subject is reduced to the work’s correct interpretation.¹⁰⁸ There is nothing of the sort to be found in Kluge’s work: the

¹⁰⁶ PAVSEK, Christopher. **The Utopia of Film: Cinema and Its Futures** in Godard, Kluge, and Tahimik. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, p. 164.

¹⁰⁷ KLUGE, 2012a, p. 38.

¹⁰⁸ That Adorno is presupposing a quasi-ideal receiver is one of the (many) reasons why Adorno emphasizes that artworks behave like windowless monads, which can forego communication. This is also why the individual reception tends to be dismissed: When Adorno speaks of aesthetic experience—which he indeed considers to be a necessary moment for the unfolding of art’s truth—it is never understood in relation to personal experiences or to the social and historical context where the reception takes place. Cf. ADORNO, 2011, p. 320.

demand for the recipient to apprehend the work's 'truth' postulated by Adorno would partake of 'imperialism of consciousness' that Kluge so thoroughly opposes.

In this point, Kluge's work stands closer to that of Brecht and Benjamin than to Adorno's. In *Public Sphere and Experience*, for example, Negt and Kluge insist that aesthetic counterproducts should have as their aim the "self-determination of [its] viewers".¹⁰⁹ Here, they draw from Brecht's call for a refunctionalization of art, echoed by Benjamin in 'The Author as Producer.' Brecht, speaking of the radio, argues that it could be "transformed from an apparatus of distribution into one of communication."¹¹⁰ This argument is hinged upon by Kluge, who argues that "the greater the degree of reciprocity between the viewer and the program on screen, the more effective the program is in generating a public sphere within which viewers are encouraged to participate in the meaning making process."¹¹¹ In particular, Kluge insists that film is ideally suited for this task, because of the way it engages the public's imagination. Contrary to Adorno's focus on the object, i.e. the work of art, Kluge's aesthetics privileges the relation between subject and object: A film, according to him, it is constructed "by the dialogue between spectators and authors."¹¹²

This does not mean, however, that Kluge shuns aside or overlooks the formal aspects of art that were central to Adorno's aesthetic theory, or that he disregards the technical construction of his works. Actually, with Benjamin, Kluge believes that the social function of a work of art cannot be separated from its technique and technical developments.¹¹³ Kluge, then, does not use the work's formal mechanisms in order to achieve a special type of synthesis of the material, but to unsettle the spectators by triggering their (sensual and intellectual) capacities. His aim is to shock them, alienating them from their reified ways of looking at reality, so that they can

¹⁰⁹ NEGt and KLUGE, 1993, p. 123.

¹¹⁰ Brecht in NEGt and KLUGE, 1993, p. 103.

¹¹¹ FORREST, Tara. **The Politics of Imagination**. Benjamin, Kracauer, Kluge. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007, p. 157.

¹¹² DAWSON, Jan and KLUGE, Alexander. 'Alexander Kluge interviewed by Jan Dawson.' *Film Comment* (November–December 1974): 51–57, p. 37.

¹¹³ BENJAMIN, Walter. The Author as Producer. In: **Walter Benjamin**. Selected Writings. Vol. 2, part 2. 1931-1934. Michael W. Jennings, et. al. (ed.) Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005, p. 770: "this concept of technique contains an indication of the correct determination of the relation between tendency and quality, the question raised at the outset."

reconsider everything “which has come to be regarded as normal.”¹¹⁴ For Kluge, the work of art is not the placeholder of some truth, as for Adorno, but a construction site where the spectator should be able to participate in the meaning-making process. As Bowie rightly notes, in this regard Kluge once more stands closer to Brecht or Benjamin than to Adorno: while Adorno also favors fragmentary works of art, in Adorno’s case this is because he thinks that fragmentation is a formal criticism of the “inauthentic unity of a fictitious totality of meaning,” to use Wellmer’s words.¹¹⁵ Kluge’s works are fragmentary, but not for the sake of negating the binding discourse of modernity. Whether this discourse is true or false is not for Kluge to decide: his aim is, instead, to expand the capacities and possibilities of the receiving subject. It is the recipients, and not the work itself—*qua* self-contained object—who have to question and ultimately reconfigure the public sphere. Critique, however negative, will not do. Rather, by including the spectators in the production of his works, Kluge aims to *transform*—to *refunctionalize*—the ‘apparatus of production.’¹¹⁶ “Not criticism alone, but effective counterproduction is required.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ BOWIE, Andrew. ‘Alexander Kluge: An Introduction.’ *Cultural Critique*, No. 4 (Autumn, 1986): 111-118, p. 115.

