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The Commerce of Auteurism: a Voice without Authority

Timothy Corrigan

> Subjectivity is greater than someone's intentions.
>
> —Alexander Kluge

Alexander Kluge is a grudging auteur, a reluctant personality who seems to engage any and all historical issues more than the history of himself: since Oberhausen, he has been one of film's most famous international signatures yet has accepted that label only with great hesitation and careful qualification.

To locate Kluge within this troubled category of auteur has always required revision, but as Kluge has evolved through the contemporary international film industry, placing Kluge the auteur has meant increasingly complicating that position to fit the shifting grounds of postmodern culture. Commentators within modern German cinema have noted his original trouble with and redefinitions of auteurism. As Miriam Hansen and Eric Rentschler have argued, one of the most important collective gestures of contemporary German cinema may has been to resituate the very notion of the auteur. Rentschler has shown that Kluge has been part of an effort to enact a variety of cultural subjectivities in which different enunciatory relations with history have decentered the conventions of auteurism. Hansen notes that for the New German Cinema "the emphasis was necessarily more on a 'politique des auteurs,' the political struggle for independent film-making in a country which did not have a film culture comparable to that of France," this new direction calling for a "revision of Autorenkino through a collective politics of production."[1]

1. Eric Rentschler, *West German Film in the Course of Time* (Bedford Hills, NY:

Accurate as these assessments are, they should be supplemented by suggesting another way in which Kluge has mobilized auteurism as a critical category: namely, with Kluge one finds less a critical subversion of auteurism as a production strategy than a critical exploitation of auteurism as a category for reception. Indeed, the marked shift within auteurism as a way of viewing and receiving movies, rather than as a mode of production, has been the central change in the meaning of auteurism from the sixties to the eighties. It is along these lines that Kluge has begun to make specific use of the commerce of his own singularity and subjectivity.

Many of the relevant terms in this revised stance — fragmentation, diversification, multiplication — are not new to studies of Kluge. But I will enlist them here as part of a specific commercial strategy which I find in Kluge, one in which a politics of agency takes its place as much in an extra-textual as in a textual business, more exactly as a"semi-textual" practice where Kluge admits to performing himself as an image of the writer/producer/filmmaker but primarily as a strategy for eliciting certain relations with his audience. In a crucial sense, Kluge's writing of a self in today's national/international film industry situates itself between the more social and political work surrounding the films (his involvements with government policies or television networks) and the reception of his film practice (whose material textuality refuses to be the authority for its reading). As an extension of his early attempts to dismantle the aura of auteurism as expression, Kluge's more recent engagements with the practice of auteurism have been to use it as a textual material in its own right, a textual material through which he can act out and disperse the specific problematic of an authoritative agency.

The Multiple Children of Truffaut

As a heuristic category, theories and practices of auteurism have never really been untroubled. Its spread from France in the fifties through America and elsewhere in the sixties and seventies was tightly bound to changes in production and distribution strategies, such as the rise of an international art cinema and the introduction of an Arriflex camera. While these changes in production technique frequently presented

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Redgrave, 1984) 89-101 and 158-61; Miriam Hansen, "Cooperative Auteur Cinema and Oppositional Public Sphere: Alexander Kluge's Contribution to *Germany in Autumn*," *New German Critique* 24-25 (Fall/Winter 1981-2). See also Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema*: A History (New Brunswick: Rutgers U. Press, 1989).

auteurism as a more accurate way to cut through the complications of mass entertainment and to locate the expressive core of the film art, they also offered, less visibly, a more historically appropriate method for negotiating the reception of films. The historical adaptability of auteurism, back through the works of early filmmakers like Von Stroheim and Eisenstein and through to the present generation of Spielberg and Cimino, identifies mainly the desire and demand of an industry to generate an artistic (and specifically Romantic) aura during a period when the industry as such needed to distinguish itself from other, less elevated, forms of mass media (most notably, television). Auteurism offered not just new audiences, retrieved from the modernist art communities, but new cultural sanctions to old audiences, alienated and awash in an indistinguishable spate of media images. Despite its often overstated counter-cultural pretentions, auteurism became a deft move in establishing a model that would dominate and stabilize critical reception for at least thirty years. The subsequent auteurist marketing of movies, such as Bernardo Bertolucci's *1900*, David Lean's *Ryan's Daughter*, or Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* guaranteed, through the reverberations of directorial names across titles, a relationship between audience and movie whereby an intentional and authorial agency governs, as a kind of brand-name vision whose contextual meanings are already determined, the way a movie is seen and received.[2]

