

Experimental Fiction or Classical Story-Telling? Alexander Kluge's Multi-Media Authorship

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1. The Discourse of Experimentalism

The artist Anselm Kiefer recently compared Alexander Kluge's work to that of the physicists at CERN who smash atoms into their smallest constituent parts in order to discover new particles and ultimately the laws that hold the world together. In Kiefer's view, Kluge's work achieves a similar effect by letting a multitude of events, ideas and documents pertaining to the most diverse thematic fields collide. (Kiefer 182) Without using the term "experimental", Kiefer places Alexander Kluge in a tradition of "experimental literature" which goes back to Emile Zola's defence of the "experimental novel" as a form of writing that aims to use the observation of human behaviour as a tool for the discovery of the laws which determine this behaviour. (Zola 1–54) In the spirit of 19th century scientific optimism, Zola argued that art, and the work of the novelist, should become one of the sciences and use scientific methods in order to contribute to the complete understanding of the world and enable the correction or eradication of its illnesses. Where Zola drew on medical and sociological examples seen through the prism of a mechanical determinism, Kiefer has updated the comparison of arts and science by using the most advanced form of high-industrial particle physics, but the underlying method of transferring scientific capital into literary capital has not changed.

Kiefer's comparison is just one in a long tradition of attempts to conceptualize an "experimental" art. But while the label has persisted throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, Zola's original definition with its insistence on the aim of mastering the real through literary experimentation seems to have lost much of its relevance. Perhaps in acknowledgement of the fact that writers experiment not so much with people and material objects, but with words, sentences and larger textual structures, the term has come to refer primarily to projects which question and re-organise the literary components of their work rather than the physical, medical or social laws which govern the real

world. According to a recent overview of experimental literature, the “one feature that all literary experiments share is their commitment to raising fundamental questions about the very nature and being of verbal art itself.” Whereas Zola aimed at changing society, the history of experimental writing (or at least its academic conceptualization) has focused more on changing and renewing literature: “Experiment is [. . .] literature’s way of reinventing itself.” (Bray, Gibbons, McHale 1)

Kiefer implicitly acknowledges this shift when he points out that the result of Kluge’s literary particle accelerator work lies in the avoidance of those neat logical or dramaturgical connections which govern mainstream narrative writing. Instead, a new, previously unseen connection arises, promising new knowledge out of the debris that the collisions have produced. But Kiefer adds another significant twist to his characterisation of Kluge’s method when he concludes that this new “Zusammenhang”¹ has been created as if by magic by the author himself, who is the only one with the power to see and produce these previously unseen connections.

Within the space of two sentences, we have moved seamlessly from the world of science to that of magic and fairy tales. That may well correspond to the spirit of Kluge’s work which constantly questions and subverts the distinctions that we use to construct our concept of reality—between fact and fiction, science and magic, the past and the present.² And yet, the sleight of hand which shifts the concept of the experiment from the well-defined confines of the physics laboratory to the realm of story-telling should be noted and queried. What can it mean to describe Kluge’s work as “experimental fiction” and what is gained for an understanding of this work by the application of such a label?³

Alexander Kluge’s production is not easy to categorize. An author of unbounded productivity, he has published works of literary fiction, political philosophy, and film theory, feature films and documentary films as well as a huge and ever-growing number of television magazines. Recently he has also started to colonize the internet, employed new formats of electronic publishing and exhibited his work in museum spaces. Working with the spoken as well as the written word, creating moving images, but also incorporating still images and music from other sources, Kluge has spread his activities across almost all available media. At the same time, he appears to have avoided the established genres on which much mainstream activity in these media rests. Few of his films can be considered proper feature films, with the director instead preferring hybrid forms that have been classified as “essay films”. (Blümlinger) Only one of his books, published early in his career, was originally presented as a novel, and this book has undergone more (and more serious) revisions than any other of Kluge’s works, eventually losing the original genre label.⁴ *Schlachtbeschreibung* never really fitted established definitions of the genre of the novel anyway, but with its collage of historical

documents from the battle of Stalingrad it might have qualified either as a kind of “Sachbuch” —the German category for non-fictional, popular journalistic books—or as a decidedly “experimental novel”.

The avoidance or subversion of established genres and the rules on which they rely may indeed justify a classification of Kluge’s works as experimental. In keeping with the expectations associated with this term, they have frequently been described as “difficult”, though rarely as shocking or iconoclastic—the other qualities which Bray, Gibbons and McHale associate with experimental literature. (Bray, Gibbons, McHale 2) On the other hand, scholarship about Kluge’s work has routinely positioned the author in the tradition of modernism and, more specifically (and in line with the author’s own regular references), as an heir to the aesthetic, philosophical and historiographical concepts of Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno.⁵ The distinction is significant, because the modernism of Benjamin and Adorno is characterized by a strong attachment to aesthetic tradition and a humanist philosophy, both features which the “experimental” wing of modernism usually sought to leave behind in the name of science and progress. Although Kluge’s career as a public figure began with the Oberhausen manifesto in which a group of young filmmakers declared in vintage avant-gardist style that the old cinema was “dead” and that they intended to bury it for good, he has since shown no inclination to present his work as a programmatic rejection of tradition. (Oberhausener Manifest)

At the same time, Kluge has frequently described his work as essentially unfinished, because it can only ever be completed—however briefly and provisionally—in the mind of his audience. The totalizing impulse of modernism with its attempts to create all-encompassing systems and representations of the modern world is thus always balanced in Kluge’s work by a tendency towards fragmentation, gaps and re-organisation which recalls crucial features of an experimental impulse driven by the desire to try out new things. In a recent discussion of experimental writing, Steve Tomasula has suggested that such experiments with readers depend to a large extent on new forms of organising the information contained in literary texts, or, to use his term, experimental “information design.” While traditional realist forms tend to hide their construction in order to heighten the sense of reality, “experimental” forms reject the impression of naturalness and draw attention to their “constructed nature,” making the design a part of the story-telling itself. (Tomasula 436) According to Tomasula, contemporary experimental information design is characterized in particular by a focus on networks, interconnectedness, decentralization and a constant blurring of genres. (Tomasula 441–442)

Such a description appears to provide a useful heuristic framework for a discussion of Kluge’s writing which aims to go beyond the established categorisations of his work. In particular, Kluge’s preference for shorter forms, or “Geschichten”, which are assembled in ever growing and frequently

re-organised collections may prompt an analysis that concentrates on the nature of these constituent parts of his books as well as on their interconnectedness which creates the “Zusammenhang” that is so central to Kluge’s poetics.