¹¹⁵ WELLMER, Albrecht. ‘Truth, Semblance, and Reconciliation.’ In **The Persistence of Modernity**. Translated by David Midgley, 1-35. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007, p. 19.

¹¹⁶ Cf. BENJAMIN, 2005, p. 774: “[Brecht] was the first to make of intellectuals the far-reaching demand not to supply the apparatus of production without, to the utmost extent possible, changing it in accordance with socialism.”

¹¹⁷ NEGΤ and KLUGE, 1993, p. 266. At this point, one might wonder whether Kluge’s political and aesthetic theories and his understanding of art’s role in the reconstruction of the public sphere are still valid in today’s societies, where face-to-face communication, and even mass media like film and television have been replaced by digital communication, and where traditional forms of labor are being replaced by, e.g., artificial intelligence or machine labor. Recently, the massive power and diffusion of digital companies—like Meta or Google—and financial markets have given rise to the talk of ‘neo-feudalism’ or ‘techno-feudalism.’ The terms have been used to refer to a situation where societies are dominated by powerful elite groups, where state power is privatized, and where the majority of the citizens lose their legal protections. Regarding the public sphere, its ‘refeudalization’ (Habermas) refers to the way in which private organizations gain increasing public power, and state institutions turn to ‘marketing’ and ‘advertisement’ techniques to win support, blurring the distinction between state and society. (Cf. MOROZOV, Evgeny. ‘Critique of Techno-Feudal Reason.’ *New Left Review*, 133 / 134 January-April 2022: 89-126.) In spite of these changes, I believe Kluge’s aesthetics and his conceptualization of the public sphere are still dated. Briefly, let me mention two signs that point in this direction. First, what Kluge says about the persistence of resistance (in people’s wishes and in their imagination) still applies in spite of the aforementioned changes: even if capitalism has developed new tools to coopt these, people’s obstinacy is irreducible. Second, just as in all previous forms

In order to provoke the spectators into questioning the discursive and material limitations of the public sphere, Kluge's films foster an openness of experience through the transgression of genres, narrative structures, and the idea of authorship. This is apparent in his first full-length feature film, *Yesterday Girl*, a film that tells the story of Anita G., a woman who, just like the German nation after the disasters of the Second World War, is trying to run away from her past, instead of 'working through' it, to use Adorno's phrase. The tone of the film is set from the very beginning, since even before the 'plot' begins, Kluge provides two cyphers which the spectator's imagination will have to work against. The first is the film's title—*Abschied von Gestern* — "farewell to yesterday." The second is the opening epigraph which reads: "It is not an abyss that separates us from yesterday, but a changed situation."¹¹⁸ Can we actually say goodbye to yesterday? Can we pretend that our history has been left behind? What is the relation between our past, present, and future?

I cannot go into an in-depth analysis of the whole film here but, in what follows, I describe the first scene to illustrate some of Kluge's recurring aesthetic strategies and motifs. There, we see the back of a judge that reads off Anita's personal information and describes her 'crimes': Anita, we learn, stole a co-worker's jacket, and now awaits to hear what the conviction for such a crime will be. This judge, whose face we cannot initially see, appears, at first, to be insensitive to Anita's story, to her background, to her motives. He—as many of the characters encountered later on by Anita—cannot understand "why she behaves like a criminal, or why she tries to become happy but doesn't succeed; or why she gives up opportunities and

of capitalism, it is still the case that we need art and the work of the public sphere to orient this obstinacy progressively. Kluge's recent work can be seen as his attempt to tap into these digital media and 'refunctionalize' them, something that echoes his earlier move from film to television. Ultimately, Kluge is aware that capitalism is always changing, trying to manipulate people's obstinate energies. But this need to constantly transform itself also signals the persistence of people's needs, wishes, fantasies, and self-regulation. Hence the continued validity of Kluge's aesthetic project of "crafting [the new media] into vanguard generators of time and space [that make] more fantasy, more obstinate feelings, and more unhindered self-regulation" possible." (Langston, in FULK, Kirkland. "Ohne Musik ist alles Leben ein Irrtum": Alexander Kluge, Techno, and the Proletarian Counterpublic Sphere." *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 92:3, 2017: 245-263, p. 261).