Indeed, one of the chief mystifications within early theories and practices of auteurism has been a valorization of one or another idea of expression, mostly disconnected from its marketing and commercial implications. Despite their large differences, theories and practices of auteurism from Astruc and Peter Wollen to Foucault and Stephen Heath, from John Ford to Jean Luc Godard, share basic assumptions about the auteur as the structuring principle of enunciation, an organizing expression of one sort or another.[3] Whether one locates that auteurial presence as a source for stylistic or other textual consistencies and variations or as a figurative authority supplanting a lost or "dead"

2. A collection of the major documents and debates about auteurism can be found in *Theories of Authorship: A Reader*, ed. John Caughie (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981). See also Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage, 1975) 292-4.

3. Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana U. Press, 1972); Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?", in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell U. Press, 1977) 113-138; Stephen Heath,"Comment on 'The Idea of Authorship'," *Screen* 14.3 (Autumn 1973): 86-91.

source (as Barthes would say) in the form of a textual enunciation, the place of the auteur within a textual causality describes a way of organizing spectatorial positions in a transcendent or trans-subjective fashion.[4] To view a film as the product of an auteur means to read or to respond to it as an expressive organization that precedes and supersedes the historical fragmentations and subjective distortions that can take over the reception of even the most classically coded movie. The often strained attempts to make consistent or evolutionary the British and American movies of Hitchcock or the German and Hollywood films of Fritz Lang are governed by some sense of a historically trans-subjective and transcendent category which authorizes certain readings or understandings of those movies. In David Bordwell's analysis of auteurism as an interpretative cue,

> the overt self-consciousness of the narration is often paralleled by an extratextual emphasis on the filmmaker as source. Within the art cinema's mode of production and reception, the concept of the *author* has a formal function it did not possess in the Hollywood studio system. Film journalism and criticism promote authors, as do film festivals, retrospectives, and academic film study. Directors' statements of intent guide comprehension of the film, while a body of work linked by an authorial signature encourages viewers to read each film as a chapter of an oeuvre. [. . .] More broadly, the author becomes the real-world parallel to the narrational presence 'who' communicates (what is the filmmaker saying?) and 'who' expresses (what is the author's personal vision?).[5]

Formalist and cognitive critiques of auteurism, such as Bordwell's, can vanquish most of the myths of expressivity in the cinema in favor of more formal and heuristic uses for the auteur. Yet these too do not fully attend to the survival — and, in fact, increasing importance — of the auteur as a commercial strategy for organizing audience reception, as a critical concept bound to distribution and marketing aims. Today, even these modernist corrections, discussions, or deconstructions of the romantic roots of auteurism need to be taken another step towards recontextualizing them within industrial and commercial trajectories.

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4. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 142-48.

5. David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: U. of Wisconsin Press, 1985) 211.

Illustrating this need to investigate how "the author is constructed by and for commerce," John Caughie has noted that this question has been overlooked since Brecht's 1931 account of *The Threepenny Opera* trial in which Brecht "brilliantly exposes the contradiction in cinema between the commercial need to maintain the ideology of the creative artist and the simultaneous need to redefine ownership in terms of capital, rather than creative investment."[6]

This attention to a commerce of auteurism is especially critical in keeping pace with the auteur as a practice and interpretative category during the last fifteen years, the period when the play of commerce has increasingly assimilated the action of enunciation and expression. Certainly such a revaluation of auteurism as more than enunciatory expression or a heuristic category could and should take place across any of its historical variations and to a certain extent has already been implicit in the social and historical emphasis of a "politique des auteurs." Yet the international imperatives of postmodern culture have made it clear that commerce is now much more than just a contending discourse: if, in conjunction with the so-called international art cinema of the sixties and seventies, the auteur had been absorbed as a phantom presence within a text, he or she has rematerialized in the eighties as a commercial performance of *the business of being an auteur*. To follow this move in a postmodern culture, the practices of auteurism now must be re-theorized in terms of the wider material strategies of social agency. Here the auteur can be described according to the conditions of a cultural and commercial intersubjectivity, a social interaction distinct from an intentional causality or textual transcendence.

