
Richard Langston

Editorial

I.

At first glance, Alexander Kluge's idea of the "poetic power of theory" seems to be, at the very most, only a decade old. Arguably one of the first formal instantiations can be found on disc 13 from Kluge's boxed set of curated television broadcasts *Seen sind für Fische Inseln* released in 2009. In pursuit of an answer to the question "Can thought and moving images be put together?", the seven DCTP cultural windows assembled under the disc's title "The Poetic Power of Theory" include dialogues about such philosophers as Aristoteles, Spinoza, Kant, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Deleuze.¹ Even though the accompanying booklet where Kluge articulates the disc's leading question refrains from ever providing a definitive answer, the seven dialogues do seem to provide an answer in the affirmative by virtue of their mere presence. Yes, disc 13 seems to say, thought and moving images can be yoked. However, the subtitle "How Can Marx's *Capital* Be Made into a Film?" of Kluge's dialogue with Oskar Negt leaves little if any doubt that Kluge's dialogues are themselves not intended as illustrations of any such sought-after coupling. These are neither the philosopher's stone nor the result of any alchemical transmutation. Rather, they are, in large part, philosophical discussions about the conditions for any such coupling. Christopher Pavsek has recently argued that the "basic movement of cognition" described in Immanuel Kant's legendary maxim from *Critique of Pure Reason* – "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind." – has long served as a "foundation of [Kluge's] theory of cinema".² If cinema is indeed "oriented toward cognition", as Kluge contended already in 1964, then

1 Alexander Kluge, "Eine Grenze zwischen Theorie und Poesie gibt es nicht", in id., *Seen sind für Fische Inseln. Fernseharbeiten 1987–2008 – Album*, (ed.) Martin Weinmann, Frankfurt a.M. 2009, p. 179. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the German original are those of the author.

2 Christopher Pavsek, *The Utopia of Film. Cinema and Its Futures in Godard, Kluge, and Tahimik*, New York 2013, p. 159.

these dialogues grouped under the banner of “the poetic power of theory” initially suggest that the movement cinema must engage in between “sensuousness and understanding” remains a pressing if not unresolved matter for Kluge.³

Yet a closer examination of the many ways Kluge has used his idea in recent years reveals just how “the poetic power of theory” has advanced beyond these original epistemological concerns. In a short text entitled “A Border between Theory and Poetry Doesn’t Exist” that addresses the disc’s seven aforementioned broadcasts in the boxed set’s accompanying booklet, Kluge writes: “the strongest poetry in science and theory is related to evolution, the cosmos, and mathematics. Kant claims that there is no praxis without theory. Theories possess a gentle violence and, over time, a harsh violence as well. A border between theory and poetry doesn’t exist. Novalis: ‘The absolutely scientific is the absolutely poetic.’”⁴ In other words, poetry is not the exclusive domain of poets. On the contrary, poetry is equally at work in the natural objects, on which the allegedly unpoetic natural sciences – biology, astronomy, mathematics – base their theories. Where do we come from? Where are we in this endless universe? How do we put the answers to these questions into an intelligible language? In the subsequent story entitled “On the Use of Poetry” reproduced from his 2006 book *Tür an Tür mit einem anderen Leben*, Kluge teases out these poetic dimensions of first nature. Contracted by the Pentagon to calculate naturally occurring changes in the earth’s rotational velocity needed for the success of America’s future missile defense system, Harvard geologist Douglas Mitcher concludes that the miniscule changes are “not exactly rhythmical”. Instead, “they occurred according to a HAZY NOTION” “more likely noticeable on a poetic scale of precision”.⁵ To be sure, laser-guided bombs have no use for such a poetic theory of rotational velocity as it lacks exactitude entirely. Kluge’s story not only asserts the existence of the poetic in the natural world but it also insists that this poetic dimension is indelibly wrapped up in people’s fortunes. On the German autobahn, a fraction of a second – the time of both chance and these rotational

3 Alexander Kluge, “Die Utopia Film (1964)”, in id., *In Gefahr und größter Not bringt der Mittelweg den Tod. Texte zu Kino, Film, Politik*, (ed.) Christian Schulte, Berlin 1999, p. 53. See also: Pavsek, p. 160.