¹¹⁸ In the original German the phrase reads: "Uns trennt von Gestern kein Abgrund, sondern die veränderte Lage."

tries to find chances where none exist.”¹¹⁹ This is apparent by his constant questioning of Anita: he asks about her parents, where she comes from, what did she study. Did she go to school? Did she finish? Did she have a job? “Why did you give all that up?” the judge asks, still expressionless, after learning she was working as a telephone operator.¹²⁰ But his posture, the way he looks at her, make it apparent that he is not willing to hear what she has to say. What counts is *his* experience, not hers, as he mentions after dismissing one of her replies. The exchange continues with the same logic, until a moment where the audience keeps hearing the judge, and yet the image shows his mouth motionless. Eventually, he calls her forth. “Were you cold?” he asks. “Yes.” “In my experience,” the judge says, “that’s unusual.”

One is prone to read the faceless judge as a representation of the just as faceless apparatus of bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is, after all, neutral, guided by an abstract notion of justice, it *must*—for the sake of its neutrality—detach itself from the real sociohistorical conditions. Hence why the judge cannot comprehend Anita’s past, her history of dispossession, her status as a runaway and an outsider (Anita, we learn, is of Jewish descent and comes from Easter Germany) and the stigmas that all of this entails. Such neutrality is conveyed by the film when, for example, we see the judge silent and yet keep on hearing his voice. As Hansen puts it, this dis-synchronicity shows the way that the “discourse of legality exceeds the individual act of enunciation.”¹²¹ But the film also shows how, to use Habermas’ words, “bureaucracy stands convicted of its own irrational rationality.”¹²² Bureaucracy, below its veneer, is not as neutral as it claims to be. The judge thus dismisses Anita’s answers (skeptical when she claims to be from Leipzig, he replies: “You haven’t got a Leipzig accent”), filtering them through his own privileged standpoint. The judge asks Anita whether she is claiming that her past—the damages suffered by her grandparents in 1938 because they were Jewish—has anything to do with “[her] present situation.”¹²³ “No. Then let’s leave it, it’s in the past.” He comprehends the

¹¹⁹ DAWSON, 1974.

¹²⁰ *Yesterday Girl*, directed by Alexander Kluge.

¹²¹ HANSEN, Miriam Bratu. “Space of History, Language of Time: Kluge’s *Yesterday Girl* (1966).” In Eric Rentschler, ed., **German Film and Literature: Adaptations and Transformations, 193–216**. New York: Methuen, 1986, p. 197.

¹²² HABERMAS, 2001, p. 116.

¹²³ *Yesterday Girl*, directed by Alexander Kluge.

life impulses, wishes, desires of Anita, just as he cannot comprehend her past, or how that affects her present situation.

In *Yesterday Girl*, Kluge attempts to illustrate *something* about the past—past mistakes, past wishes, past (hi)stories—and about the way we relate to it. But he is not the one to say exactly what is the correct way to work through our past, nor does he provide the spectators with answers. Instead, the film aims to raise questions, to provoke a “storm of fantasy,” as Kluge writes,¹²⁴ forcing individuals to think about their relation to their individual and collective histories.

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To foster an experiential openness, Kluge provides works which are more like construction sites, and whose aim is, in Brechtian fashion, preventing the spectator from identifying with the character of situation, thereby frustrating their experience. Hence why his films and stories tend to leave the spectator with a feeling of incompleteness, of frustration. This is not accidental, however, but is intended to prevent the receiver from being absorbed by the diegesis of a seamless narrative, thereby encouraging an active reception. Kluge’s work utilizes many strategies to achieve this, among which we could mention the “literarization” of film, with which he aims to produce a more complex viewing by inserting intertitles (and even voice-overs) through which he fragments the representational (i.e. photographic) base of film.¹²⁵ Another strategy is the crossing between documentary and fiction, a crossing whose goal is to problematize that division between what is ‘real’ and what is not. Fictional discourse (the discourse of fantasy and the imagination) as Hansen notes, is ‘real,’ so Kluge contends, insofar as it emerges from a protest against reality, and yet it can still regress to a subjective and abstract point of view.¹²⁶ The documentary form, for its part, tends to confuse the immediacy of what is

¹²⁴ KLUGE, 2012a, p. 44. Translation modified.