Models of agency are useful here precisely because they are models of intersubjectivity which aim to undermine the metaphysics and the authority of expression and intention. They delineate a model of action in which both expression and reception are conditioned and monitored by reflective postures towards their material conditions. Charles Taylor, for instance, has argued a model of human agency which foregrounds "second order desires" where the "reflective self-evaluation" of "the self-interpreting subject" has as its object "the having of certain

6. *Theories of Authorship: A Reader* 2; Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967) 18: 139-209; in French, *Le Procés de quat'sous: experience sociologique*, trans. J.-L. Lebrave and J.-P. Lefèbvre (Paris: Editons de l'Arche, 1970) 148-221. See also Ben Brewster, "Brecht and the Film Industry," *Screen* 16.4 (Winter 1975-76): 16--33. See also Robert Self, "Robert Altman and the Theory of Authorship," *Cinema Journal* 25.1 (Fall 1985): 3-11.

first-order desires."[7] Similarly, Anthony Giddens suggests a materialist model of expression as self-reflective action: the motivation of expressive action, the rationalization of that action, and the reflective monitoring of action concomitantly interact to map the structure of expression as a reflective social discourse which necessarily calls attention to the material terms of its communication.[8] In both cases, agency becomes a mode of enunciation which describes an active and monitored engagement with its own conditions as the subjective expresses itself through the socially symbolic. In the cinema, the auteur-as-agency thus becomes a place for encountering not so much a transcending meaning (of first-order desires) but the different conditions through which expressive meaning is made by an auteur and reconstructed by an audience, conditions which involve historical and cultural motivations and rationalizations. Here, even reluctant auteurs like Kluge may strategically embrace the more promising possibilities of the auteur as a commercial presence, since the commercial status of that presence now necessarily become part of an agency which culturally and socially monitors spectatorial identification and critical reception.

The Auteur as Star

Where the practice of the auteur as a particular brand of social agency initiates a revision of its relation with film audiences — and where Kluge finds his opening for addressing those audiences — is, paradoxically, in the contemporary status of the auteur as a star. This idea of the auteur-star may appear merely to hark back to the earlier avatars of auteurism who were placed in certain aesthetic and intellectual pantheons: from Orson Welles to Robert Bresson, the celebrity of auteurism was a product of a certain textual distinction. Despite the general consistency of the tradition of the textual auteur, more recent versions of auteurist positions have deviated from its textual center. In line with the marketing transformation of the auteur of the international art cinema into the cult of personality that defined the film artist of the seventies, auteurs have increasingly become situated along an extratextual path, in which their commercial status as auteurs is their chief function as auteurs: the auteur-star is meaningful primarily as a

7. Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1985) 43, 28, and 15.

8. Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contrast in Social Analysis* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1983).

promotion or recovery of a movie or group of movies, frequently regardless of the filmic text itself.[9] Like Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate*, auteurist movies are often made before they are made; and, like Coppola's *Tucker*, a director's promoted biography can preempt most textual receptions of a movie.[10] In a twist on the tradition of certain movies being vehicles for certain stars, the auteur-star can potentially carry and redeem any sort of textual material, often to the extent of making us forget that material through the marvel of its agency. In this sense, promotional technology and production feats become the new "camera-stylo," serving a new auteurism in which the making of a movie (like *Fitzcarraldo*) or its unmaking (as with *Twilight Zone*) foreground an agency that forecloses the text itself. As Godard has parodied it so incisively in recent films like *King Lear*, in today's commerce we want to know what our authors and auteurs look like or how they act; it is the text that may now be dead.[11]

Placed before and after a film text and in effect usurping the work of that text and its reception, today's auteurs are agents who, whether they wish it or not, are always on the verge of being consumed by their status as stars. By this I am not suggesting some brand of egotism but that the binary distinctions that once formulated most models of auteurist expression or formal organization have collapsed into what Dana Polan has called the postmodern "evacuation of sense" within mass culture.[12] The oppositional calculus of expression to text, psychology to meaning, or authority to interpretation no longer sustains

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9. An example of this position, one which responds to the special status of the auteur yet fails to relect on its larger cultural and critical implications, is Jospeh Gelmis's *The Film Director as Superstar* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1970): "Over half the movie tickets sold today are bought by moviegoers between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five. They know what a director is, what he does and what he's done" (xvii). More recently and specifically, see Jeffery Chown, *Hollywood Auteur: Francis Coppola* (New York: UMI, 1988).

