

“Eine Qualität, von der man weiß, dass es sie schon einmal gegeben hat“
 Young Berlin filmmakers on the trail of *New German Cinema*

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This paper argues that the new wave of German cinema since the late 1990s, headed by filmmakers of the so-called *Berliner Schule* can be seen as a continuation of the 1960s and 1970s tradition of German *Autorenkino*. Despite obvious contextual and thematic differences between both “waves,” including the necessary differentiation within German *Autorenkino* and the historical meaning of the term *Berliner Schule*, the work of both eras is considered to be avant-gardist art. In both waves, filmmakers tried to bring together the artistic and the political, aiming to change the existing conditions of society. A comparison of Alexander Kluge’s early film *Abschied von Gestern* (1966) and Sören Voigt’s *Identity Kills* (2003) will serve as a case study to illustrate the type of relationship I propose between the two movements.

On the formal and narrative levels, the films of both movements are preoccupied with identity, or what Thomas Elsaesser has termed “Erfahrung” of the spectator via identification, distanciation and otherness (*New German Cinema* 158). The need for “Erfahrung” in the 1970s is connected to the suppressed German trauma, arguably to the famous “inability to mourn” after the Second World War.¹ The trauma contemporary film tackles is a different kind of trauma, but the strategies of how to deal with it are similar.

Additionally, women play an important, yet problematic role in the *Autorenkino* of *New German Cinema*,² mainly because of their function as tools for the projection of the auteurs’ subjective message. Yet, the feminist film movement developed out of New German Cinema and its project to arrive at an authentic depiction of that subjectivity. Again, in the films of the *Berliner Schule* women become screens of the auteurs’ projections, but their important role in the narrative has a different meaning than in the earlier film movement. At the same time, the new conception of the female in the films of the *Berliner Schule* could produce a film that would have to be termed “post-feminist” and these films seem to emerge in the works of some female directors associated with the *Berliner Schule*.³ In the context of this year’s Berlin film festival, *Berlinale*, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* invited three contemporary German filmmakers, whose films premiered at this event, for a

roundtable discussion (Althen et al.). As it turned out, the talk between Angela Schanelec, Benjamin Heisenberg and Oskar Roehler blatantly exposed the almost hostile relationship between critical art house film and commercial entertainment cinema in the contemporary German film scene. Oskar Roehler, whose recent history film *Jud Süß: Film ohne Gewissen* had just been critically received in the press and audience, threatened to leave the panel after the two other directors, both associated with the *Berliner Schule*, had commented on the lack of recognition German filmmakers receive as artists in comparison to the acclaim cinematic “auteurs” receive in France. Roehler, for his part, lamented the new intellectualism in the way film is treated in Germany and made it a point to be recognized as a director, not as an “Autor.” According to him, cinema needed the spectacular, large sets and big budgets in order to be “good cinema” (ibid.).

The rift between both camps proved insurmountable and a true dialogue did not emerge at the FAZ’s roundtable. In fact, Roehler’s attacks on films conceived as works of art and films with claims to authenticity and the bleak realism generally associated with the *Berliner Schule* point to the problematic relationship in Germany between art and commercialism. This problem reaches back to theories of the Frankfurt School with Walter Benjamin’s optimistic *Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* contrasted by Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s pessimistic *Cultural Industry in The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It was also at the heart of the auteur politics of *New German Cinema* and *Autorenkino* in the 1960s and 70s. This political debate was eventually brought to an end with the new minister of internal affair, Friedrich Zimmermann of the conservative Christian Social Union (CSU), deciding for the tax payer and box office revenues, and thus against the cinematic auteurs, as if artistic claims and spectator satisfaction were incommensurable (Meurer 79-81). The debate back then pointed to the lack of a cinematic public culture in Germany, as opposed to the situation in France, where film has traditionally been part of public discourse. The comment of a pro-industry critic and filmmaker in 1977 echoes the attitude Roehler displayed in the 2010 FAZ discussion, saying that “Film-makers like Kluge, Herzog, Geissendörfer and Fassbinder, all of whom have collected subsidies more than once, and who despite such public funding are incapable of directing a success, should in future be barred from receiving subsidies” (qtd. in Elsaesser, *New German Cinema* 374).

While originally the term “auteur” was given by the French *Cahiers du Cinéma* to classical Hollywood filmmakers such as Howard Hawks and Alfred Hitchcock, thus undermining the barrier between

what traditionally had been “high” versus “low” art, in the German context it became a politically motivated term in the early sixties. Film as a consumer good and means of mass entertainment was associated with a fascist mentality and the popular cinema of the Weimar era. Ironically, the *Autoren* thus opposed principles of the American film industry, which had been flooding the German market with Hollywood movies as part of the Allies’ attempt to re-educate Germans in democracy. Today the concept of cinematic auteurs has shifted to “auteur” as a name brand that helps promoting films of individual directors on an international scale. The concept itself seems contradictory, as it can refer to classical Hollywood style and commercially successful entertainment film, as well as avant-garde claims.

