

On Kluge's Ideological Antiquity

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In advance of the screening of part two of Alexander Kluge's nine-hour epic News from Ideological Antiquity: Marx – Eisenstein – Capital tomorrow evening at e-flux, Marty Kirchner, of Red Channels and the IWW, Boško Blagojević, artist and founder of Platform for Pedagogy, Chris Reitz, Ph.D. candidate in Art History at Princeton, and Stephen Squibb, in-house dilettante, discussed the German filmmaker's life and work. Appropriately enough, given the topic, the conversation went long and didn't reach a definitive ending. To be continued, maybe, in advance of part three next week.

Marty Kirchner: This may not be the best place to start since we haven't even seen all of Kluge's film yet, but I think we should talk about whether either Kluge or Eisenstein are actually interested in making a film version of *Capital*. Perhaps we could approach the question of what Kluge is trying to do with this film, and what Eisenstein would have wanted to do with his. I may be wrong, but I don't think either filmmaker sets out to make Marx's ideas more accessible, the way, say, David Harvey does in his book, *A Companion to Capital*. My guess is that Eisenstein's ambitions were quite different than Kluge's; and not only for the obvious reasons; film had a very different meaning then than it does today. Still, I wonder to what extent even Eisenstein sought to use film to bring *Capital* to the masses.

Stephen Squibb: I think this is an excellent place to begin. Especially when we consider the context of Eisenstein's initial idea. He is trying to edit *October* down for the rapidly approaching anniversary of the revolution. He is very late, and so is prescribed amphetamines to help him work. Sleeping very little, and heavily drugged, Eisenstein begins to make his famous notes towards a film version of *Capital*. This is also in the general vicinity of his meeting with Joyce about the possibility of filming *Ulysses*. So we have these two poles: the October revolution and

Ulysses. and perhaps it is interesting to think of *Capital* as taking place somewhere in between these, both literally and figuratively. The question might then be – what, or which, is *Capital* for Eisenstein in this moment? *Ulysses* or revolution?

For Kluge's part I agree that this question of accessibility, or of the cinematic as such, is not so central. Given that, though, does his attempt, all nine hours of it, represent something like the truth of Eisenstein's unrealized desire – or its betrayal?

Boško Blagojević: In his monumental portrait of the popular Romanian revolution of 1989, Harun Farocki observed that film seemed destined since its invention to make history visible. This relation between history and film—the former making the latter possible—is dialectically resolved by Farocki with a technological promise from one century, the one out of which film technology emerges, to the next: if film is possible, then history too, must be possible. Visibility and legibility are not the same things of course. In its density, in its arduous ambition, perhaps Kluge's film, too, works at something like deepening the contemporary historical imagination.

MK: With all the intertitles, Kluge's *News* makes reference to the bygone era of silent film, the era Eisenstein would have been working in when he would have made his version. To what extent would Kluge see *Capital* the way he sees silent film, as a memory of a bygone era?

If, for Marx, history is the history of class struggles, Eisenstein's film really would have made history legible, even if what he had planned was a fictional narrative. Farocki's film *Videograms of a Revolution*, seems in some ways more Vertov than Eisenstein; however, I read somewhere that Eisenstein's *October* and Farocki's *Videograms*, could be thought of as films that bookend 20th century Central European history, both for the events they document, and in the technological and formal means by which those events are represented.

Chris Reitz: Reference is tricky in Kluge's work. Keep in mind, most of his early feature-length films use intertitles, and while this is certainly a gesture to the era of silent film, I'm not sure this referent exists only in memory for Kluge. Recall, for example, the scene of the revolutionary Soviet film in Kluge's section of *Germany in Autumn*. I have no idea what that scene accomplishes, but it's a great example of Kluge-style reference. At the very least, it marks the difference between film production and diegesis and locates the revolutionary gesture in the collision of story telling (when we see the "real" world of production) and the "cinematic." Because silent films are dependent on intertitles, the cinematic is always interrupted by the mechanism of story telling—that is, you can never totally lose yourself in a silent film because the words keep interrupting. It is a form of early montage, and for Kluge it means that montage was always part of the apparatus of cinema. In that respect, silent film isn't part of film history, so much, as it is a part of the very nature of film making. This is ultimately, I think, bound up with Kluge's struggle to get out from underneath Adorno's writing on film. Kluge was Adorno's student, of course, and he constantly struggled to demonstrate that film wasn't the primary vehicle of the culture industry, that it was instead a tool for distraction and imagination (as an aside, I have no doubt that Kluge's use of distraction in film is a deployment of Benjamin's notion of distraction/dreaming against Adorno's insistence that cinema requires burdensome attentive viewing). The point being that the reference to silent film, if we can call it reference, suggests that the formal structures of silent film are somehow proper to film in general; that montage and distraction are proper to film in general.