2. Short Prose and Big Books

The development of Kluge’s literary publications looks somewhat paradoxical: His first book, *Lebensläufe*, consisted of six fictional biographical portraits, all but one of them of medium length, presenting a range of characters and their life-stories between the Third Reich and post-war Germany, and tied together by the author’s suggestion that these stories were concerned with the “Frage nach der Tradition” (question of tradition) (Kluge, *Lebensläufe* 7)⁶, specifically the “Bruchstelle von 1945” (rupture of 1945, *Lebensläufe* 279). Later books would present increasingly shorter stories, often describing a single moment, event or observation, but in ever growing numbers, resulting in collections of several hundred pages. Chapter headings are employed to suggest thematic or temporal connections between the hugely diverse stories, but the structure of the books is far from orderly or logical. Readers, therefore, experience a constant oscillation between a highly fragmented story-universe that consists of hundreds of short texts and the suggestion, supported by titles and chapter headings, that there must be a grand totality underneath all of these small pieces which promises to encompass both the individual and wider social experiences of the present while showing this present as part of an endless network of knots and connections covering the entirety of human history—and beyond. Starting with the two volume publication *Chronik der Gefühle* in 2000 which combined nearly all of his previous literary publications with approximately 800 new stories, Kluge’s books have finally taken on the appearance of an ongoing, ever-growing project in which all elements belong together. (Kluge, *Ermittlung* 10) While they are clearly not novels, they are, in the words of Matthew Miller, “epic in scope”, yet not “organized according to any overarching temporally integrated narrative”. (Miller 321) In fact, the organisation of Kluge’s books actively defies most conventional forms of integration without abandoning claims to represent some form of connection, or “Zusammenhang”, as Kluge calls it.

But the very nature and construction of this “Zusammenhang” has always been a problem for Kluge’s audience. Responding to critics who claimed that his films were incomprehensible for “normal viewers”, the narrator in Kluge’s film *Die Patriotin* described the protagonist, a history teacher, as deeply confused by the challenge of making sense of German history: “Most of the time, Gabi Teichert is rather confused. This is a question of context/connections.” (Kluge, *Patriotin* 168) Confusion is presented in this film both as a response to the complex and ungovernable structure of historical reality and—crucially—as a productive state of mind, because it motivates the pro-

tagonist to search for the very connections which might permit her to develop a new perspective and make sense of this history. Kluge's work is thus about both mirroring the complex state of reality, and providing an information design which forces the audience to become active and decipher this reality for themselves. It is "experimental" in the tradition of Zola as it claims that its innovative structure is designed to reflect the true structure of reality rather than fulfilling the demands of literary convention. The three crucial ingredients in this design are comparatively short units (labelled as stories, or "Geschichten"), a broad, all-encompassing range of topics and locations, and a method of combining seemingly unrelated elements in such a way as to force audiences to search for and construct new connections instead of reproducing the established ones.

Just by means of illustration, I will provide a few examples from the American edition of stories published under the title *The Devil's Blind Spot. Tales From the New Century* in 2004. The volume consists of five chapters, containing 173 separate stories as well as a small number of illustrations. According to the author's foreword, the purpose of the stories lies in the attempt to decipher the "WRITING ON THE WALL. Once it alerted tyrants. In our time the warnings (e.g., Chernobyl, 9/11, asymmetrical warfare) are addressed not only to the rulers, but to all of us, and I have the impression these communications contain a great deal of small print. We are reading it in the surroundings of the new century." (*Devil's Blind Spot* vii–viii)

The introduction sets out a challenge both for the author and his readers: to see and understand a coded message which can be found all around us, but will only make sense to an alert observer willing to connect the fragmented pieces. Contrasting the capital letters of the "writing on the wall" with the crucial, but usually neglected "small print" of legal agreements, Kluge promises to seek out both the seemingly obvious and the repressed aspects of reality. The introduction thus provides a variation of the core elements which have featured in almost all of Kluge's explanatory paratexts for the past 40 years: there are the references to history and tradition, but also to the present as the framework and expectational horizon for the readers; there is the focus on the "small print" and ephemera which not only accompany the big history, but enlighten it and perhaps reveal its true meaning; and there is the urgent need to decipher such communications, to make sense of them, because one's survival may depend on it. Kluge seems to eschew an experimental approach that draws attention to its innovative literary features in favour of an urgent appeal to the readers' engagement with the reality beyond the book. If experimental writing is first and foremost designed to renew literature, the author shows little interest in such a project, as he is faced with the more urgent task of understanding "the new century".

But the clarity of this programme is quickly subverted by Kluge's execution which, as we have already seen, is more likely to cause confusion

than understanding. While the mostly short stories which make up the text of the collection may not be too mysterious on their own, the connections between them and the sequence in which they have been ordered defy easy understanding. The vast range of topics, places, characters and times covered in Kluge's stories doesn't lend itself to a neat historical or causal sequence, but neither does Kluge produce an orderly network of knots and connections. Some sense of orientation is provided by titles, as each story has its individual title, but is also part of a larger chapter with its own title. Kluge ostensibly uses these titles to draw the readers' attention to specific topics or problems, and has sometimes suggested that readers should chart their way through his books by picking items whose titles appeal to them instead of dutifully reading one piece after another. (DBS, viii) But Kluge's titles are often more mysterious than the stories themselves, and they rarely provide simple information about what to expect.