10. One particularly significant account of the contemporary auteur as self-promoting superstar is Steven Bach, *Final Cut: Dreams and Disaster in the Making of "Heaven's Gate"* (New York: New American Library, 1986). A more theoretical and pertinent discussion is Sheila Johnston, "A Star is Born: Fassbinder and the New German Cinema," *New German Critique* 24-25 (Fall/Winter 1981-82): 57-72.

11. One of the most sensational examples of how the production process of a auteur can usurp the film in several senses is Les Blank's *Burden of Dreams* (1981/2), which documents Herzog's making of *Fitzcarraldo* (1982).

12. Dana Polan, "Brief Encounters: Mass Culture and the Evacuation of Sense," in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: U. of Indiana Press, 1986) 167-187.

the contemporary auteur film. Instead, institutional and commercial agency defines auteurism almost exclusively as publicity and advertisement, that is, as both a provocative and empty display of material surface that intercepts those more traditional dynamics. Although filmmakers may write manifestos and preside over movements, Meaghan Morris has noted (in language similar to Richard Dyer's description of stars) that today "the primary modes of film and auteur packaging are advertising, review snippeting, trailers, magazine profiles — always already in appropriation as the precondition, and not the postproduction of meaning."[13] To respond to a movie as primarily or merely a Spielberg film is, after all, the pleasure of refusing an evaluative relation to it — a pleasure that might be equally true of the standard reception of Herzog movies — and much of that pleasure lies in being able to know already, not read, the meaning of the film in a totalizing image that precedes the movie in the public images of its creator.[14] An auteur film today seems to aspire more and more to a critical tautology, capable of being understood and consumed without being seen. Like an Andy Warhol movie, it can communicate a great deal for a large number of audiences who know the maker's reputation but have never seen the films themselves.

For Kluge, it seems that the evolution of auteurism into a kind of postmodern stardom has now, following an irony that runs through many of his projects, come to serve his aims for relocating a spectator's relation to a film as a more material engagement with the cultural agencies of history.

An Agent of Agency: A Prismatic Effect

Of the several tacks within the commerce of the auteur-star, two are most pertinent here: the commercial auteur and the auteur of commerce. Although the first category could theoretically include a vast range of stars as directors and directors as stars (Sylvester Stallone, Madonna, Clint Eastwood, and so forth), more purportedly respectable names in this group would include Spielberg, George Lucas, Brian De

13. Meaghan Morris, "Tooth and Claw: Tales of Survival and Crocodile Dundee," in *Universal Abandon: The Politics of Postmodernism*, ed. Andrew Ross (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1988) 122-123; Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI, 1979).

14. Cf. Timothy Corrigan, "Producing Herzog: From a Body of Images," in *The Films of Werner Herzog: Between Mirage and History*, ed. Timothy Corrigan (New York and London: Methuen, 1986) 3-19.

Palma, David Lean and, with different agendas, John Sayles, Woody Allen, Truffaut of the later years, Lina Wertmuller, and the Bertolucci of the latest Academy Awards. My argument so far would assimilate most of these names, since what defines this group is a recognition, either foisted upon them or chosen by them, that the celebrity of their agency produces and promotes texts that invariably exceed the movie itself, both before and after its release.

The second category is, I believe, the more intriguing variation on the first, for there a filmmaker attempts to monitor or rework the institutional manipulations of the auteurist position within the commerce of the contemporary movie industry. If normally the auteurist text promotes and recuperates a movie, these filmmakers now run the commerce of the auteurist and autonomous self up against its textual expression in a way that shatters the coherency of both authorial expression and stardom. Motivations, desires, and historical developments — which are frequently dramatized in critical readings of films as at least semi-autobiographical — now become destablized and usually with a purpose: did the same Fassbinder who made *Maria Braun* give us *Querelle*? is it the same self-exiled and stridently independent Coppola who says "I need to be a solo guy" and then for *Tucker* humbly surrended the film to George Lucas's "marketing sense of what people want"?[15] While a more traditional auteurist position could describe these changes in perspective and expression according to some coherent notion of evolution, an evaluation of many contemporary filmmakers must admit fissures and discrepancies which consciously employ the public image of the auteur in order to confront and fragment its expressive coherence.[16]

I believe Kluge has positioned himself more and more within such a commerce of auteurism, admitting and reworking the institutional impostures and excesses of an auteurist position today in a way that aligns him somewhat peculiarly on this front with filmmakers like Raoul

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15. Robert Lindsey, "Francis Ford Coppola: Promises to Keep," *New York Times Magazine*, section 6 (24 July 1988): 23-27.