4 Kluge, *Seen sind für Fische Inseln*, p. 189. Kluge’s story is very likely picking up on his earlier dialogue with Durs Grünbein contained on disc three of *News from Ideological Antiquity. Marx–Eisenstein–Das Kapital* (2008), in which Kluge states: “There is no border between poetry and theory. That is Schiller’s central idea. I write down thoughts, while everyone else follows Petrarch and essentially writes romance novels. That is a proud attitude apropos the means of poetry. You find that in Brecht and I like it very much.” See Alexander Kluge, *Nachrichten aus der ideologischen Antike. Marx–Eisenstein–Das Kapital*, Berlin 2008, disc 3: *Paradoxe der Tauschgesellschaft*, track 6: “Durs Grünbein: Brechts Hexameter zum *Kommunistischen Manifest*”, minute 46:17.

5 Ibid., 190. See also Alexander Kluge, “Vom Nutzen der Poesie”, *Tür an Tür mit einem anderen Leben. 350 neue Geschichten*, Frankfurt a.M 2006, pp. 33–34.

discrepancies – can be what decides between a fatal accident and a driver’s safe passage. In the case of the latter, knowledge of the absolutely scientific (and hence the absolutely poetic) is not a precondition for good fortune in second nature. Rather, the power of (scientific) theories of first nature’s poetics lies in their limited usefulness. This poetic capacity for resistance has evolved into a cornerstone of Kluge’s recent thinking about the conditions for protesting the most recent manifestations of instrumentalized science and technology: “For every algorithm there is an anti-algorithm.”⁶

Roughly a decade after the release of *Seen sind für Fische Inseln*, the expression “the poetic power of theory” experienced a meteoric rise in Kluge’s work. His solo exhibition “Pluriversum” at the Folkwang Museum Essen closed in January 2018 only then to acquire the secondary title “The Poetic Power of Theory” before resurfacing at Vienna’s Belvedere 21 later in 2018 and then at Munich’s Literaturhaus the following year. Kluge’s 2018 collaboration with American poet Ben Lerner, *The Snows of Venice* contains an entire chapter entitled “The Poetic Power of Theory”; in one of its 14 stories inspired by a poem gleaned from Lerner’s 2010 collection *Mean Free Path*, Kluge’s narrator ponders the elegance of seabirds’ wings and their plausible “capacity for theory”. “What”, the voice then asks, “does the ‘poetic power of theory’ mean for them?”⁷ Kluge’s film “Ithaka Program” made exclusively for Leslie A. Adelson’s October 2018 Kluge conference at Cornell University carried the secondary title “The Poetic Power of Theory”. It was also used for shorts featured in both the Alexander Kluge-James Ensor exhibit “Siècles Noirs/Dark Centuries” held at the Fondation Vincent Van Gogh in Arles, France and Kluge’s massive film program “From Zed to Omega” that opened the exhibition “The New Alphabet” held in January 2019 at Berlin’s Haus der Kulturen der Welt.⁸ In light of its sudden ubiquity, “the poetic power of theory” has advanced, or so it would seem, to become a catchall for the entirety of Kluge’s aesthetic practice. “The poetic power of theory” has served as a banner for the retrospectives in Essen, Vienna, and Munich; an optic for Kluge’s storytelling; and the explicit subject for his recent filmmaking. In all these instances, the twin concerns articulated in the two aforementioned examples from *Seen sind für Fische Inseln* – namely cinema’s poetic forms of cognition possible

6 Alexander Kluge, “Reading and Writing. How Can I Live? What Can I Know? What Does the Future Hold”, in Bernd Scherer/Olga von Schubert (eds.), *The New Alphabet. Opening Days*, Berlin 2019, p. 36.