As the dispute between Roehler, Heisenberg and Schanelec shows, *Autorenkino* is not at all dead in Germany. Long gone are the times when Eric Rentschler lamented the lack of political engagement among German filmmakers in his essay on the German “Cinema of Consensus,” published in 2000 (cf. 262-271). While film scholars such as Thomas Elsaesser argue that in European cinema regions and cities have replaced auteurs and nations, having become, “in view of its declining impact and seeming provincialism, eerily a part of world cinema” (*European Cinema* 30), others, such as Marco Abel, see German cinema on the verge of a renaissance (cf. Abel), and the French *Cahiers du Cinéma* have been concentrating on the Berliner Schule as an epitome of vital young German art house film since the late 1990s.

Within *New German Cinema*, Alexander Kluge could be claimed to represent the prototype of a German auteur. After all, he was one of the signatories of the *Oberhausener Manifest* and arguably the most eager proponent of the principles of the new movement in the early sixties. Together with Edgar Reitz he developed an education program for the *Ulmer Filminstitut*, which trained young filmmakers in all aspects of filmmaking, with the aim of being able to control all steps in the production process. Kluge’s film *Abschied von Gestern* is said to have been the very first *Neuer Deutscher Film*, winning silver at the Venice Film Festival 1966 and accrediting German film internationally, followed by *Artisten in der Zirkuskuppel: Ratlos*, which won gold in 1968. *Abschied von Gestern* has been described as the only one of Kluge’s cinematic productions still establishing a bond with the audience. As opposed to Kluge’s other works, it cannot be dismissed as what Wolfgang Schütte has fittingly termed “Alexander Träume,” films that presuppose an ideal recipient, who reads them like books in order to appreciate their rich totality (Barg 197). As opposed to the French concept of *cinéma d’auteur*,

Kluge was not appointed an *auteur* retrospectively, but represented the concept of *Autorenkino* even before making his first successful films, which underline his affinities to theory and his abstract authorship.

Despite all the differences existing between people like Alexander Kluge or Edgar Reitz, who consciously formed ‘schools’ of filmmaking and emphasized the need for recognizable groups and political lobbying, and the loose discussion group which has somewhat involuntarily acquired the label of *Berliner Schule*, similarities between both movements exist. For example, Kluge and Reitz are cited regularly in the *Berliner Schule* discussion forum, the journal *Revolver* published by *Filmverlag der Autoren*.⁵ The notion of a cinematic “quality one knows has existed in the past” refers to the utopian film theories of Reitz and Kluge (Elsaesser, *New German Cinema* 120-122), whose goal it was to regain what was promised in film history (Barg 89). Cinematic *Autoren* such as Wim Wenders and R.W. Fassbinder, too, explored classical French and American film in their works. The phrase can also be applied to the editors of *Revolver*, who borrow from early cinema and base their stories on works of classical Hollywood, as well as avant-garde traditions. Christian Petzold’s 2007 film *Yella*, for example, is based on both an American horror-mystery of the early 1960s⁶ and on Harun Farocki’s venture-capital documentary *Nicht ohne Risiko* (2004). In both film movements the parent generation is denounced and directors try to connect to a tradition preceding that of their parents (cf. Kluge, “Interview” 17).

The term *Berliner Schule* originally referred to the Berlin DFFB (Deutsche Film und Fernsehakademie Berlin), founded in 1966. It was associated with what Elsaesser termed “cinema of experience,” with “documentaries about strike committees and cramped housing conditions, about the educational disadvantages of Turkish children in West Berlin, the difficulties of unionizing women or the successes of grass-roots movements in organizing anti-nuclear protesters” (*New German Cinema* 176). Back then it was contrasted by the Munich based film school, which indulged in artifice and which Kluge is generally associated with (ibid. 169).

However, the contemporary *Berliner Schule* is not named after the DFFB, but accredited to stylistically and thematically corresponding films produced in and around Berlin. In fact, the *Berliner Schule* I am referring to combines both aesthetic concepts of the historic Munich and Berlin film schools, roughly summarized as “cinema of experience” and “experience of cinema” (ibid. 207-209).

Both tendencies fed into cinema as “identity machine,” a machine which activated the spectator, cinema as an instrument that provided for the audience’s primary identification: identification with the screen and the act of seeing instead of with the characters. This is the first of the two important aspects in *New German Cinema*, as well as in the films of the *Berliner Schule*. Primary identification involves the body of the spectators, who are set in motion by the very stasis of the camera employed in the films of, for example, Christoph Hochhäusler (Abel).

Thomas Elsaesser pointed out the important role of the cinematic authors for German identity formation during the sixties, after the Berlin Wall had been built and the postwar West German society was slowly released from American tutelage. Relying on concepts of identity formation developed by Lacan and Foucault, Elsaesser asserted that *New German Cinema* was something like an “extreme case study of identity formation” (Davidson 16).

Questions of identity in Adenauer’s and Brandt’s Germany involved the alienation of the subject in a society still marked by continuities inherited from the Nazi era and the rift between idealism and reality, private and public. In his films, Werner Herzog depicts overreachers and underdogs, such as Kaspar Hauser, Woyzeck or Stroszek, who lack a language compatible with public discourse. Staged emotions and obvious role playing are key elements in Fassbinder’s films, while gaps of knowledge, narrative interruptions and overtone insertions are prevalent in those of Alexander Kluge. The border between victim and victimizer, the oppressed and the oppressor, becomes fluid as characters become mere spectators, detached from material life conditions, such as that of Young Törless in Volker Schlöndorff’s film of the same title. Here, the act of observing and standing by at the scene of a crime is shifted to the center of the narrative.