Here is a list of the chapter titles from *The Devil's Blind Spot*: "Little Is Known of the Devil's Good Deeds"; "Love as a Foreign Language"; "Sara-jewo, No Matter What the Place is Called"; "Flying Blind"; "The Devil in the White House". The fourth chapter, "Flying Blind", contains five subsections: "Stories of the Cosmos"; "Submarine Stories"; "Can a Body Politic Say I?"; "Homeward Bound"; "Man Without a Head". Focusing on the significantly longer German edition of the book, Matthew Miller has observed that Kluge's chapters frequently establish a focus on specific locations or spatial metaphors, but that there is then no obvious connection between these focal points and some of the stories included under particular headings. (Miller 322) The chapter titles chosen for the American edition follow a different, primarily thematic logic, but make it equally difficult to establish a clear sense of order or "Zusammenhang".

They are, however, an essential aspect of the book's information design. Choosing catchy and sufficiently mysterious titles for his works has been one of Kluge's most celebrated skills, and he has always used the headings for chapters and individual stories as a means of attracting, sustaining and channelling his readers' attention. These titles provide a semblance of structure, breaking down the lengthy collections into smaller, manageable units which may be governed by common themes. In almost all of his books, Kluge has included detailed contents pages which permit readers to select individual chapters or stories. While most of his German publications provide a full list of all stories in the order in which they are printed, often running over several pages, the American collection *The Devil's Blind Spot* presents the story titles in an alphabetical index at the end of the book, thus creating an additional, equally valid structure which invites readers to discover new connections outside of the primary structure provided by the chapters. Although Kluge appears to take great care in ordering his stories, the information design of

his books invites readers to create their own sequence and to discover new connections which the author may not have been aware of.

But even readers who follow Kluge's own presentation as dutifully as academic critics intent on deciphering the author's intention will inevitably encounter a series of unexpected turns which will force them to make decisions of their own. The surface structure of the books is usually rather loose, as the chapter titles are sufficiently open to cover a broad range of topics. Chapter 1 of *The Devil's Blind Spot* contains 16 separate items or stories of differing lengths which are supposed to focus on "the devil's good deeds". They are situated in post-war Milan, 1950s West Germany, among advancing American troops in the final days of WWII, present day Naples, Southeast Germany during the time of the witch-hunts, moments from the lives of the early astronomers Kepler and Galileo, at the Viennese Institute of Criminology in 1932, in New York after 9/11, on board the St Moritz Express train, Northern Germany in 1931, at a Hamburg zoo during the Allied air raids, during the "first epoch of Globalization" (37) and in a seminar at Stanford University, during "the age of asymmetrical warfare" (38), i.e., today. The characters in these stories include soldiers, scientists, firemen, physicians, Christian theologians, and a rabbi, a German married couple, a Russian refugee, Adolf Hitler and his entourage, and an unnamed old lady and her carer. Some are historical personalities, and the stories associated with these figures may be factual, others are nameless or most likely fictional.

Gunther Martens has demonstrated that the geographical scope of Kluge's stories has expanded from a narrow focus on Germany and some key locations of the Second World War in the early works to almost the entire globe (and occasionally outer space) in his most recent books. (Martens 35) This expansion has been accompanied by a similar expansion of the stories' temporal reach which may now cover any moment from prehistoric times to the near future, still including of course those key events of 20th century German history which provided the focus for Kluge's early works. (see Uecker, *Wiederholungszwang* 125–129) All of history and the entire space which can be observed by humans provides the raw material for Kluge's work as its thematic and temporal range has expanded ever further since his earliest publications. This expansion is justified by the author's belief that the far-away past is always still with us and lies at the root of people's present actions and perceptions even if they are not aware of it. (*Chronik der Gefühle* I, 462, 989) It is the task of the artist to break down their audiences' delusional sense of a present without any past and to confront them with their real selves: In a work of art the spectator "meets himself in a shape which he had in prehistoric times and carries within himself for his entire life, even he doesn't know it." (*Chronik* I, 803) Kluge's challenging organisation of his work seems designed to enable a confrontation with these unknown remnants of

the past in the present, or, as Kiefer puts it, to let seemingly random elements collide so that new energy is released from their encounter.

If the information design of Kluge's works is challenging both because of the thematic and temporal range that must be accommodated and as a result of its loose structure which allows all elements to be connected with each other, the format of the individual elements themselves can appear as fairly simple, even conventional. It is true that Kluge employs a variety of genres, but they are firmly rooted in literary tradition. In particular, Kluge draws on the short genres associated with popular storytelling in the Enlightenment period, published in the newly emerging newspapers and calendars. The farming calendar (Almanach), a popular genre in Germany in the 18th and early 19th centuries, promised to combine instructive news and entertaining stories, embodied in a characteristic form of anecdotal and moralising storytelling or "Kalendergeschichten". Less frequent are references to the classical literary "Novelle" or the modern short story, but they also appear occasionally in Kluge's narrative universe as do personal memories and situational observations which can be directly attributed to the author himself.

Another crucial component derived from Enlightenment traditions in Kluge's mix of genres is provided by the form of the dialogue which enacts a conversation about events as well as philosophical principles. Although frequently revolving around a narrative core, it functions more as an analytical than a narrative genre. Some of Kluge's dialogues take the form of interviews and sometimes draw on the lengthy conversations which Kluge conducts for his television magazines. Experts, for instance academic researchers or journalists, often appear as a source of information both in these magazines and in Kluge's stories, and frequently their mode of presentation is aimed at conveying information rather than story-telling. At other times, the contributors to such dialogues remain nameless and exchangeable, representing the dialogic principle of working through a problem by surrounding it with questions and tentative counter questions in more abstract form.