16. In *Narration and the Fiction Film*, David Bordwell recognizes this fragmentation of the auteur but sees it as a mere variation on the traditional auteur-narrator: "The popularity of R.W. Fassbinder in recent years may owe something to his ability to change narrational personae from film to film so that there is a 'realist' Fassbinder, a 'literary' Fassbinder, a 'pastiche' Fassbinder, a 'frenzied' Fassbinder, and so on" (210). Obviously I believe that mobilizing these different agencies within an auteurist category has larger implications.

Ruiz, Nagisa Oshima, R. W. Fassbinder, the Godard of the eighties, and Coppola. Walking a tightrope between the image as a romantic auteur and his recognition of its commercial conditions, Kluge has recently described himself as a "demolition artist" whose position under the Big Top today alternates between a highwire artist and a performing clown: "I'm Robinson Crusoe. If I'm an artist, I am alone, and individually I can work only this way. I'm esoteric like Adorno is, like every artist is. But I would like to have camouflage, mimicry. I think it's important not to show one is an artist nowadays, because it's a very dangerous status."[17] Again, this claim both to be an artist and to mimic the image of the artist does not contradict Kluge's earlier aesthetic programs in revising the needs of "Autorenfilm" as a cooperative cinema nor his other efforts to generate the multiple perspectives of a public sphere. Yet, if in the sixties and early seventies those efforts emphasized political and formal strategies that leaned towards a counter-cultural utopia, this particular engagement with the commerce of auteurism indicates a more conscious confrontation with his own evolution into the mainstream of film culture. If, comparing Kluge to Wenders, Schlöndorff, Fassbinder, and Herzog, one could previously make, more reliably, the claim that Kluge stood outside the international auteurist circle, that is less true today as Kluge carefully promotes his politics through the promotion of his name: his recent premier appearance in New York, for example, has featured radio interviews, university symposia, negotiations with *Paper Tiger*, a special issue of *October,* and the overseeing of an American collection of his films and television programs at the Anthology Film Archives. A growing television presence in West Germany, Kluge has become a reluctant star within the international auteurist circle, and the question has now become for him, I believe, the inverse of the American political scene today: not how can a star absorb the political but how does a star reactivate a materialist politics within his or her commercial agency.

The answer for Kluge and others is that there is a business and politics of agency that permits auteurism to remain a useful tactic in engaging commercial or semi-commercial patterns of identification. Although auteurism today has effectively vacated agency or a metaphysics of expressive causality and textual authority, the shell of auteurism

17. Yvonne Rainer and Ernest Larsen, "'We Are Demolition Artists': An Interview with Alexander Kluge," *The Independent* (June 1989): 21.

— that remains in the form of a material publicity — opens a space for the dramatization of subjectivity refusing its own expressive authority, for a dramatization of subjectivity as, in fact, a material intersubjectivity responsive to the action of self-interpretation and self-critique. To put this in linguistic terms, the mechanisms for identifying with a speaking subject, usually a director, have become as important to communication in film culture today as the so-called textual statement of a movie itself or the different ways it is received by different audiences: the commercial drama of a movie's source can say as much today as the drama of the movie and the dispositions of its viewers. As important as the text of a Kluge film becomes the work of critical reception that Kluge initiates across his name, his auteurist status and his public's knowledge of it.

Kluge thus finds in the contemporary agency of auteurism one of several postmodern grounds on which to initiate a modernist critique of contemporary cynicism and vacancy, a way of reorganizing a devalued and emptied auteurism as a critical subjectivity.[18] As early as 1979, he claims, "I have always believed in auteur cinema." But "auteur cinema," he continues, "is not a minority phenomenon: all people relate to their experiences like authors — rather than managers of department stores."[19] Implicit even in these remarks is an understanding of auteurism as a process of identification which can reflect itself as an agency for critical "self-interpretation" in its audience; such a reception of auteurism is possible largely because a putative creative presence has been commercially dislocated from textual authority and refocused as the mechanisms of agency. Indeed, one sees an especially concrete and anticipatory version of this critical use of the agency of auteurism in Kluge's release and re-release of perhaps his most commercial undertaking, *Strongman Ferdinand*: he followed the film from theater to theater, the authorial source repositioned as a critical interlocutor defined by the diversity of his audience. The auteur becomes literally realized as an agency constructed across the diverse response

18. Kluge remarks: "We are not postmodernists. I believe in the avant-garde. But that is not where the distinction lies. There are two different approaches: dominating the materials and respecting the materials. The first would take materials to realize intentions. The opposed attitude would be to accept the autonomy of these materials, which are living." Stuart Liebman, "On New German Cinema, Art, Enlightenment, and the Public Sphere: An Interview with Alexander Kluge," *October* 46 (Fall 1988): 57.