The hesitancy, diffidence and indecision of the typical Wenders protagonist, the endless sitting around in bars drinking beer in Fassbinder films or the resolute spunk of a character like Christa Klages in von Trotta’s film by that title are mirror-images of the spectator, foils for direct identification. In contrast to that, there are films which make identification itself the issue, both within the narrative and in their narrational stance, such as many Fassbinder films which use an ‘inner frame’ in the composition of shots to ‘place’ characters and events, or in Herzog’s documentaries, where characters often stare aggressively into the camera (Elsaesser, *New German Cinema* 60).

Abschied von Gestern addresses all the identity issues mentioned above. Anita G., the main character, is struggling between desire and the

reality principle epitomized in the first scenes. While the first two scenes show her eating and indulging in the pleasures of music and the beautiful surroundings of the old *Café Kranzler*, these cheerful shots are followed by a scene of Anita G. in court and, later, in prison. The Jewish refugee from the German Democratic Republic constantly longs for bourgeois luxuries known from her former classy lifestyle, while in the action shown in the film she has become a drifter looking for shelter in the Federal Republic. Crucial settings are places between the private and the public, like the public bathroom, where she takes her pregnancy test, or the empty warehouse display, which becomes a shelter during a point of extreme despair. The discrepancy between Anita's authentic speech and public discourse is stressed in the scenes that contrast her with public clerks, probation officers, academics and employers. In some scenes the dissociation of body and language among people representing public institutions is rendered comically, such as when representatives of a dog-training club read even the simplest statements from script, without inflecting their voices when rain starts to pour. The identity issues of private versus public and of observing versus being on display are clearly associated with gender here.

Kluge uses cinematic devices that in the 1970s have come to be associated with the critical and feminist style of filmmaking, a style that leaves the viewing subject intact by providing causal gaps instead of immersing the viewer in a closed system of meaning that reproduces hegemonic bourgeois ideology.⁷ Because of the special status of women as objects of the gaze and their traditionally passive role vis-à-vis the cinema, feminist filmmaking took aim at the disruption of viewing habits and the unquestionable connection between signifier and signified. This type of film thus rejected the concept of classical Hollywood realism, which favors continuity editing and narrative causality. Instead, filmmakers such as Agnès Varda and Chantal Akerman experimented with blending documentary realism and fiction, emphatic camera work and montage in order to come to a more investigative representation of female subjectivity.

Despite his innovative cinematic language, Kluge is not concerned with female subjectivity (Schlupmann 71). Instead, he conceptualized a "female mode of production" as part of the private economy of emotions, which according to him opposes the external economy of political and social organization (ibid.). His aesthetic theory relies on certain associations that are clearly gender stereotypes: The ability to reach back to unconscious memories from childhood, as well as to associate images and sounds with bits of past experience in his

films are associated with the female mode of production. Based on the assumption that these 'female' abilities reside in each individual, the viewer is to activate these abilities and fill in the gaps in Kluge's films with associations and emotions. Kluge stresses that his goal is not the identification of the viewer with the characters on screen, but the formation of a "third image" in the head of the viewer upon seeing two juxtaposed images (Lewandowski 36).

Besides rendering the 'female' an abstract concept without consideration for the actual female subject, Kluge supports the dialectic of male and female by following the Marxist binary of internal and external economics, of private and public realm, and he portrays the male-female dialectic as that of active versus passive, criticizing the male part but at the same time condemning the female to inaction. In his films, women barely speak while Kluge's voice is largely present in voice-over narration, even if in a very gentle manner. Instead of a male gaze controlling the female image, it is the male voice which controls and comments on the female main characters.⁸

Shifting to the beginning of the twenty-first century and to the films of the *Berliner Schule*, one realizes that these films, too, use critical devices, which by now of course have come to be much more common. Most of them use exceptionally long shots, a static camera, a mix of professional and non-professional actors and authentic settings. Sören Voigt inserts black frames between shots to mark dramatic development, Christoph Hochhäusler uses atonal music to convey a subjective perspective and Valeska Grisebach experiments with diegetic and extradiegetic sounds. Most of the *Berliner Schule* filmmakers leave gaps of knowledge in order to speak to irrational senses and personal experience.

In the films of Hochhäusler, Petzold, Voigt and Schanelec, just as in Kluge's film, it is women who suffer from an unfinished past and an anticipated future. However, here the Marxist opposition between public discourse and inner voice is not clear anymore. The female main characters in *Berliner Schule* films such as *Yella* (Christian Petzold, 2007), *Milchwald* (Christoph Hochhäusler, 2003) and *Identity Kills* (Sören Voigt, 2003) seem to have lost their authentic voice and way of seeing, which Anita G. in *Abschied von Gestern* still possessed. They embrace and become part of the superficial world of commodities. At the same time, they are overwhelmed and paralyzed by this seemingly compact and impenetrable reality. These women are suspended in the present without fully being 'here.' In their presence, this all-mighty reality that seemingly leaves no room for imagination and fantasy becomes itself uncanny, something that is at the same time artificial and alive. They wander

around in space, but while Anita G. still had the goal of eventually getting somewhere, of settling down and being accepted in the end, this endpoint is lost for the postmodern women of the *Berliner Schule* filmmakers. Their women apparently have no inner world, no past experience to remember and no utopian future destination. At least the camera does not hint at it as in Kluge's film via the montage technique. They are ghost-like, alive and dead at the same time, mere images, reflected in mirrors, looked at through glass walls, captured on photographs and imagined in dreamlike illusions. This mode of being is reflected in the style of film-making, which often leaves the audience undecided as to whether we see actors in a piece of fiction or in a real life documentary.