Wolfgang Reichmann has argued that Kluge draws on the ancient forms of the chronicle and the calendar for his collections, but has updated them for the purposes of the 20th and 21st centuries. (Reichmann 89) Kluge has transferred these once popular formats with their mixture of genres and purposes, their combination of entertainment, practical advice and philosophising, often underpinned by strong Christian sentiment, to what is essentially now a high-brow literary format, in the process extending the range of topics and discourses and replacing simple moral conclusions with the challenge to the readers to establish not only the connections between all the parts, but also their significance themselves. While no-one would have characterised Johann Peter Hebel's *Kalendergeschichten* as experimental in the late 18th century⁷, Kluge's collections which imitate Hebel's work are widely perceived as com-

plex, challenging and confusing. This may be the result of what Miller has characterised as a “fusion of highly theoretical issues with the popular genre of anecdotal storytelling”. (Miller 329) Where the authors of chronicles, calendars and encyclopaedias relied on a pre-established sense of order in the world and provided reasonably neat moral advice, Kluge challenges his readers to confront an overwhelmingly diverse and seemingly chaotic world and reconsider their methods of orientation by finding their own path through his stories. Walter Benjamin observed in the 1930s that the storyteller of old who would provide advice and guidance to his audience has been replaced in modernity by narrators who can no longer make sense of the world because it is changing so quickly. (Benjamin 83–107) Kluge’s storytelling seems to illustrate this claim, but does not want to let go of the earlier promise of help and orientation that made such storytelling so attractive.

For Kluge, this is ultimately a question of “Zusammenhang”, of how the myriad pieces are connected and what the whole should look like. In an early version, in his so-called novel *Schlachtbeschreibung*, Kluge described the structuring principle as a “matrix” where each element was locked into place to create a stable and robust structure. More recently, he has employed the metaphors of the network and the sphere, highlighting either the openness and variability of connections between the elements or their simultaneity and equal significance within the construction.⁸ As his *Chronik der Gefühle* signalled, Kluge’s texts are present to him not as stages in a historical development of his own work, but as constantly evolving, equi-present fragments of an ever expanding attempt to grasp the interconnectedness of the past, the present and the future of human experience.

It is therefore not sufficient to describe the process by which Kluge assembles his texts as a merely additive technique. (Miller 332) What sustains this project and makes its principles visible is a specific variant of the modernist technique of montage. This is most obvious in Kluge’s films and television productions where montage frequently appears as disruption of any visual and narrative coherence. By comparison, his books appear less daring, because individual stories are usually left intact, and montage works at the level of the connections between texts rather than intervening openly within the stories. Kluge has talked about montage at great length, and much of the secondary literature about Kluge’s work has focused on the way in which Kluge uses this technique. (Roberts) In our context, it must suffice to point out that he distinguishes a technique which aims at creating fixed connections and interpretations of these connections from one which opens up new experiences and stimulates the viewers or readers to follow their own thoughts. Kluge’s use of montage is usually located on the latter pole of this distinction; as the example of the sequence of chapters and stories in *The Devil’s Blind Spot* has shown, it works frequently not through creating simple binary structures, but by amassing large quantities of texts or images whose connections

are tentative, requiring readers to select and combine the individual elements in their own mind.⁹ Andreas Sombroek has characterised Kluge's approach as a "Poetik des Dazwischen", a poetics which deliberately creates small gaps between the elements where the readers' or viewers' activities must find a starting point for their own attempts at establishing connections, structures and meaning—or even resist the pressure to achieve such closure.

This doesn't preclude the discovery of simpler connections, but they are almost always fortuitous or accidental discoveries. Consider for instance the quotation from Donald Rumsfeld which is used to introduce the last chapter in *The Devil's Blind Spot*: "The absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence". (*Devil's Blind Spot* 279) The line is initially read in conjunction with the title of the chapter, "The Devil in the White House", and shows up Rumsfeld's notorious attempt to brush aside the failure of US troops to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. (see Miller 334) But the reference to the devil may also establish connections to the first chapter which included several stories about the interrogation and trials of suspected witches (*Devil's Blind Spot* 12–15)—a procedure which operated with the same paradigm. This connection, or "Zusammenhang", is by no means obvious, let alone the only possible connection, and readers may only make it if they are lucky enough to remember the relevant passages at the right time. Like Benjamin's materialist historian, they have to see a suddenly emerging constellation among the myriad pieces and grasp it firmly in order to make it a presence—otherwise it will be replaced by other, perhaps meaningless constellations and disappear forever. (Benjamin 247)

This description implies a challenge and a heavy responsibility for the reader, but also freedom.¹⁰ The extent of this freedom is perhaps signalled by Kluge's own treatment of his collections. Not only has he occasionally rewritten parts of his work, but he has also permitted the composition of his collections to be disrupted and re-constituted when it suited him. His only "novel", *Schlachtbeschreibung*, exists in at least four different versions which not only include different texts but also present their material in radically different sequences. The English-language title *The Devil's Blind Spot* which I have used to illustrate Kluge's practices, is in fact a heavily truncated version of his original German book *Die Lücke, die der Teufel lässt. Im Umfeld des neuen Jahrhunderts*. Its approximately 500 stories have been reduced to 173, many of which have also been placed under new chapter headings and in entirely new contexts. All the texts in the American book are included in the German version, and yet, they appear to be two completely different books. "Zusammenhang", or so it seems, is always variable, permitting the author to create new arrangements, but also challenging readers to establish new connections by making their own selections: "Each chapter in this book is preceded by a few lines which allow the reader to decide which of them arouse his or her interest." (*Devil's Blind Spot* viii)¹¹

These are, then, the basic constituents of Kluge's collections of stories: a mix of genres derived primarily, but by no means exclusively from popular formats of the Enlightenment period which combined information, instruction and entertainment as their principal purposes; the high-modernist form of montage as the dominant technique of combining and contrasting the various elements of the collections; and an almost post-modern approach to liberating the various elements from their fixed positions so that they can be re-arranged and re-appropriated both by the author and his readers. Attempts to classify Kluge's work as either genuinely "modern" or "post-modern" can provide useful insights into aspects of his technique as well as the underlying poetic concepts (Lutze), but they are in danger of not only constructing a simplistic division, but also of missing the central point of Kluge's own approach which strives to demonstrate time and again that distinctions should be used as flexible, analytical tools and must not be allowed to harden into fixed oppositions.