7 Alexander Kluge, “Theory Like Swimming in a Storm”, in Ben Lerner/Alexander Kluge, *The Snows of Venice. The Lerner-Kluge Container*, (tr.) Isabel Cole, Leipzig 2018, pp. 169–194. For reasons substantiated in section two below, Cole’s rendering of “poetische Kraft” as “poetic force” has been changed here to “poetic power”.

8 See the English-language protocol of Kluge’s “Ithaka Program” and the German-language protocol of “Von Zett bis Omega” included in this volume.

in second nature and the resistance inherent in first nature's own poetic dynamics – are omnipresent. What remains to be seen then is how this poetic power of theory informs Kluge's aesthetic politics and how this aesthetic politics is distinct from the discipline of social theory.

II.

As much as Kluge's idea of "the poetic power of theory" may seem like a comparatively recent development, individual components do have roots reaching back to the heights of Kluge's theoretical collaborations with Oskar Negt. Arguably the most important of keywords is power [*Kraft*]. Not to be mistaken for the German word *Macht* and certainly not equivalent to the English word "force", the *Kraft* in *poetische Kraft* [poetic power] is closely associated with Marx's "labor power" [*Arbeitskraft*], as Kluge makes plainly clear in the following pages.⁹ Not to be confused with "labor capacity" [*Arbeitsvermögen*], which Negt and Kluge classify in *History and Obstinacy* as an empirically verifiable product that emerges from the violence of separation and discipline otherwise known as the political economy of capital, the origins of Negt and Kluge's concept of labor power reach back to the young Marx's anthropology, in general, and his Hegelian account of humankind's "objective essential powers", in particular. In theory, essential powers reside in the reservoir of innate characteristics – appropriating Marx's language, they write of an "immense accumulation" – within every human being that ideally enables them to realize their objective nature by acting on the natural world.¹⁰ In reality, man's powers of self-externalization are severely hampered by the alienating effects of capital that extract a portion of this labor power as if it were a commodity. Essential to Negt and Kluge's account is their assertion that historical labor capacities, which capital has long gleaned and still expropriates from laborers, never exhaust this reservoir. Human bodies always hold some of their labor power in reserve. In other words, labor power has a tenacious will of its own that refuses to forfeit its own property claims entirely (*DuM* 95; *HO* 127). Even though this source of resistance is congenital and indefatigable, its success is, however, not guaranteed, for neither is labor power singular nor are its intensities equivalent or consistent. Happiness found in resistance is ultimately a tricky matter of relationality, degree, and balance.

9 See Alexander Kluge/Richard Langston, "'Der Theoretiker geht aufs Fremde'. Alexander Kluge im Gespräch über die poetische Kraft der Theorie" included in section two of this volume. Here p. 146.

10 Oskar Negt/Alexander Kluge, *Der unterschätzte Mensch*, vol. 1: *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, Frankfurt a.M. 2001, p. 78 and 90. See also Alexander Kluge/Oskar Negt, *History and Obstinacy*, (ed.) Devin Fore, (tr.) Richard Langston et al., New York 2014, p. 478n4 and 122.

In Kluge's mind's eye, the poetic power of theory is just one among many particular instantiations of labor power. Others like the power of love [*Liebeskraft*] and the power of reason [*die Kraft der Vernunft*] are the subject of whole chapters in Negt and Kluge's *History and Obstinacy*.¹¹ Given the attention they pay to "theory labor" [*Theoriearbeit*] in their chapter on the labor of intelligence, it is not unreasonable to assume at first glance that the poetic power of theory is hitched to the labor of intelligence. However, Kluge makes clear in his essay "Die poetische Kraft der Theorie" included here that poetic power is not synonymous with theoretical power. Unlike the kind of theory solely intent on providing orientation – they write in *History and Obstinacy*, "[t]heory's design is to deliver measurable orientation to praxis" – the poetic power of theory does not abstain from the direct action characteristic of political praxis (*DuM* 483). "The poetic", Kluge explains in his essay, "comes from the word 'to make, to become active, to give form'."¹² Reminiscent of Martin Heidegger's account of *poiēsis* as bringing-forth [*Hervorbringen*], poetic power involves the production of "narrative expression" understood in the widest sense.¹³ ("The poetic means to collect", Kluge exclaims at the close of his essay and identifies Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* as his model.¹⁴) Yet it is not subjects who deliberately articulate this expression but rather the poetic power that resides within them. This power is thus a characteristic shared by all human beings that no social system (or sovereign ego) can channel or repress. It is, in other words, the language of resistance, self-will, obstinacy. Poetic power is, therefore, not subordinate to theoretical power. Instead, it is a power unto itself. Only when these two powers collide, rub against one another, and strike a balance do the conditions for emancipation become possible.