19. Alexander Kluge, "On Film and the Public Sphere," trans. Thomas Levin and Miriam Hansen, *New German Critique* 24-25(Fall/Winter 1981-82): 206-207.

of a genuinely public sphere — not unlike one of Charles Moore's postmodern buildings, constructed through the interaction of community planning.

Kluge's aesthetic and ideological play with agency within the commerce of auteurism may be seen acted out across a spectrum of other artistic and social texts: from public appearances and social and political commitments to literary and non-literary writings, from rumored histories of one's past to one's penchant for a certain camera person or a particular star.[20] A recent television program which he has produced, for instance, features a collage of different "auteurs" from the New German Cinema (Helke Sanders, Margarethe von Trotta, Herzog, Volker Schlöndorff), yet the show refuses to identify the specific product of any particular director. Indeed, for Kluge, the very multiplicity of his own personae, as a university professor, novelist, aesthetician, politician, lawyer, disciple of Adorno, and businessman becomes a fortuitous instability within the auteurist perspective on his filmmaking career. Other, more textual dimensions, would include his early use of his sister as a familial counterpart in films like *Yesterday Girl*, his place as adaptor of his own stories, such as *The Patriot*, and the books that reassemble movies like *The Patriot* and *The Power of Emotion* around Kluge's own voice and promulgations.[21] Like the wry voice-over whose "useless remarks" introduce *The Patriot*, his expressive agency through most of these tactics achieves a "prismatic effect" which tends to assert and then disperse its own authority.[22]

As a much more specific case, however, I want to look briefly at one "semi-textual" strategy which is often taken for granted in Kluge's and other auteurs' work: the interview — one of the few, documentable extra-textual spaces where Kluge engages and disperses his own organizing agency as auteur. The standard directorial interview might be described according to the action of promotion and explanation: it is the writing and explaining of a film through the promotion of a certain intentional self; it is frequently the commercial dramatization of self as the motivating agent of textuality. With Kluge, though, it becomes a dialogue about complications and deferral in which in his words he,

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20. For additional examples of these moves within Kluge's artistic practice and biography, see Thomas Böhm-Christl, ed., *Alexander Kluge* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983).

21. Alexander Kluge, *Die Patriotin: Texte/Bilder 1-6* (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 1979); *Die Macht der Gefühle* (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 1984).

22. Rainer and Larsen 23-24.

"like a catalyst, [. . .] disappears from the process." Indeed much of attraction of the interview format for Kluge may be precisely that dialogic or polylogic structure which is ignored in most auteurist encounters but which for him is enacted as something between a conflictual debate and the relational experience of "chatting" (which Kluge oddly associates with women). This kind of encounter obviously parallels Kluge's work with textual montage and his other efforts to replace creative authority with a more cooperative and conflictual exchange. Yet here it has the specific advantage of reformulating the coherence of intention and the opacity of celebrity that attaches independently to the agency of auteurism, the path which in the contemporary film industry has become increasingly important in forming modes of identification as expressive action.

For Kluge, the interview regularly accentuates that presentation of agency according to a series of rhetorical and structural strategies. As early as 1974 Jan Dawson recorded this tendency when she introduced a long interview as "a fragmented, three-day conversation." After reading the transcript of that interview, Kluge distanced himself further from it by complaining about its abstractions and asking Dawson "to cut down the generalisations and explicate his meaning with more concrete illustrations from the films." Confronted with all these dislocations of her speaking subject, Dawson took proper refuge in Kluge's film aesthetics, asking the reader to "create their own interview from the text that follows."[23]

More specifically (and more recently), one finds in Kluge's interviews a tendency not only to alternate the abstract with the concrete but to embed that concrete in a disconnected montage of seemingly digressive stories, placing himself as an empty agent at the center of "not one story but many stories."[24] These anecdotes can range from accounts of the filming of an eviction in Frankfurt to stories about the "history of the plow, which in 8 A.D. already looked like it does today" to pseudo-confessional fantasies of love-making in the deserts of Africa.[25] Sometimes, these episodic digressions can serve as illustrations of certain points, but just as often they stand out as Brechtian gests which seem intentionally to trouble the historical and cultural place of Kluge