Kluge's technique can certainly be positioned within an experimental tradition as it aims at creating an open, potentially never complete network of shifting connections. That this approach subverts established literary genres is, however, a by-product of the attempt to make sense of the experience of the world rather than a primary concern driven by literary experimentalism.

3. Reality, Wishes and Anti-Realism

My analysis so far has suggested that Kluge's work is motivated by the author's desire to represent, account for and explore the complex reality in which we live, and that the complexity of this reality provides the principal justification for the complex information design of his books. But such an account which superficially links Kluge's project to the tradition of Zola's experimental realism is incomplete, because it fails to acknowledge the complexity of Kluge's own notion of reality and realism. Kluge has written and talked about this problem repeatedly and at great length, and much critical energy has been invested in documenting, paraphrasing and analysing his approach. (see Kluge, *In Gefahr*; *Raw Materials*) For our purposes here it must be sufficient to highlight Kluge's fervent belief that the representational systems produced by modern science, the media, or politics are all truncated, ideological distortions which produce false hierarchies of what is important, cut off the connections between elements and deny the veracity of individual experiences and desires. If modern scientific "realism" is often programmatically constructed from the fictional perspective of a non-subject, Kluge insists that each individual with his or her personal as well as collective biography brings a valid range of experiences to the table and that the arts—in Kluge's case: film and literature—must articulate these perspectives and create a space for them in the public sphere.

While this may seem uncontroversial in a literary context which often privileges subjectivity, Kluge rejects modes of representing subjectivity which isolate the individuals' experiences from their multiple contexts in order to create the impression of coherence and homogeneity. Each single experience is valid, but no single experience is valid on its own. And not only are the connections—to the past, to far-away places, to social as well as biological frameworks—an integral part of such realism, but they must also constantly be re-established and re-imagined.

The most obvious consequences of this approach provide the basis for the strategy discussed above: Kluge's insistence on combining an ever-growing number of stories which cover all almost all parts of the globe, all imaginable topics and all times is at least in part the author's attempt to avoid false cut-off points. And because his notion of realism privileges an all-encompassing connectivity rather than single-track causality, his storyverse must continuously grow in all directions.

Another, perhaps more mundane consequence of Kluge's attitude towards realism and reality concerns the distinction between facts and fiction and the specific genres with which they are usually associated. Kluge's subversion of these distinctions is hardly original; in fact, some of the early farming calendars routinely combined summaries of news items, anecdotes that might have derived from real incidents, instructive morality tales and doubtful gossip in a mix that would refer to grand historical figures alongside unknown "everymen". Kluge's collections too make it impossible to distinguish between facts and fictions as they explicitly query or simply ignore the usefulness of this particular distinction. The seamless sequencing of the stories suggests that the distinction between "real" and "fictional" characters and events is irrelevant here. We can google names and dates to find out quickly if they have a basis in reality—a research technique which readers of the original calendars did not have at their command—but it is doubtful how useful such research would be. Just like the original calendars, Kluge's stories frequently rely on published material and present it in sometimes unaltered or only marginally edited form, but once again, such observations only serve to describe the author's procedures, but contribute little to an understanding of the purpose of such techniques, because they only describe a technical feature of Kluge's approach, but fail to address its purpose. (see Marten; Reichmann)

Kluge has of course commented on the problematic distinction between facts and fictions repeatedly—a feature which sets his work apart from the early precursors—and pointed out its limited reliability. Most famously, a short sequence in his film *Die Patriotin* labels an obviously staged shot of a smoking man as a documentary image compared to news footage of a bomber plane which is described as part of a staged fiction, because the image cannot show the specific role of the plane in the air raid that is the topic of the scene.

(*Die Patriotin* 68–69) Such techniques seem to function as a form of self-reflection, part of a well-established experimental technique that draws attention to the medial construction of all representation and produces new perspectives by making these constructions and their underlying principles transparent. But once again, it is important to stress that for Kluge such self-reflection aims not primarily at revolutionising writing, but is based on his concern with the nature of reality.

With regard to the example from *Die Patriotin*, the reality of the images can never reside in their isolated status, but requires a multitude of connections to be actualised. These connections quickly extend beyond the realm of immediate causality and temporal linearity and construct a form of “hyper-causality” (*Kongs große Stunde* 277) which connects man’s primeval instincts and the evolution of wishes and motivations over thousands of years with the specific history of industrial production that has created the weaponry of the 20th century and its destructive uses despite the fact that human emotions are always seeking for a “way out”.

Kluge’s realism assumes not only that everything is somehow connected to everything else, but that the reality of human history and politics has created the wrong connections which must be questioned so that alternative connections can be constructed which offer a way out of the history of destructions. The primary force on which such a project must be built is the “anti-realism of emotions”, the steadfast insistence of emotions and desires that the brute force of reality can be overcome. (Forrest 11–13) As these emotions are, for Kluge, a historical force in their own right, any realism which ignores them is necessarily incomplete and ideological.

In Kluge’s early works, this subversive force was hardly detectable, and when it first surfaced in his stories, it worked through references to fairy tales as stories which had encapsulated and transformed real experiences. Increasingly, in his later work, the realm of the fantastic has been expanded to include stories of aliens and ghosts, of spiritual apparitions and unmeasurable forces which establish connections between places and times that would be deemed unreal in scientific terms. Such forces, one of Kluge’s characters argues, work not through the physical principle of cause and effect, but are carried by “spirits that track around the globe and condense into massive MOVEMENTS”.¹² It is therefore not surprising, that some of Kluge’s more recent stories not only stage encounters between real and fictional characters or place historical characters in situations which are not part of their documented biographies (for example in “Heidegger auf der Krim”, *Chronik der Gefühle* I), but also re-awaken dead people who explore events of the present. (“Mein Vater auf der Münchner Sicherheitskonferenz”, *Kongs große Stunde* 263–266)

Reality as we know it is never abandoned in Kluge’s stories, but his experiments are aimed at subverting this reality. Whereas conventional realist

fiction usually suspends reality in favour of more or less credible fictional versions of the same reality, Kluge's stories suspend the very distinction between fact and fiction and open up a space for the unreal within conventional reality. Fredric Jameson has argued that Kluge's writing results in "the utter effacement of any separation between the fictive and the non-fictive" and "testifies to the disappearance of 'fiction' as such, as a meaningful (narrative) category." (Jameson 188–189), but it is important to note that this gesture is less concerned with formal narrative categories than with Kluge's urgent attempt to include the normally excluded hopes, phantasies and wishes in our understanding of reality.