Thomas Elsaesser in his 2007 book *Hollywood Heute* uses the term "Neo Noir" cinema for those films in which the male hero is paralyzed by an unspecified trauma. He traces this trauma back to contemporary media society, in which the individual is so saturated with mediated experience (Erlebnis) that the conception of a linear life story (Erfahrung) becomes impossible. While the theme in the classical *Film Noir* of the postwar era was male failure in the face of a world out of sync (cf. Elsaesser, *Hollywood Heute* 42), *Neo-Noir* has to do with an excess of experience in the postmodern world, where the individual consequently becomes numb to human emotions, as if he was already dead: "It hurts so much that I don't feel it anymore" (Foster 106). The main protagonists of these movies are "in a state of inversion. Despite their anticipation of catastrophe, they are unable to help themselves and become observers of their own destruction" (Elsaesser, *Hollywood Heute* 46, my translation).

While Elsaesser focuses on male protagonists, who, in contrast to classical Hollywood cinema's rational, active heroes represent "iffy, agitated characters, wandering around in an urban labyrinth or prowling about a bleak landscape," the agitated heroes of *Berliner Schule* films are female (ibid. 27, my translation). In Christian Petzold's *Yella*, for example, the main character does not know whether she is dead or alive. The catastrophe took place in the beginning of the story as a "border experience" in the literal and allegorical sense, her ex-boyfriend steering his car into the former inner-German border river, the Elbe. In the plot, Yella is haunted by her ex-boyfriend and becomes herself haunting, as she drives a company owner to commit suicide in the end. The women characters of *Berliner Schule* films are drivers and business aspirants, who oscillate between excessive emotionality and ascetic suppression of

feelings. They appear machine-like or spectral, unreal and deadly instead of life-giving, nourishing and maternal.

Their society is comparable to the “celibatory machine” Michel de Certeau addresses in his book *Heterologies. Discourse on the Other* (156-158). The “celibatory machine” is a secularized system of representation, opposed by de Certeau to that of mystic writing. Writing on “celibatory machines” in the work of Herman Melville, Branka Arsić says that modern individuals “are secularized: they have never had a Holy Land (the body of the mother) and so have never had the holiness (of God or the father). They have neither possessed nor lost anything; they have ‘always’ been desireless orphans” (122). The modern individual, through secularization, has lost the mother and the Holy Land, both of which in the German imagination are comprised as “Heimat.” The maternal place of belonging and belief is lost. Instead, the countryside becomes exchangeable, utilitarian and void of history, like the new female characters, “faceless, silent, sheet-white; they themselves were never born: they simply and eternally are” (Arsić 123). They provide for the masculine order, which is in fact machine-like, in taking on the role of the screen onto which male fantasies can be projected. It resembles the endpoint of the Enlightenment project, the point at which utopia turns into a dystopia of absolute coldness.

Just like the characters in classical Noir or Neo-Noir films that suffer from a loss of memory, a loss of continuity with the past, and are suspended in the present, postwar and post-unification Germany is characterized by a lack of identity and willful amnesia. Helma Sanders-Brahms describes post-war Germany as a country that denied its history, destroying all remnants of the past and making room for a new efficient economy (160-162). There are signs that filmmakers and scholars compare the end of the twentieth century to this era of identity-formation, turning the *Wende* into a new “zero hour” in German history. In fact, Michael Klier’s *Ostkreuz* of 1991, depicting the bleak outskirts of Berlin right after the fall of the Berlin Wall, has often been compared to Rossellini’s *Germania Anno Zero* of 1948, which was set in the ruins of the bombed city after World War II. Klier, too, is counted among the directors associated with *Berliner Schule*.

The kind of German identity promoted in public discourse around the end of the twentieth century is that of a dynamic, open society starting anew and leaving behind the darker aspects of its history. With the 1999 decision to move the German capital from Bonn back to Berlin, the city, yet under construction and slowly turning into a European metropolis, became a symbol of German orientation to the

future. In fact, it was the success of Tom Tykwer's *Lola Rennt* in 1998, which spurred the identification of young Germans with the city via the strong-willed and self-conscious character.⁹ In the film, Berlin appears as a huge urban playground for young people, a city that opens up different future opportunities at every corner. The term "Generation Berlin" arose after the film's release and with the growing popularity of Berlin mass events such as the *Love Parade* and the Soccer World cup in 2006 (Bude 2001). Like Lola, young Berliners believe in their own strength rather than in authority and in the future rather than the past. They are highly mobile and appear dynamic, despite their limited financial assets.