Whereas the flâneur counted for Benjamin as an extinct, nineteenth-century social type ideal for the archeological study of modernity's consumerist being-in-the-world, the ancient Greek *theoros* serves as Kluge's ur-form for parsing the origins and fate of the poetic power of theory in the twenty-first century. In a story from *Snows of Venice* entitled "A Theoros in Greek Antiquity" reproduced in his poetic power essay, Kluge explains that a *theoros* was an ancient Greek observer who accompanied delegations traveling to foreign city-states. His task was to "find out whether *the strangers* are lying. But he is also supposed to pay

11 See chapters six on intelligence and eleven on private relationships in the original German edition. These appear as chapters four and seven in the English translation.

12 See Alexander Kluge, "Die poetische Kraft der Theorie", included in this volume. Here: p. 30. 13 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 43. As Ulrike Vedder points out in her essay included here, Kluge's idea of poetics as collecting dates back to his story "Heiner Müller und das Projekt Quellwasser" included in Alexander Kluge, *Chronik der Gefühle*, vol. 2: *Lebensläufe*, Frankfurt a.M. 2000, p. 1008–1010. See in this volume Ulrike Vedder, "Alexander Kluges Museumspoetik", p. 84.

attention to whether *his own people* are lying.”¹⁵ In her recent scholarly account of the *theoros* in antiquity, classicist Andrea Wilson Nightingale explains that the attendant practice of *theoria* – witnessing panhellenic spectacles abroad – was a “venerable cultural practice”, in which the traveler honed his ““theoric gaze” – the “gaze of (and at) alterity” – in order to discern “cultural difference”.¹⁶ Once back home, a civically-minded *theoros* then shared with the polis his observations gleaned from “contemplating the spectacle of truth”.¹⁷ In our contemporary moment, says Kluge, when powerful storms technological, political, social, and cultural in nature have uprooted the foundations necessary for discerning difference – what is truth in a world allegedly full of fakes? – this theoric gaze must surmount innumerable challenges for it to remain viable. In the remainder of Kluge’s essay, he makes clear that in today’s disruptive times theory cannot afford to traffic in general information. Accordingly, it requires a poetic power capable of delivering narration rich in subjective experience. This poetic power also calls for the highest levels of expression today and, therefore, must be prepared to don the mantle of the translator and engage any number of foreign, forgotten, extinct, and technical languages. And it must fashion both containers and vehicles for transporting these collections and the differences they contain. These are just some of Kluge’s thoughts on energizing the *theoros* and his theoric gaze in the twenty-first century that are outlined in his essay and addressed further in the supporting materials included in this volume of the *Alexander Kluge-Jahrbuch*.

III.

Volume six of the *Alexander Kluge-Jahrbuch* takes its title from Kluge’s aforementioned essay originally commissioned for the English-language publication of select proceedings from Adelson’s Kluge conference “New Perspectives on Creative Arts and Critical Practice” held at Cornell University on October 11 to 13, 2018.¹⁸ Adelson’s introduction begins this first thematic cluster by outlining the design and objectives of her innovative symposium and sketching in brief the arguments found in Alan Beyerchen’s, Erik Porath’s, Ulrike Vedder’s, and Hans Jürgen Scheuer’s conference proceedings included here. To appear in English in

15 Kluge, “Die poetische Kraft der Theorie”, p. 30. Cf. Kluge, “A Theoros in Greek Antiquity”, in Lerner/ Kluge, p. 171.

16 Andrea Wilson Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy. Theoria in Its Cultural Context*, Cambridge 2004, p. 40–41.