4. Multi-Media Storytelling and Authorship

An added complication in the understanding of Kluge's work arises from his multi- and inter-medial approach. Having for a long time combined work as a writer and film-maker, and since the 1980s, television producer, he has always insisted that any distinctions between the media were insignificant because the real medium—the only one that counts—was in his audience's minds. Kluge's dismissal of media theory or media aesthetics is problematic, and an analysis of his output can easily demonstrate that the different media with their differing capacity to integrate text, images, and sounds, but particularly with their differing uses of time, have a significant impact on the way in which individual pieces are put together—both by the author and in his audience's minds. (Uecker, *Rohstoffe*; Lutze 156–165) Nevertheless, there are strong indications that Kluge himself occasionally dreams of some sort of "Gesamtkunstwerk" that would subsume the different media, just as his collections of stories subsume the matter and essence of their individual components into something new and different.¹³

As matters stand, Kluge cannot achieve this imaginary goal, but can create approximations which impact on the shape of his storytelling and contribute further to the impression of an experimental strategy underlying his work and setting it apart from mainstream fiction, film-making or television. Only a small portion of these activities is focused on strictly narrative forms and much of the material can hardly be categorised as "stories", but it is clear that they are constantly rubbing against the author's literary works and are part of an attempt to expand and reconfigure the universe of narrative through the techniques provided by the new media. In his television programmes and DVDs, Kluge has experimented with simultaneous combinations of sound, images and texts which create dissonances between all three media and sometimes threaten to overwhelm the viewers' receptive capacity. Kluge's books may appear less daunting by comparison, partly because they cannot incorporate moving images or sounds, but perhaps more importantly, because they don't dictate the speed and rhythm of reception, providing the reader a greater

degree of control over the reception process. The forbidding length of many of Kluge's German books—a feature not recreated by English-language versions—might be seen as an attempt to compensate for this.

Images have of course featured heavily in Kluge's books since the mid-1970s when he began to experiment with text-image combinations, integrating a large variety of found images into his stories. (Bechtold; Anderson). For a while he also experimented with different font-types and page designs which added another layer of graphic design to his texts. In stark contrast to the functional design propagated by the modernist Bauhaus tradition, these books are more reminiscent of the experimental school of Dadaism. Not only does the design draw attention to the mediality of the book and to the physical presence of print, but it also disrupts the easy flow of letters across the pages and highlights the fragmenting character of the montage technique which determines the books' composition. This approach climaxed in two books which were based on (or revolving around) Kluge's film scripts for *Die Patriotin* and *Die Macht der Gefühle*, scrap-books that combined film stills, production scripts, diary notes, short stories and excerpts from Kluge's reading. By contrast, his recent collaborations with the painter Gerhard Richter are characterised by a much more orderly and controlled appearance. Kluge's stories are presented in an austere typeface lacking even the bold titles which routinely interrupted the uniformity of the pages in Kluge's earlier collections, while Richter has contributed a series of sometimes vibrantly colourful photographic images of landscapes, cities, animals, and people. The connections between these images and Kluge's stories remain mysterious and there is no indication that the two artists collaborated directly, but Kluge clearly wants to suggest that both elements in these books which were created independently communicate with each other. (Alter, Koepnick, Langston)

Kluge has also made a minor attempt at using the opportunities for multi-media montage provided by the new format of electronic books or, as his publisher calls them, "multi-touch books". (Alexander Kluge—Multi Touch Books) Five collections have been published which for the first time in Kluge's work combine selected stories with music tracks, animations, and short clips from his films and television magazines. They have been characterised as a "stream of descriptions, images, thoughts, and music" circling around a very loose central idea—the titles of the publications refer for instance to time, water or the stars. (Combrink 289) The books provide yet another example of Kluge's willingness to re-combine different elements of his work, and they also showcase his interest in exploring the opportunities for innovation provided by new media, but the choice of a closed platform for publication (Apple's iTunes) as well as a somewhat haphazard approach to the design of these "books" indicates a limited commitment to the technology. A statement by Kluge's assistant even suggests that they are perhaps intended as no more than an appetizer for Kluge's work. (Combrink 289)

Created specifically for the iPad, they may invite a more playful interaction than Kluge's books, as they require the "user" not only to turn pages, but to start or stop the embedded video and audio files, enlarge parts of the screen or jump forwards and backwards by using a content menu placed like a film strip at the bottom of the screen. But such "interaction" can equally be described as impoverished compared to the engagement that Kluge's books and films usually require, and it is questionable, what form of communication arises from such a user experience.

The limitations of Kluge's interests in new media are also illustrated by his use of the internet. While he has described Youtube as a potential vehicle for the creation of a more diversified public sphere that can accommodate and combine an unlimited range of genres and formats of variable length and has also launched a website for his television productions (Göttler), he has shown no real interest in the potential of links and linking, treating the internet merely as a publication platform or repository, rather than a medium with its own potential. More importantly, his writing remains focused on the book as a medium and has shied away from an exploration of hypertext as an alternative to organising his stories and the connections between them. The—as yet unfulfilled—promise of a literary renewal through hypertextual experimentation (see Landow) does not tempt Kluge who has been content recently to exploit new forms of publication instead of new forms of production.