In the case of *Capital*, the use of intertitles also serves as a reference to Kluge's own cinematic history; that is, to his pre-television projects. It's a taking up again of unfinished ideas and an unfinished medium. It may also be a struggle with the limitations of that medium. In the 1960s Kluge wanted film to provide a non-pedagogical space in which distracted participants could set their imaginative powers to work against the uniform, determining apparatus of the culture industry. Central to this project was Marx's critique of capital. But what place did Marx have in the unfolding of Kluge's project? What role did Marx have in the creation of the counter public sphere? In effect, *Capital* is an endless string of reference to Kluge's own history and medium—it's

an attempt to re-trace ideological origins through cinematic origins in order to determine if Marx is as central to cinema as montage is.

SS: Two things here I'd like to tease out.

First, Chris references Kluge's works for television. This is interesting precisely for the difficulty we have, in this country, of imagining an artist like Kluge producing for American television. There are examples of course, Paper Tiger and the like, but television is a world apart for us, it seems. We have a phrase: Theater is Life, Film is Art, and Television is Furniture – and I think that this is broadly correct at a certain understanding.

This becomes more interesting, perhaps, in the context of Kluge's desperate attempt to rescue the moving image from the charge of culture industry complicity, precisely by turning to the cotton gin of mass cultural quietism; television, the individual household screen. We could draw a parallel between Kluge and another of Adorno's celebrated students, Jurgen Habermas. Both Kluge and Habermas refuse to abandon the public to the baroque complexity of Adorno's paranoid economy. Both insist that the public persists, somehow, and that it is worth fighting for, and both have a decidedly ambiguous relation to Marx – but then so did ol' Teddy.

Second, however, and taking a step back, what is striking is the extent to which both Habermas and Kluge, for all their embracing of the public, categorically refuse to bend their style to its ostensible demands. It is not too much to say that Habermas is the most brilliant member of the Frankfurt tradition, and also its least exciting writer. And though I am less familiar with Kluge's early work, his nine hour *Capital* feels of a piece with *The Theory of Communicative Action* in this respect. And even though Adorno was legend for his conceptual difficulty, it is impossible not to be struck by his absolute dexterity with language, and the delight he takes in simultaneously showing off and inviting us in – even in the depths of a text like *Aesthetic Theory (Negative Dialectics)* remains relatively foreclosed to us, at least until Hullot-Kentor finishes his damn translation. Anytime, Bob.). And this is to say nothing of the incredible economy and power of *Minima Moralia* or his newspaper columns about astrology – *The Stars Down to Earth*, a lesser work.

Marx, I think, inhabits each of these positions at various times and in various ways. *The Manifesto* is a masterpiece of style and clarity, *Capital* is not. And I confess there is part of me that thinks the ideas of the latter are in some sense bound to their form, that they are book ideas, incapable of a complete translation to the screen – something no amount of intertiting can change...

BB: I am personally not quite familiar enough with Kluge's entire body of work to affirm your position on his unwillingness to accommodate a more, shall we say, democratic mode of contemplation or spectatorship. I am interested, however, in the question of the critical efficacy of cultural work. We might allegorize the film or film-text under scrutiny as a kind of summoning, a conjuring of a public that will then animate that work in various afterlives of discussion and response. This is what cultural reception is about, as opposed to say something more anodyne that the culture industry might produce. Let's take a step back and ask ourselves for a moment what sort of public is Kluge's *Ideological Antiquities* assembling? What spirits are being exorcised in our voices now, demonstrating knowledge or speculating on this work now unfolding for the first time with English language subtitles in New York?