17 Ibid., 40.

18 The conference program and video recordings of the individual lectures can be accessed <https://vod.video.cornell.edu/channel/channelid/106742121>. (Last accessed: 01.07.2019.)

volume 139 of *New German Critique*, Kluge's essay on "the poetic power of theory", which addresses this idea head-on for the first time, appears here in the German original along with the four aforementioned essays originally presented at Cornell University.¹⁹ Concluding this first cluster is an illustrated, English-language transcript of Kluge's film "Ithaka Program" created especially for the Cornell conference. For a comprehensive understanding of the expansive interdisciplinary dialogue advanced at Cornell University, readers of this issue of the *Jahrbuch* are strongly encouraged to seek out the companion issue of *New German Critique*, for both publications were conceived, to channel Kluge's thinking, like conjoined twins separated at birth that yearn to be together.

Section two carries with Kluge's essay on the poetic power of theory, first in the form of a dialogue and then with the help of an array of supporting evidence. Asked in this dialogue to explicate the "power" [*Kraft*] in "poetic power" [*poetische Kraft*], Kluge replies that pure potential resides in the anthropological category of labor power [*Arbeitskraft*], with which poetic power is naturally aligned. In order to throw this potential into relief, we must "plant whole gardens of words", Kluge says.²⁰ Only when we collect words a-grammatically in the form of constellations or concordances can we begin to see how words exert gravitative powers on one another. Only then can we begin to make precise differentiations, not between their potential meanings but rather in the expressive means our imagination finds in language. Given both Kluge's emphasis on collecting words and building semantic fields as well as Oskar Negt's own very recent admission that the substantive content of words has recently collapsed thus making words dangerously manipulatable, it is within reason to speculate that a fifth theoretical collaboration between Negt and Kluge might continue these lines of inquiry originally discussed in 2014 during Negt's research stay in Vienna.²¹ It was for these reasons that the editors decided to include a partial transcript of the ten and a half hours of film and audio material Kluge presented at the exhibition "The New Alphabet" at Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt, for much of it addresses concretely the rapid "transformation of signs" and the co-presence of older sign systems in our current age.²² For Kluge and Negt, digitalization in the form of algorithms, data networks, and artificial intelligence poses a challenge to their longstanding call to defend humanity with counter-publics and counter-productions. On this note, volume six includes an English translation of Kluge's 2013

19 The English translation is: Alexander Kluge, "The Poetic Power of Theory", (tr.) Leslie A. Adelson, *New German Critique* 139 (Feb. 2020). Forthcoming.

20 Kluge/Langston, p. 146.

21 See the sections "Treffen in Wien – Nachdenken über das Gemeinsame" and "Am Anfang war das Wort" in Oskar Negt, *Erfahrungsspuren. Eine autobiographische Denkreise*, Göttingen 2019, pp. 311–320.

22 Kluge, "Reading and Writing", p. 34.

missive to millennials on the conditions for publicity in the digital age. Concluding cluster two is a transcript of Kluge's last cultural window broadcast on June 25, 2018, as well as a second dialogue about DCTP's early connections to independent filmmaker Jonas Mekas and American auteur television as well as Kluge's recent return to the feature film.

Cluster three directs readers' attention to one of Kluge's most consuming passions in recent years, namely his collaborations with visual artists. Like the dialogues with Gerhard Richter and Anselm Kiefer published in volumes four and five of the *Jahrbuch*, respectively, volume six includes a transcript of Kluge's conversation with Georg Baselitz recorded at the Haus der Kunst Munich in early December 2016. This dialogue provides additional context for their 2017 collaboration *Weltverändernder Zorn. Nachricht von den Gegenfüßlern* as well as a second collaboration currently in progress. Another prolific cooperation with American painter and filmmaker Sarah Morris has generated not only collaborative films but in Morris's case also a string of solo works, in which Kluge assumes a leading role on camera. One such work is her 2017 film *Finite and Infinite Games*, of which Morris has provided a transcript. The following three scholarly essays dedicate their attention to Kluge's specific collaborations. Lilian Haberer considers Kluge's work with female artists like Michaela Melián, Kerstin Brätsch, Adele Röder, and Sarah Morris; Cyrus Shahan looks in detail at how Melián's twin installations *Speicher* and *Rückspiegel* from 2008 unearth Kluge's contributions to the pioneering installation *VariaVision. Unendliche Fahrt – aber begrenzt*, a collaboration with Edgar Reitz and Josef Anton Riedl from 1965. Closing this section, Seth Howes trains his attention on Kluge's cinematic and theoretical influence on East German artist Lutz Dammbeck's films and installations from the eighties.