¹²⁵ ‘Literarization’ is the term used by Hansen to describe Kluge’s technique and is borrowed from Brecht. Notably, a similar strategy is used in his novels and theoretical works, where images are interspersed, breaking with the naturalized and reified modes of reading.

¹²⁶ HANSEN, Miriam Bratu. ‘Cooperative Auteur Cinema and Oppositional Public Sphere: Alexander Kluge’s Contribution to Germany in Autumn.’ In **Alexander Kluge**. *Raw Materials for the Imagination*. Edited by Tara Forrest, 50-71. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012, p. 60.

perceivable with what is objectively real—thus occluding the real weight of the functional and the structural dimensions of society. Kluge aims at exposing reality as the ‘historical fiction’ that it is, and at recovering the real weight and potential contained in the fictive, in the ‘fantastic.’ And this is something he achieves by blurring the line between documentation and fictional storytelling.

An example of the above is found in his literary account of the air raid on his hometown, the German city of Halberstadt, found in his *Neue Geschichten*. There, Kluge juxtaposes an account of the bombing as seen from the point of view of the pilots who bombarded the town—the perspective from “above,” which not surprisingly is told in a highly technical, abstract manner—with the stories of the people “below,” who try to react to the events but have no time nor the means to get to safety. Kluge, for example, writes of Frau Schrader, a cinema manager (and victim of the bombing) who cannot even find the right means for expressing her experience: “The houses were burning ‘like torches’. She searched for a better expression for what she could so clearly see.”¹²⁷ Kluge locates this passage—without making explicit connections—alongside the descriptions of the workers making the munitions (workers whose only goal is to “make a thorough, solid, trustworthy impression” on their bosses with their labour, as they mention),¹²⁸ and alongside a ‘fake’ interview with a pilot of one of the bombarding planes, who, after being asked why were the bombs still dropped—even when the city had surrendered—can only answer:

The goods had to go down onto the city. They cost a lot of money. You couldn’t just throw that away, in the mountains or open fields after it was produced at such expense. How could this, in your opinion, have been reported to the higher ups?¹²⁹

The associations between these passages are left for the reader to build. What is clear, however, is that Kluge’s account of the bombing does not aim at producing

¹²⁷ KLUGE, Alexander. **Neue Geschichten, No. 1-18**, ‘Unheimlichkeit der Zeit’. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977, p. 36.

¹²⁸ ROBERTS, David. ‘Alexander Kluge and German History.’ In **Alexander Kluge**. *Raw Materials for the Imagination*. Edited by Tara Forrest, 127-154. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012, p. 135.

¹²⁹ KLUGE, Alexander. ‘The Air Raid on Halberstadt, 8 April 1945 (extract)’ In **Alexander Kluge**. *Raw Materials for the Imagination*. Edited by Tara Forrest, 155-172. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012b, p. 159.

a true, objective account of the events, nor a phenomenological, subjectively correct account.

More definitive than ‘literarization’ and the crossing of documentary and fiction, montage becomes the main technical tool with which Kluge’s work has been associated, and that most clearly exposes how he conceptualizes—and attempts to construct—an emancipatory artwork. A technical device that does not interfere with images but rather “arranges them in a constellation,” as Adorno wrote in an essay on film highly indebted to (but also influential for) Kluge, montage appears as an aesthetic answer to the capitalist narrowness of experience.¹³⁰ But in their understandings of montage the differences between Adorno and Kluge once more come to the forefront, and show the rigid aspects of Adorno’s aesthetics. Adorno’s analyses of montage—in line with the general trend of his aesthetics—are guided by the idea that reality is meaningless, and that its task should be exposing this fact, and safeguarding the possibility of reconciliation. If Adorno praised montage, this was because he thought that it could achieve this double movement of negation and utopia.¹³¹ Montage did this by “rupturing the semblance provided by art,” to use Miriam Hansen’s words, and then, through the juxtaposition of unrelated and heterogeneous elements, allowing something ‘new’ to emerge.¹³² Adorno ends up overlooking, however, the material that is used to create it, or the media in which it is presented. In Adorno’s work, the significance of montage is reduced to a singular, undifferentiated task, and the social and historical context of its production and reception is not considered.