CR: Habermas is the appropriate reference point. For those unfamiliar, Kluge has spent years working with Oskar Negt on a notion of the counter public sphere in response of Habermas. They even have a book (*The Public Sphere and Experience*). The concept is extremely problematic as it takes the proletariat as the theoretical population of this counter sphere; a proletariat who is trapped somewhere between the 19thC unskilled laborer class and a 20thC communicationally-disenfranchised middle class. Still, it's important to retain some of Habermas. The destruction of the bourgeois public sphere was the result of a sophistication of media and the manipulation of

the image of the public that the private individual then consumed. The “public” was always represented to the individual, of course. It arose in France out of pamphlets and reviews exchanged in coffee shops. The cohesion and uniformity of public opinion was always, in part, an illusionistic representation. But advancing strategies of media manipulation created a situation in which the mediated “public opinion” did not reflect the needs of the consuming individuals. Media was the catalyst. As Bosko suggests, Kluge understands his work as a similar catalyst for the production of a representation of “publicness” as generated by the imagining, film-going individual.

In other words, Kluge’s work doesn’t need to provide stylistic vernacular for the public—in fact, public style as it exists is produced by the culture industry. Film only needs to provide space for the emergence of a counter-public sphere. That space exists, for Kluge, in narrative ruptures, collisions of story and storytelling, and even in long pauses and blank screens. For him it’s about the activity of viewing—about getting bored and imagining elements into the film, about mentally completing the film and thereby taking charge of image production.

I’m also not sure *Capital* is about transposing Marx into film. The participants (including the aforementioned Negt) are closer to Kluge’s use of Marx than to Marx’s text itself. I have to wonder if it isn’t more about proximity to origins (Kluge is always interested in his own proximity to the making of film) than it is about ideas.

MK: I want to follow up with Bosko’s question about what kind of public Kluge’s *Ideological Antiquities* assembles. To me this seems like a public consisting of students and intellectuals. I don’t see the worker included in this public, so I guess I don’t fully understand Kluge’s concept of the proletarian public sphere. If the space for a counter-public sphere emerges from formal devices such as narrative rupture, or collisions of story and storytelling, it seems as if the subject matter of the film can still be something that is relevant to members of the working class. Do working-class Germans watch Kluge’s television shows?

CR: I’m not sure if working class Germans watch Kluge. I’m inclined to think that they do only because you can watch him for free with no cable subscription. But I really don’t know.

However, I think there’s an unnecessary separation of intellectual and worker in play here that isn’t totally appropriate to Kluge’s work. For decades he has managed to open up theoretical and practical spaces for alternatives to bourgeois/corporate media culture. The foundation for each of these interventions was Marx, and in this film he explores the relationship between Marx and his medium.

To offer a little more history: After the war the centralized German film industry (under Goebbels) was dismantled by the allies. German film ceased to exist, and Hollywood undermined national production and distribution outlets in order to sell the German public war-time American films. Over the years, a damaged, fledgling German cinema emerged (first in the East). The two most popular genres were *Heimatfilm* (escapist movies about the undamaged, nostalgic German countryside) and *Trümmerfilm* (films situated in bombed German cities that made Germans out to be victims of internal [but still “other”] murders and external aggressors). Both ignored questions of democratic responsibility for National Socialism or critically examined elements of German society that led to both the war and the death camps. This went on for a while, then in 1961 Kluge made *Brutality in Stone*, a short film juxtaposing Nazi buildings still in use with Hitler’s speeches. This was the first filmic space that directly engaged the persistence of Nazi influence in Germany. Then he wrote the manifesto for New German Cinema and advocated for, and won, centralized support for first-time and experimental film makers. Each achievement, though geared toward “students” and “intellectuals,” created a space for critical, national cinema, which Germany now has. Also keep in mind, those students who were allowed funding in the mid-60s, and those students who saw *Brutality in Stone* in 1961, went on to do a lot more in 1968.

Then there's TV. I don't have all the facts on this, but I believe Kluge was instrumental in guaranteeing that the first few channels remain available for public use and consumption (that Germany keep the channels off of any paid cable line up, and that German funding exist for making shows for those channels). At the very least, he's advocated to keep it that way, and has been involved in producing and funding public TV.

Again, it's about creating spaces that didn't exist—spaces outside the influence of those in control of media production. The proletariat for Kluge is not the “working class,” but those who don't have control of the means of production and distribution for media culture.