Berliner Schule filmmakers seem to undermine exactly this idealized picture of a strong-willed, dynamic and mobile society. In their films, female main characters wander around the capital, which turns out to be an empty center space full of gaps where the Wall used to stand, with empty streets, unfinished construction sites and monotonous suburbs in the Eastern part. In particular, mothers are used to talk about the subject in contemporary German society. In a matriarchal society everyone is equal, because all are children of mothers whose love is granted unconditionally. Hierarchical thinking belongs to the patriarchal order and gives rise to the separation of the public and the private (cf. von Trotta, qtd. in Knight 145-146). Mothers in *Berliner Schule* films are either absent or suppressed, just like Anita G. in *Abschied von Gestern* who gives birth in prison and has to give up her child in the end.

Sören Voigt is one of the *Autoren* of the *Berliner Schule* who consciously defines his style of filmmaking against the backdrop of *New German Cinema* in his interviews in *Revolver*, the film journal functioning as a discussion forum among *Berliner Schule* filmmakers (Voigt). Voigt is one of the lesser known Berlin filmmakers. He graduated from the Berlin film school DFFB. His first feature film was a comedy produced for television, *Tolle Lage* (2000), in which he had to comply with aesthetic demands of the broadcaster. With *Identity Kills* (2003), he directed a film without having to comply with market demands, as he financed it by himself. This allowed him to insert estranging effects, such as long, black cuts and the use of documentary techniques, a static camera and the insertion of dream images falling out of the narrative. In volume 9 (2003) of *Revolver*, Voigt stated that, like in the 1960s, Germany needed some filmmakers to start filming at their personal financial risk, since today there was no place for independent films and thus no room for discussion, conflict and, in effect, life in the German subsidy system (Voigt).

In the plot, Voigt depicts the fate of a young Berlin woman, who suffers from the irresponsibility and lack of identity of her

generation, the “Generation Berlin.” From the very beginning the audience is not asked to identify with Karen, as the camera remains distanced. Instead, the young woman is shown identifying with random people on the street, imitating their gestures, absorbing life around her. Karen’s hair is wet as she wanders the streets, as if she just stepped out of the water, has been reborn and is starting anew from an initial catastrophe or accident. Something has happened in the past and is likely to return in the future, meaning during the course of this film. The same outlook is given in Kluge’s *Abschied von Gestern*, where the opening captions read: “Uns trennt von Gestern nur die veränderte Lage.”

What is to follow is the creation of Karen’s new identity as a revenant or specter, which Derrida defines as an absence or simulacrum that is at the same time corporeal and material. In his work *Specters of Marx* Derrida defines money and the commodity as the specters of our time due to their leveling effect which makes everything exchangeable and thus devoid of personal properties. Derrida speaks of the “apparition of the bodiless body of money: not the lifeless body or the cadaver, but a life without personal life or individual property” (41). He finds our present, which is defined by market forces and the rule of money, spectral and asks his readers to “learn spirits,” to “converse with ghosts” in order to be able to cope with the destabilizing effect of the simultaneous presence of opposites such as life and death, reality and illusion in our world. Whenever one finds the spectral, he asserts, “there is reason to doubt the reassuring order of the present, and especially the border between the present and everything that could be opposed to it” (39), i.e. absence, virtuality or the simulacrum in general. In the case of Karen, she has tried to commit suicide, is now starting a new life and is on the way to visit her psychiatrist.

In contrast to Kluge’s main character Anita G., Karen’s personality is empty. While Anita had a distinct past, personal memories and the goal to fit in with the FRG society, Karen’s pale, flat face with her tied-back, red hair is devoid of expressions, a blank page awaiting inscription by the world around her. Karen’s explanation of her suicidal dream in the therapeutic session at the beginning of the film parallels the court scene in Kluge’s film where Anita has to explain her flight from the GDR and theft of a cardigan. However, Karen is faced not with the male representative of state justice, but with a female therapist. The world cannot be divided into the male-female polarities anymore, and Karen is allowed to speak in her own words. While in Anita’s world an understanding environment would have made her situation easier, Karen’s enemy is within herself and a relief or cure is not possible. In

her recounting of the dream she had after taking the pills, Karen describes the absence of a sense of self, a feeling of not knowing where she begins and ends. In her dream she was “just there” in empty space. Yet, in waking life Karen seems lost, too. This makes her an easy victim of exploitation in her relationship with her boyfriend Ben, who has no innate personality either, but defines himself through his friends and status symbols of the party generation, such as fast cars and techno music. Karen seems doomed to fit in with the role others prescribe for her, while these others, too are just actors staging reality.

The troubling aspects of the concept of ‘identity’ are embodied in this character: On the one hand, when the subject identifies aspects of an ‘Other’ and assimilates those aspects into themselves, they are transformed, wholly or partially, after the model this ‘Other’ provides. It is by means of a series of identifications that the personality is constituted and specified (cf. Laplanche, entry “identification”). At the same time, the identifying subject becomes exchangeable, a mere type assimilated to categories such as nation, class or gender. Identity in this sense implies reproducibility and exchangeability. It is an economy in which parts of a person’s inside and a social outside are being interchanged.

From the very beginning of the film Karen is exchangeable, starting with her return home after therapeutic treatment only to discover Ben’s ex-girlfriend in her apartment. There always seems to be a substitute already there, ready to take her place as soon as she turns her back on her home. The impression of exchangeability is enhanced as we see Karen’s apartment bloc with its endless rows of identical flats and her tiny mailbox surrounded by hundreds of other boxes of the same size. Karen’s environment here effectively mirrors her identity in crisis.