Kluge is not concerned with whether or not the use of montage stands for a ‘disavowal’ of unity that dialectically ‘reaffirms unity,’ as Adorno was. He *is* interested, however, in the possibility of surprising the spectators and pushing them to see reality as if with a new pair of eyes. Yet, Kluge does not presuppose exactly which perspective his recipients will adopt, or in what direction will the ‘shock’

¹³⁰ In ‘Transparencies on Film,’ Adorno speaks of the ‘Oberhauseners’ in reference to the group of filmmakers (led by Kluge) who signed the ‘Oberhausen manifesto,’ and which led to the emergence of New German Cinema. ADORNO, 1981-2, p. 199.

¹³¹ Montage, Adorno writes, “disavows unity through the demonstrative disparateness of the parts at the same time that, as a principle of form, it reaffirms unity” ADORNO, 2011, p. 203.

¹³² HANSEN, 2012, p. 222.

direct their imagination. Kluge's use of montage, therefore, not only differs from how Adorno understood it, but also differs from the understanding of the technique as found in filmmakers such as Eisenstein, who used montage in order to produce a "spectacle delivering a precisely defined impact on spectators," as Stuart Liebman writes.¹³³ Kluge's goal is the polar opposite of this: to make a cinema where the spectators can produce *their own meanings*.

For Kluge, a truly emancipatory work of art would have to produce, *not* a desired effect, but an active spectatorship, one where the imagination of the audiences was allowed to make its own connections. The goal of Kluge's filmic and artistic practice is to make his audience suspend their prejudices and presuppositions—everything in reality that is taken for granted becomes subject for questioning. According to Kluge, what is required to make art productive for the project of emancipation is an artistic practice that acts as a medium through which individuals can connect their concrete (yet often inarticulate) experiences of oppression, with the underground structures of reality which produce such experiences. Because those structures lie beyond what can be grasped sensually, however, Kluge uses techniques such as montage, which fragment the "false continuum" of reality in order to create gaps through which the causes of disaster can become visible.¹³⁴ Hence why, contrary to traditional theories of montage that attempt to produce a third image by juxtaposing two different (often contrasting) shots, Kluge's interest lies in the gap that opens up between them.¹³⁵ It is in this gap where a space opens up for the unfolding of the spectators' imagination and, therefore, where the possibility to radically reconstruct rationality and the public sphere lies.

In calling for the intervention of art in consciousness, Kluge could be said to be following Adorno. Yet Kluge insists, contra Adorno, that this intervention must affect *everyday* consciousness, and that art must not cut its ties from the real movement of history, and from the concrete possibilities of an emancipatory political praxis. In the story that closes Kluge's collection *The Devil's Blindspot*, entitled 'Moments of Danger for the Last Survivors of Critical Theory at Adorno's

¹³³ LIEBMAN, 1988, p. 18.

¹³⁴ Cf. HABERMAS, 2001, p. 122.

¹³⁵ HANSEN, 2012, p. 60.

Funeral,' Kluge provides a fictional snapshot that perfectly captures this gap that separates him from the theory of Adorno. There, Kluge describes the events surrounding Adorno's (fictional) funeral. Max Horkheimer refuses to comment on the music, or on whether Adorno would have found it appropriate. Hans-Jurgen Krahl, for his part, stands outside—perhaps to disrupt the funeral? Or was his intention to “kidnap” the coffin?”¹³⁶ Perhaps the most telling moment is one where Kluge describes how a downpour surprises the funeral procession. ‘No one from “Critical Theory” had an umbrella,’ Kluge writes.¹³⁷ This is the ‘Critical Theory’ that Adorno represents: one that aims to transform society, yet—to continue with the allegory—is so detached from reality that it forgets to check the weather forecast. This is not the Critical Theory that Kluge wants to preserve. “To save the minds [of Critical Theory]” Kluge writes, as if describing his pragmatic approach to art and critique, “I order large pots of warm beer to be prepared . . . This is a precaution against catching cold.”¹³⁸

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¹³⁶ KLUGE, Alexander. **The Devil's Blind Spot, Tales from the New Century**. Translated by Martin Chalmers and Michael Husle. New York: New Directions, 2004, p. 307-308.

¹³⁷ KLUGE, 2004, p. 308.

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