SS: I actually think this connects quite elegantly to Bosko's question earlier. It seems appropriate that Kluge's *News*, by virtue of its tremendous length, has by necessity created a sort of contingent public sphere here in New York, a temporarily united front as it were, as several organizations have collaborated to provide the necessary space. I was so delighted when I saw the Platform mailer; delighted, but not surprised. Here was a formidable alliance! I think Kluge would be pleased of with the space he has created, however unintentionally.

I think what Bokso's question, and Chris' comments, speak to is a way of re-conceptualizing a certain anxiety cultural workers feel about their relation to politics, one that is quite widespread. I think this anxiety can quickly sour, and become a kind of pathological longing for the mythic work of art that, by dint of its peculiar genius, compels others to think as we do, and who will then do our acting for us. Paul Chan once referred to this as the confusion of the work of people with the work of objects – a kind of looking to the latter to do the work of the former.

MK: Maybe “intellectual” is an outdated word and hard for us to pin down, and maybe “academic” is a more contemporary term. I think it is important to understand that there is a difference between an academic, such as a professor at the University of Munich, and a working-class person, such as a Turkish immigrant construction worker. Obviously these two people occupy different positions in the sphere of production, they have different incomes, different expectations in life, a whole different set of problems and concerns. I think you would agree with this. What I don't understand then is why this distinction is unnecessary when we are talking about Kluge's work and who its audience is. Regarding the filmic spaces that Kluge's work opens, what bothers me is that I wonder how alternative these spaces are to bourgeois/corporate media culture when it is only the bourgeoisie, or at least those who come from relative places of privilege, who engage with them.

What I am saying may not apply to Kluge's *Brutality in Stone*. I don't know enough about this film or the context in which it was made. For one thing, I don't know how widely throughout Germany the film was seen, or what the general reception of the film was at the time. On a more general level, though, what it sounds like you are saying is that independent films open a space where an alternative culture can be articulated. I agree, in many important ways they do; however, I don't see them as being per se an alternative to the overarching culture we live in, the culture of capitalism. We all know the role that the arts play in gentrification and tourism. In my opinion, there can't be an alternative culture, media or otherwise, that isn't rooted in an alternative to capitalism.

That said, I think Kluge is using the term proletariat somewhat metaphorically. For Kluge, proletariat media its almost like saying DIY media. It is the media produced and distributed by those people who do not have access to the mainstream, corporate means of media production. What is interesting is the extent to which Kluge is applying a Marxist analysis to what people in the US might simply refer to as alternative media.

SS: Right, and that's the big question: Just how central are the means of cultural production in the last instance? On the one hand, we have the grand narratives of complicity that mark our day

and inform our thinking: Artist as gentrifier, culture as the R&D department of bourgeois consumption, hipsterism as the vanguard of monopoly capital, etc etc. On the other; the great apologists for the viability of a radical culture of resistance, Ranciere's assertion of art's redistributive possibilities at the level of sense, Badiou's similar accounting of the disruption incited by the artistic truth event, Debord's faith in the subversive power of the detournment, Virno's commitment to a certain virtuosity unaccountable by the standards of exchange and on and on.

Even without picking sides in this debate, its easy to see the historical cause for its prominence. As the world-system has evolved, the majority of industrial manufacturing has been moved from the center to the periphery. This means that the working class no longer exists in direct proximity to the center of power. Imagine, in 19th and early 20th century New York and London, *they made things*, often just up the street from the Stock Exchange and City Hall. It was easy for Marx in London or Emma Goldman in New York to preach their respective gospels, because the evidence was right there, taking place within the same cultural space. Now, with the majority of the working class living in rural China the question must be posed: which is the more essential: the culture industry at the center of the system, or the manufacturing at its edges?

In Kluge it is possible to see a wager being made in favor of the former, of culture being the new means to be seized, and Chris explains this quite beautifully. However, and I think this is what Marty is getting at, it's not clear that Marx would've approved of this substitution, of gallery or cinema or studio for factory and workshop. And this is perhaps what we mean when we speak of Marx's materialism, his ruthless insistence on the structural impact of physical contingency of human's being-in-the-world. Perhaps culture has evolved to such a place that it determines these arrangements, and so we are justified in making our interventions there, though this is becoming an increasingly difficult case to make.

In any event, Kluge will no doubt have much to say on the subject tomorrow night, hope to see you all there.