Ben’s holding on to Karen despite his obvious lack of affection and his exploitation of her weakness is crueler than the way Anita G. in Kluge’s film is treated by her lovers, who simply leave her. His attitude to Karen is cynical in the sense Derrida uses the term, calling the exchangeable commodity “cynical” because it effaces differences. This cynic prostitutes him- or herself because he or she is “always ready to exchange not only soul, but body with each and every other commodity” (Derrida 162). Ben agrees to marry her to ensure his faithfulness but participates in the registrar’s ceremony wearing his every day shirt. Behind Ben a male guest likely to be his father is partially visible, looking at him critically. The exchangeability of women for Ben becomes obvious in the scene when Karen meets his short-time girlfriend Sara in a train station. Sara is situated in front of a huge commercial poster promoting beer with a towering *Brandenburg Gate* in

the background. Both girls wear the same necklace, which was apparently given to Karen first, but then handed to Sara, while Karen replaced the original with a copy acquired in the store. Ben keeps Karen in the intermediate state of a dead life. For him, Karen is exchangeable, a tool for the satisfaction of his needs. She resembles the pieces of silverware she produces as a worker in a huge factory. The film cuts from Karen's image on the Berlin streets to the factory machines stamping pieces of metal into the shape of expensive-looking forks. Long shots observe assembly lines with the rhythmically appearing and disappearing industrial products at certain stages in the production process. These shots are inserted regularly after scenes of Karen's everyday life outside the factory, showing later production steps at later stages of the film, indicating on the one hand Karen's advancing production of identity, on the other hand making us aware of the production of the film itself, which, too, is a commodity product.

In our age of globalized capitalism, the place where one searches for new identities is the shopping mall. This is where Karen spends her free time. In a shot at the beginning of the film, her image, reflected in a ceiling mirror between two moving escalators, floats across the screen like a ghost. In another shot her image is captured by observation cameras. Here, Karen becomes replaced by her mediated visual representation. In such shots set in the mall, the filming effect is doubled and originals cannot be discerned anymore. In one scene we see her flat, white face behind a glass jewelry showcase filled with crystal animals. As we learn later on, the young woman is fascinated by the manifold reflections of light these figures evoke, being at the same time artistic representations of life and gaining an artificial life of their own by the light passing through them. These animals have manifold surfaces which fascinates Karen, who is herself merely a surface.

These animals return in the cheaper version of glass animals in the scene where Karen recounts the dream she had after taking pills to commit suicide. She is playing with a glass turtle saying that the crystal animals made her remember the dream of a dark tunnel or subterranean void in which she could not discern her own outlines from the surrounding blackness. In that dream, she also saw her own past and re-lived experiences from a long time ago. The crystal animals thus do to Karen what Kluge's film is supposed to do in the head of the spectator: Via the juxtaposition of images we are supposed to dive back into past experiences and free-associate with the images inside of us. It is the last instance where Karen seems to have an inside. However, with the return to Ben and his rejection of her as an authentic being, she becomes more

and more surface, like the travel brochures she studies and reproduces in a copy shop.

Kluge, too, inserts the image of crystal glass into his film in the form of the magically glittering chandeliers in the hotel where Anita G. works as a cleaning lady. They represent the shining, beautiful things children try to grasp and grown-ups still long for, the ideal of luxury and the temptation of money. In Kluge's film, one does not observe Anita herself fascinated by this crystal, but it is shown to the viewer, who at that point is supposed to identify with the character and admire the mystical, glittering and shining things. The spectator is distanced from the effect in Voigt's film, just like the characters are distanced from their own bodies and emotions.

The cheap double of the crystal, the carved glass, a commodity everybody can buy and enjoy, is a substitute for real luxury in Voigt's film. Fanny, the woman Karen envies for her independence and success, owns a whole cabinet full of such animals and Karen takes them over as a substitute for the original that she is denied. What happens in the following scenes is illusion, virtual reality taking over reality proper. Karen becomes entangled in the spectral, the world represented by crystal and glass, the world of illusion and surfaces created with light. Her body proper disappears in the course of the film as we watch her stage an alternative reality within the world of the film. What we see is the image of an image, while the film's style connotes documentary reality. The effect is one Freud would call "unheimlich" or uncanny, when life and death, reality and fiction become indistinguishable (cf. 210-219).

The gap between Karen's everyday life and the glass world of mercenary identities, which is also the world of film as opposed to reality, is significant: While getting her hair done in the same mall where she saw the crystal animals, she witnesses another customer telling her hairdresser about an exciting job offer with a hotel chain in the Dominican Republic. Listening to the future plans of the self-confident young lady named Fanny, Karen's face empties and becomes the screen for projections. Shortly after, Karen is sipping a milkshake in the lobby of the mall's cafe, when the head of the travel agency whom Fanny was supposed to meet for the job interview approaches her thinking that she is the applicant. Karen enjoys the mistake and pretends to be Fanny, until her inability to speak Spanish foils her pretension. Thus, just like Anita G. in *Abschied von Gestern*, Karen has difficulties speaking in foreign words or standardized speech. However, as opposed to Anita, Karen is willing to learn Spanish. She starts taking language lessons in an environment reminiscent of the mall. Furthermore the English title of

her film suggests translatability from the start. Derrida, in line with Nietzsche, associates translatability with currency exchange and thus with the monetary market. In fact, Karen ends up selling some of the silverware she produces in the factory to tourists at the highway, speaking English to strangers who do not care about the fate behind the desperate move of this girl. As it is implied, Karen sells not only silverware in the end, but also sex to a client who mentions that there are “other ways to earn money,” followed by a camera pan from the silverware box in front of Karen’s belly to the customer’s pants.