23. *Alexander Kluge and the Occasional Work of a Female Slave*, ed. Jan Dawson (Perth: A Perth Film Festival Publication, 1975) 27.
24. Kluge, "On Film and the Public Sphere" 206.
25. Kluge, "On Film and the Public Sphere" 216-17

himself as speaking subject: the apparent failure to maintain a consistency in subject matter or historical episode monitors a speaker whose agency is regularly being fractured by that matter. This is the presentation of Kluge as historical raconteur who, unlike the Reagan paradigm, does not use the historical anecdote to fabricate himself as a transcendent or opaque agent of discourse ("anything I say is important and true simply because I say it") but to disperse or dislocate his agency through the material variety of history's "histoires" ("because anything could be said it surpasses any coherence I can give it").

A second characteristic of the Kluge voice is its ability to absorb or deflect a centered, critical position. As has been common from the beginning, an interview with Kluge is an interview with a complex plurality manifested in his third- or first-person plural voice and the deflection of most questions about his specific work towards larger financial, artistic and political issues. In an interview with Stuart Liebman, for instance, Kluge consistently redefines his own alliances, relocating himself as a filmmaker with a variety of odd bedfellows. He accepts Herzog as an ally, as "an amateur like me." "Even films like *The Boat*, *The Never-Ending Story*, *The Name of the Rose*," he allows, "are made the Oberhausen way." Yet he finds Straub and Huillet's *Moses and Aaron*, a film that would seem close to Kluge's own materialist aesthetics, too visual in its recreation of the opera.[26] At one point, cinemas are declared dead and television hailed as the future; but then he acknowledges, "we will come through television to cinema again." With typical mobility and contrariety, he refuses full identification with either the modernist or postmodernist school, and instead declares his work "classical" in its faith in a counter-public sphere.[27] His objections and agreements always appear as only qualifiers, making waffling appear a strict political program: "we have no objections," he says of his and Negt's disagreements with the historical focus of Habermas's work, "but we have a different field of employment."[28] In a 1989 interview with Yvonne Rainer and Ernest Larsen, Rainer pursues the elusive "we" that Kluge becomes, and the response only diffuses the agency further before it paradoxically joins ranks with *Der Spiegel*:

26. Liebman 31, 49, 25.
27. Liebman 43.
28. Liebman 42.

> We have organized ourselves. We have organized all opera houses and theaters in Germany, book publishers and independent filmmakers. In other words, the traditional media — not newspapers or broadcast artists — the books, cinemas, theaters, and the circus. They belong together. And on television they look very different. This is understandable because originally they had nothing to do with television. We also have a partner, the news magazine *Der Spiegel*.[29]

To paraphrase his own words, this auteurial voice — mobile, critical, and generous in the sense he applies it to Adorno — is a voice of continual differentiation in which it becomes more a predicate and a "porous" agent than an authorizing expression.

Interview tactics such as these are not, obviously, radical political gestures. As a part of the diversified confrontation that is Kluge's project, however, they can mark a significant move within the critical reception of agency. Indeed, the questionable possibility of a "radical gesture" itself may be exactly what is implicit in a perspective on auteurism as critical agency. As Charles Taylor notes about the subject/agent of Sartre's "radical choice" (who might equally be the classical auteur or the textual auteur of the sixties):

> He would be utterly without identity. [. . .] The subject of radical choice is another avatar of that recurrent figure, which our civilization aspires to realize, the disembodied ego, the subject who can objectify all being, including his own, and choose in radical freedom. But the promised total self-possession would in fact be the most total self-loss.[30]

Instead, as I believe Kluge recognizes on all fronts, the preliminary question to all other questions of symbolic form within today's international culture must concern the material conditions and agencies of inter-subjectivity. This is a politics of agency that moves beyond radical choice towards that of the radical evaluation and openness of a public sphere, towards, in Charles Taylor's words, the "deepest unstructured sense of what is important."

Kluge has said of the style of his films, "one doesn't see the cut, but my signature resides in it." Likewise, one might say of his agency as an auteur, one hardly sees the expression because the speaker resides so rigorously in the material politics of its predication.

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29. Rainer and Larsen 19.
30. Taylor 35.