A German reviewer seems to have come to a similar conclusion when he observed a few years ago that Kluge's collage of texts and images that had once seemed new and exciting to him now appeared dated, as the simultaneity of constantly changing texts, images, film and music clips on the internet was capable of creating potentially much more complex constellations than the pages of Kluge's books. Moreover, the preservation of any and all of Kluge's ideas and observations in a medium as durable as the book appeared to reveal a lack of quality control that was no longer acceptable in a world where original ideas are constantly thrown up and replaced by other ideas in a stream of newsfeeds. Kluge may have pioneered some of the techniques characteristic of internet communication, but instead of moving with the times, he was now conserving an increasingly dated approach. (Wey)

Such an assessment highlights the pitfalls of an experimental tradition whose attempts at disrupting the traditional organisation of texts through visual interventions focused on the surface appearance of these texts is constantly at risk of being overtaken by new designs. If "the design of information becomes" not only "part of the message conveyed" (Tomasula 441), but appears to become the main message itself, an author's approach will inevitably look dated as soon as new designs emerge—turning "experiments" into mere fashions or fads which alter surface appearances in the battle for consumer attention and distinctiveness, but provide no new insights into the ideas and meanings at the heart of an author's work.

The focus on authorship implied in this wording is deliberate and highlights perhaps another limitation of Kluge's "experimental" curiosity. Rejecting consideration of media-specific aesthetics and techniques, Kluge argues that his authorship is independent of the material organisation of the book, film, or electronic format which may be used to present and disseminate his stories. But as a result, the traditional category of authorship moves once again centre-stage as a unifying category which organizes the perception and interpretation of Kluge's output as the coherent "work" of its "creator". As Peter C. Lutze has shown, "Kluge has been unusually active in organizing meaning" through "countless interviews", providing "many clues and connections that help journalists and readers understand" his work. According to Lutze, "Kluge controls the interpretation both by what he explains and by what he declines to explain", making it "virtually impossible" for audiences to read Kluge's works "in isolation from the bulk of extratextual information that is available." (Lutze 159–161) Kluge's own comments frequently seek to deny such authorial control, claiming that the texts "organize themselves", independently from the author's (perhaps even misguided) intentions. (Kluge, *Verdeckte Ermittlung* 41–42) Kluge's claims stand in the tradition of avant-gardist projects aimed at reducing the significance of the author as the "master" of his work, but they must be read against a practice of authorial performances which shows few restraints when it comes to expressing his motivations and describing the preferred approach to the stories. But it should also be noted that in his numerous statements and comments about his work, Kluge rarely provides specific explanations of the connections between individual stories, preferring instead to highlight the broad principles which govern his writing. They are part of the "information design", using the recognizable and well-established figure of the author to complement the presentational strategies of his books. (see Uecker, *Schreiben*)

The authorial effect is not only the result of Kluge's constant presence as a public figure, but also of the sheer volume of works which—despite their superficial variety—are easily identifiable as parts of the same overarching project. The combined force of Kluge's production of paratexts, the presence of his voice and the bulk of texts all reinforce the impression of a coherent work which is the product of a single, clearly identifiable author, articulating and expressing through all of their thematic variety his unique view of the world. Such an effect has its drawbacks, because it reduces Kluge's work to a simple expression of an individual "vision", with each new text simply reiterating an already established aesthetic and philosophical programme. In view of the volume of Kluge's output, this may be an understandable response, but it risks overlooking not only the constant renewal of his writing, but also its internal complexity.

However, Lutze's conclusion may primarily express the dismay of a critic who finds that much of the critical discourse about Kluge is indeed

dominated by the often uncritical reproduction of the author's paratextual utterances which has frequently replaced independent analysis of the texts and films themselves. It is less clear what impact Kluge's self-commentary has on his wider audience who may not follow the stream of statements as meticulously as the professional critics. Moreover, in Kluge's literary works the role of the authorial figure is less obvious than in his films and television productions which have since the 1970s been characterised by the persistent presence of Kluge's voice who has acted as narrator, commentator, and interrogator, rarely showing his face, but always sounding off.

In his stories, the unmistakable sound of the author's voice seems to be absent. Initially, in the 1960s, critics even claimed that Kluge was a writer without a personal style, content to merely reproduce the languages of modern science and bureaucracy. (Uecker, *Wiederholungszwang* 123–125) In the meantime, the underlying similarities and idiosyncrasies of Kluge's writing have become unmissable, and readers who are familiar with his television work may even hear his voice when they read the stories. But it must be noted that this voice frequently impersonates other characters and viewpoints. While introductory paratexts are often signed with the author's name, many of Kluge's stories are told from the perspectives of his fictional or authentic characters and thus cannot be assumed to express his personal experiences or views. In these texts, Kluge's authorial position thus becomes as ambiguous as the distinction between fact and fiction, and the question "who speaks?" may turn out to be meaningless or misleading. Although Kluge's paratexts set out a broad framework of goals and strategies that readers may use to reassure themselves that there is a unifying intention behind the assemblage of a myriad components, they are of little use and perhaps even counterproductive when it comes to engaging with these small components themselves, where the narrative voice may be that of a fanatic National Socialist, a curious scientist, or a confused teacher. Even more importantly, the impersonal narrators who impart the majority of these stories must be distinguished from the author. While Kluge's performative presence as an author may tempt readers to treat them all as instances of one omniscient narrator, Leslie Adelson has shown that Kluge's stories deploy a multitude of narrative perspectives which frequently shift from one position to another, not only between texts but even within the space of a few lines. (Adelson, 95–147). As a result, the narrative construction of the stories does not deliver the totalising perspective which Kluge's authorial statements seem to promise. Neither the narrators nor the author can guarantee the "Zusammenhang". Any coherence between the stories can only emerge temporarily through the readers' experiences and never encompass the entire and constantly growing universe of Kluge's stories.

Kluge's authorship thus fulfils a function that is comparable to his use of well-established narrative genres. In both instances, Kluge combines fa-

miliar and seemingly dated forms of literary communication with more advanced and complex literary strategies underpinned by a modernist theory. Kluge speaks constantly and the author's voice is at least in part used to provide the reassurance that there must be some connection, but that does not mean that his authorship has the stability and authority of the pre-modernist literary genius. The heterogeneity of his work and its sources always prompts the reader to look beyond the author.