Karen later slips into the role of the travel agent to retake the interview with Fanny and consequently turns into the male part, the agent of capitalist society and exchangeability, the perpetrator in the sense of Kluge’s binary world. While Anita G. remained the victim and was on the run until the end of *Abschied von Gestern*, Karen turns into the hunter as the only chance to comply with Ben’s lifestyle.

Her hunting is more of a haunting, however, as it is tied to her role-playing, to a theatrical staging. The theatricality of Karen’s role has to remain invisible in order for Fanny to believe in the deception. The role-playing of the character parallels Sören Voigt’s concept of improvised action to avoid an “artistic effect” in the film. Voigt did not provide a detailed script or a written dialogue and had just two professional actors, Brigitte Hobmeier as Karen and Daniel Lommatzsch as Ben. Thus, non-theatrical theatricality is doubled in this film. It turns back on itself and talks about its own form in the plot. Kluge, too, used amateur actors in his film, with his sister Alexandra Kluge in the main role. Yet, the character of Anita G. does not role-play in *Abschied von Gestern*. We always see the character herself, not a secondary image of her, which is why Anita is perceived as a person and Karen increasingly as a ghost.

The transition from Karen’s uncertain self to her substitute identity is fluid and unspectacular, as if there were no boundary between reality and fiction. This is illustrated by a scene in a public bathroom, a very private, yet at the same time public realm, where Karen familiarizes herself with a new situation her role requires. In front of the mirror, she warms up before fitting into the role without ever directly looking at her own image. The audience becomes a direct witness of the process of adaptation. Karen inserts herself into her played role, becoming one with the character she is playing, just like the actress Brigitte Hobmeier becomes Karen in front of the camera, without any cinematic effect distancing her from her role. While Karen becomes a role and thus non-human in the bathroom, Anita G. is shown taking a pregnancy test in a

public bathroom. Here, the public space is the place where Anita becomes a mother and thus doubly human. In Kluge's film, the female character loses her room and ends up exposed on the street, sleeping in the open showcase of a department store and being surrounded by traffic on a street refuge, while Voigt's main character becomes invisible and visible at the same time, exposing herself willfully, but hiding behind a mask.

The utopian spaces to which Karen wants to escape are the tourist resorts of the Dominican Republic, which are only familiar to her via visual representations in travel brochures. In such an artificial landscape the employees are interchangeable, and since there is no one for whom Fanny could be irreplaceable, Karen can take extreme measures, killing Fanny in the last scene in order to take on her replaceable identity. Fanny is as much a victim of the celibatory machine in which emotional bonds do not exist as Karen. After all, the initial interview situation with "Mr. Sanchez," who took Karen for Fanny, appeared very unprofessional, suggesting that it really does not matter who gets the job as long as that person can function as a medium, being able to converse in different languages. Anita G. experiences a similarly cynical treatment in her position as a salesperson for language records when her boss explains how to utilize certain rhetorical strategies to catch customers, reducing people to types that can be manipulated through words. However, Kluge's main character still wants to arrive in the here and now, while Karen's goal is not definable and remains forever suspended in the future and the absent space.

In the last scene of *Identity Kills*, Karen is again one small particle in an endless stream of nearly identical commodities: Driving out into the open with the stolen car, she aligns herself with the queue of cars on the highway, suggesting that the murderous pressure of identification and assimilation will continue. Becoming one with the traffic on the highway, she represents that which is menacing Anita G., who in one scene is shown running from a mob of motorcycles and from the spotlight headlamps of a car chasing her down. Instead of a life-giving mother like Anita, she becomes a death-bringing specter. While Anita is shown singing, playing, living with her lovers, Karen turns herself into a commodity, into a dead object. Whereas the final sequence in Kluge's film clearly marks an unhappy ending and the defeat of the female mode of production, Voigt's ending is ambivalent and disturbing, for Karen has escaped her oppression at home and become an independent woman at the price of herself and the life of another female character.

The character does not in fact allow for identification, as any insight into emotions is impossible. The viewer does not find out at

exactly what point Karen decides to kill Fanny, and her motivations can only be deduced from her outside appearance, from the surface of her everyday interaction with others. Karen is in the present only, establishing her identity in every moment anew.

This takes us back to the initial assertion that *Berliner Schule* filmmakers, like the directors of *New German Cinema*, initiate a process of primary identification in the viewer. The viewer identifies with Marcus Stein's camera rather than the characters when it captures Karen's fascination with the crystal animals from over the shoulder of the saleswoman, when following Karen through the streets and when statically observing her in the factory. Even though the plot avoids dramatic effects, formally a dramatic development is visible. The more artificial Karen becomes, the more cuts are inserted and the time during which the screen is black becomes longer, implying that what is invisible is what is really going on in the story. The cuts have the effect of closing eyes, as if the camera were trying to not look. What is not supposed to be seen remains unseen, but can be anticipated as if by looking through the eyelids.