The fourth and final cluster of scholarly essays is dedicated to Kluge's literature and films. As with Haberer's, Shahan's, and Howes's essays in cluster three that originated at the German Studies Association's 2018 annual conference held in Pittsburgh (USA), Irina Simova's paper on the poststructuralist affinities in *Abschied von gestern* (1966) also evolved out of a presentation given at that same conference. Commissioned especially for the *Jahrbuch*, John E. Davidson's essay interrogates Kluge's arguably most overlooked film, *Der starke Ferdinand* (1976). Steffen Andrae mines the parallels between Siegfried Kracauer's and Kluge's respective concepts of realism. Adelson closes the volume's essay with a reflection on literary imagination in the age of globalization as exemplified in the prose of Kluge and Yoko Tawada.

IV.

The sixth volume of the *Alexander Kluge-Jahrbuch* would not have been possible without the assistance from a great many individuals, for which this issue's editors are endlessly grateful. As outlined in Adelson's introduction that begins the first thematic cluster in this issue, the four scholarly essays as well as the transcript to Kluge's film "Ithaka Program" were generously underwritten by broad institutional support from both Cornell University and the journal *New German Critique*. The second thematic cluster that explores Kluge's idea of the poetic power of theory further materialized by dint of Kluge's unparalleled generosity with his time and work. The editors are especially grateful for his permission to publish stills from his films, television broadcasts, and recent installations. Equally important for this section were Barbara Barnak, Gülsen Döhr, and Beata Wiggen of DCTP in Düsseldorf, who provided copious materials as well as invaluable information essential for the preparation of the transcriptions included in section two. Sarah Stevenson of the Goethe Institut New York and Elizabeth Schreiber-Byers and Georg Blochmann of Goethe Institut Washington D.C. assisted with unearthing photographs of Kluge and Mekas in New York and granted permission for one of these images to reappear in the *Jahrbuch*. In the third thematical cluster, Georg Baselitz's secretary Detlev Grentenkort was indispensable for helping with the Baselitz-Kluge transcription and securing permission to print it here. Sarah Morris's assistant Diana Stephen provided support for the transcript to *Finite and Infinite Games*. Lilian Haberer, Cyrus Shahan, and Seth Howes all relied on input from Morris, Michaela Melián, and Lutz Dammbeck, respectively, all of whom provided permission to allow images of their works to appear here. Co-editor of *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift* David E. Wellbery and J.B. Metzler Verlag were instrumental for allowing Adelson's essay to reappear here in translated form. Finally, *Jahrbuch* co-editors Rainer Stollmann and Vincent Pauval facilitated new connections that allowed for the inclusion of several valuable contributions included in this volume.

V.

The *Alexander-Kluge Jahrbuch* is a trilingual, peer-reviewed yearbook dedicated to fostering the critical study of every aspect of Alexander Kluge's work. An international platform intent on bringing together a wide range of disciplines and theoretical approaches, the yearbook welcomes both essays and reviews written in English, French or German. Detailed information about submission guidelines as well as the editorial and advisory boards can be found both in German at passagen.univie.ac.at/alexander-kluge-jahrbuch and in English at

klugejahrbuch.web.unc.edu. Unsolicited submissions are always welcome and can be submitted to one of the yearbook's five co-editors; their contact information can be found on either of the yearbook's aforementioned websites.

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