5. The Location of Experiments

We started this overview of Alexander Kluge's literary work by asking what it might mean to describe it as "experimental fiction" and what is gained by the application of this label. We have seen that certain basic features of contemporary theories of experimental writing can be easily applied to Kluge's texts and provide useful tools to describe their organisation. At the same time, the established framework only covers parts of Kluge's strategy and may even miss its essential purpose.

Some of the narrative genres used in Kluge's books not only pre-date modernity and artistic modernism, but have been side-lined by it. At the same time, Kluge's method of combining small forms into large, potentially never finished and perpetually changing collections through the use of montage is indebted to an avant-gardist modernism which in the early parts of the 20th century tried to smash the established forms of art, do away with tradition, and create a completely new way of seeing and experiencing the world through art—a way which would at the same time be in tune with the modern experience of technologized urbanisation and provide the means of criticising and overcoming this modern world. In this sense, Kluge appears to be working in what may now itself be described as a "tradition": that of radical modernism. But he refuses to use the aggressive, anti-traditional rhetoric of this project, promising instead that out of the collision of facts, stories, world-views, experiences, images and sounds, new connections will emerge which may have the power to restore and preserve the past.

A discussion of the "experimental" dimension of Kluge's project must keep this aspect in mind, because it distinguishes his work from other experimental projects. Despite Kluge's sustained interest in the methods and findings of science, his story-telling is clearly distinguished from the world of controlled and repeatable experiments in which narrowly defined hypotheses are tested in order to produce new knowledge. In Kluge's work—as in any work of art—the outcomes must be produced in the audience's minds, and will therefore be wildly different and almost never controllable or repeatable. In fact, Kluge deliberately increases the lack of control by offering his readers huge numbers of texts whose connections are to be made and remade in every

single reading. The experiments that may occur in the process remain undocumented.

More importantly, perhaps, Kluge's experiments are ultimately not concerned with the formal aspect of writing and story-telling let alone the avant-gardist rejection of tradition because they are rooted in a philosophy of history which holds that the past is always with us and must be made visible with all of its connections to the present rather than being banished. It is easy to argue that the experimental "information design" of Kluge's work is an attempt to find an appropriate way to tell stories about a world that is "marked by a degree of interconnectedness, virtual reality, decentralization, heterogeneity, genre (and genetic) blurring, surveillance, and meta-awareness". (Tomasula 442) But this only partly connects Kluge's work to Zola's project of mastering the real through literary experimentation, because no sense of ultimate control and ownership of the real emerges from Kluge's open project. This is of course a common feature of later experimental designs which concentrate precisely on the ultimate unknowability of the real and as a consequence, concern themselves primarily with a renewal of literary techniques and forms: "Experiment is [...] literature's way of reinventing itself." (Bray, Gibbons, McHale 1) But the fragmented and decentred organisation of Kluge's books is not aimed at reflecting a decentred, even post-human sense of self (Tomasula 447), but rather at providing multiple opportunities for readers to insert and connect their own experiences into the storyverse. It is aimed at affirming or re-constructing, rather than subverting, a sense of identity. The fact that in some of his most recent books, Kluge has adopted an autobiographical stance for some of his stories confirms the classical, perhaps even restorative dimension of his project.

¹ The English translation of Kiefer's speech uses the term "context" for the German "Zusammenhang".

² See in particular Alexander Kluge, 'Ein Hauptansatz des Ulmer Instituts' in Kluge, Eder, *Ulmer Dramaturgien*, 7: "Soziologie und Märchen sind eben nicht, wie man annimmt, Gegensätze, sie sind Pole in ein und derselben Sache".

³ The term is used frequently, but not systematically in discussions of Kluge's work. For a recent example see Forrest, chapter 1.

⁴ Alexander Kluge, *Schlachtbeschreibung. Organisatorischer Aufbau eines Unglücks*, Freiburg/Olten: Walter, 1964; revised versions (under slightly modified titles) were published in 1968, 1969, 1978 and 2000.

⁵ The most comprehensive discussion of Kluge's engagement with Benjamin and Adorno has now been provided by Leslie Adelson.

⁶ The same passage can also be found in *Chronik der Gefühle*, 675. Translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

⁷ For a recent characterisation see Lee, especially 518–19. Lee's description of the basic compositional principles of Hebel's collections is very similar to my own account of Kluge's books.

⁸See Vogt, 136–137; Kluge, *Schlachtbeschreibung*, Nachbemerkung; Oskar Negt, Alexander Kluge, *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, 733–734; Alexander Kluge, ‘Nichts ist stiller als eine geladene Kanone’.

⁹Critics of Kluge’s films have frequently asserted that the intended freedom of the viewer is in fact restricted both by the politics of the “Autorenfilm” which installs the author/director as the source of the film’s meaning, in Kluge’s case supplied by a constant stream of interviews and programmatic statements, and by Kluge’s strategy of flooding the viewers with too many images and connections in too short a time, leaving them little space for true independence; see Lutze, 156–167. For readers of Kluge’s books, the situation may be different as they retain control of the pace as well as the opportunity to alter the sequence of texts or skip entire parts.

¹⁰The significance of freedom in Kluge’s work has only recently been highlighted by Jürgen Habermas, ‘Rede zum 80. Geburtstag von Alexander Kluge’, 15.

¹¹“Jedem Kapitel dieses Buches gehen Zeilen voraus, aus denen der Leser sich orientieren kann, welche Kapitel sein Interesse wecken.” *Die Lücke die der Teufel lässt*, 8. Both the translation of the title and of this passage raise some issues which cannot be discussed in the context of this article.

¹²Kluge, *Kongs große Stunde*, 277: “es handelt sich um Geister, die über den Erdkreis ziehen und sich zu einer massiven BEWEGUNG verdichten.”

¹³The German term “Aufhebung” in its Hegelian sense would probably be appropriate here.

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