In the moment Karen decides to kill Fanny with a heavy, ancient, female statue, the camera does not follow her into the room, from whence we then hear a thud and a stumbling noise. Instead, the camera remains statically fixed to the hall, from which one door leads to the outside and one to Fanny's bedroom. Karen chooses the path to Fanny's bedroom. Instead of going out into the public, Karen invades another person's private realm. We do not look and still we look at the crime. The next shot peeks through the half-opened door showing Karen naked, taking off Fanny's cloths and smelling them as if she wants to inhale the life from these corporeal remnants. Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* claims that the sphere where an intimacy occurs between the subject and the object it must be the world of smells, which is being eliminated everywhere in the modern world (197). Another blink of an eye and we stand on the balcony with Karen, now transformed into a spooky Fanny, wearing a thick layer of makeup, a wig resembling Fanny's haircut, and Fanny's red dress. She waters the flowers as if they were hers. This shot only lasts a second. The eyes of the camera close again for a slow black cut and we see Karen / Fanny asking neighbors to water the flowers in her absence. Apparently, the neighbors did not know Fanny and they do not suspect anything being wrong upon receiving the keys to Fanny's apartment. A murder without consequences has become possible in a society without real social relationships and in which personal commitment is not valued. In the world of the celibatory machine we cannot trust our eyes anymore, but

rather must use intuition to distinguish between original and simulacrum. This ability has to reside in the viewer if he is to take the ending for what it is, a bizarre displacement of a character.

What Voigt shows in his film is a world where the female mode of production, the one Kluge valued in his work, has been banned and replaced by the celibatory machine. As we have seen, this leads to a devaluation of the subject, which becomes an exchangeable object or commodity, which can easily kill or be killed. However, the task of an author as authority, according to Derrida, would be not only to detect the spectral in the contemporary world, but to speak to oneself through these ghosts and thus help the living cope with the present (176). How, in other words, does the film speak to and communicate with the audience via the spectral, via ghosts? The answer is the same as in the era of *New German Cinema*: through primary identification of the viewer. While in the plot, the female mode of production is lost, the camera reproduces this interiority in the filmic style. As in the films of *Autoren* like Kluge, the viewer is activated. The shots, or "Einstellungen," are at the same time perspectives, moral points of view derived from "finding oneself or putting oneself in a particular place" (Elsaesser, "Primary Identification" 541). The viewer's own experiences and associations, even if in the subconscious, contrast and oppose what is seen in the plot. This way, the film produces the viewer as a subject who opposes the development of the film's main character. One could thus argue that the cinema of the *Berliner Schule* filmmakers, just like that of *New German Cinema*, functions as "identity machine" (cf. Elsaesser, "American Graffiti" 305), using a main female character as medium the viewer does not identify with, but observes from a distance.

Notes

- ¹ In their famous essay "The Inability to Mourn. Principles of Collective Behavior" (1975), Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich argued that the German people never mourned their own losses of World War II, because shame and denial prevented them from mourning the victims of the Holocaust.
 - ² The term *New German Cinema* is generally used to talk about the wave of critical German film between the *Oberhausener Manifest* and the death of R.W. Fassbinder in 1982. (Corrigan 1994, Elsaesser 1989) However, a more detailed categorization provides the distinction between *Young German Film* (until 1970), *New German Cinema* (starting 1971) and *New German Film* (Feature films that achieved international recognition beginning in the late sixties). The *Oberhausen Manifesto* was a declaration of 26 young German filmmakers at the eighth festival of short film in Oberhausen, 1962. They declared "Papas Kino ist tot" and wanted to create a new German film culture,
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- imitating the French one, as the words of the manifesto reflected those of the *Truffaut manifesto*.
- ³ Some female filmmakers associated with Berliner Schule include Angela Schanelec, who graduated from the German film- and television academy Berlin (DFFB) in 1995 and directed *Mein langsames Leben* in 2001, and Valeska Grisebach with *Mein Stern* (2001) and *Sehnsucht* (2006).
 - ⁴ Schmidt, Eckart. *Deutsche Zeitung*, 2 Sept. 1977.
 - ⁵ Revolver 9 (10/2003) published an interview with Alexander Kluge and a story from his *Chronik der Gefühle I* (2000). The interview was re-printed in the book *Revolver. Kino muss gefährlich sein*. Ed. Marcus Seibert. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 2006.
 - ⁶ Herk Harvey's *Carnival of Souls* (1962)
 - ⁷ In her article on "Visual Pleasure" (Screen 1975) Laura Mulvey argued for a break with conventional modes of looking and a disruption of the patriarchal logic of vision, for a "look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment" (18).
 - ⁸ Heide Schlüpmann has criticized Kluge for perceiving "a discrepancy between the superiority of the feminine mode of production and the relations of production, which separate this production from the public sphere as something private, and prevent it from becoming socially valid" (71).
 - ⁹ In fact, after the release of this film in 1998, the Lola look was copied not only by young Berliners, but by young women across the country identifying with the strong-willed and self-conscious character. As Margaret Sinka points out, even Berlin's mayor Eberhard Diepgen in 1998 appropriated the design of Lola Rennt posters for the posters of his reelection campaign, and in summer 1999 the Lola-look was transferred to Michael Naumann, Germany's first Minister of Culture, in a large digitalized photo printed by the *Berliner Morgenpost*.
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