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Ten to Eleven: Television by Alexander Kluge

This series by director Alexander Kluge produced for the West German television program *Ten to Eleven* takes stock of a century of popular fantasy near the end of the millenium. If the opera (in Kluge's 1983 film, *The Power of Emotion*) was the powerhouse of emotions in the 19th century, film, radio, cartoons, advertising and television are the opera of the 20th century.

Kluge has a Brechtian project of enlightenment, but not by means of rationalizing the irrational. He sees his task as coming to terms with "the work of fantasy as the means by which authentic experience is produced."¹ Fantasy is "work" produced by cultural machines, dynamos which power desire. To understand fantasy is to know what can change. In *Why Are You Crying, Antonio?* Kluge goes so far as to suggest that Chamberlain's insufficient appreciation for the witches in Meyerbeer's *Macbeth* led to the outbreak of World War II. But Kluge's goal is not to provide more witches, but rather to offer a metadiscourse, a reflection on the repetitive themes of popular fantasy in a way which allows us to see that very repetition. With this end in mind, Kluge transposes all sorts of Brechtian techniques of ironic distancing into the electronic realm of television.

For instance, the realistic photographic image is flattened and colorized or reduced to an icon in line-drawing to be manipulated about in the two-dimensional world of a computer paint-system. Kluge makes use of the computer and video to reproduce the effects of

older forms of visual representation, from scrolls and optic toys, cartoons and collage to the tableaux of primitive, turn-of-the-century cinema. In this series, the film image, perhaps the richest site of fantasy, is not offered "straight." It is distorted, keystoneed, or split and multiplied symmetrically, and, in a variation on the "iris" of silent film, a kind of circular magnifying glass effect is often placed over the center of the image. Most tellingly for his project, before Kluge shows us a film clip, we see the social framework in which it was received—a theater brightened by the light beam of the projector. That is, fantasy material is always distanced by another layer of presentation.

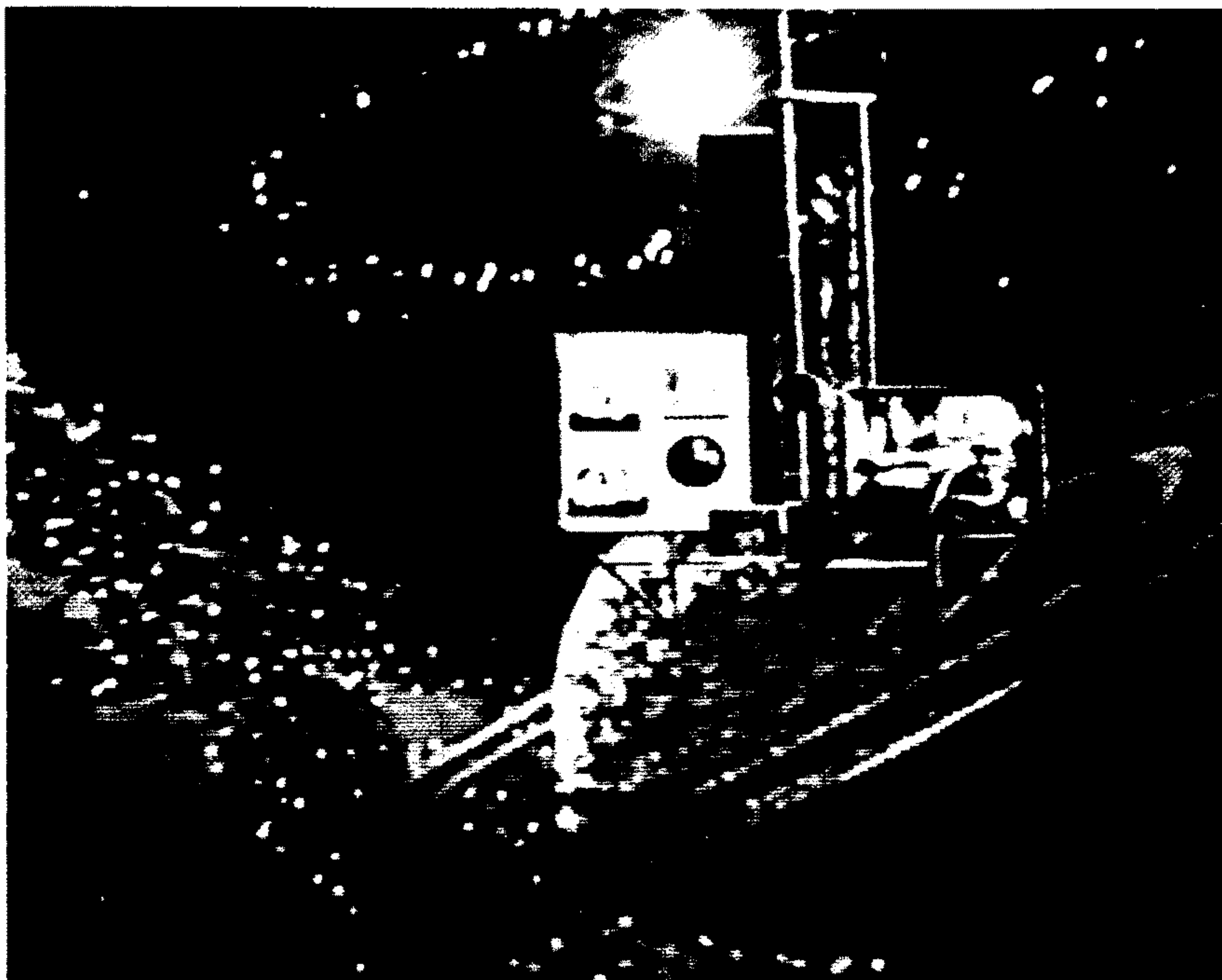
Sound is manipulated as well: the perfection of recorded operatic voices is modulated at some point or other by ordinary voices (singing badly), reproducing the lyrics and melody from popular memory. When radio broadcasts are evoked, we see the listener and the radio receiver, an old European type with the names of cities to label stations. Indeed, the global diffusion of fantasy is one of the major themes of the series.

The practices of television are ironized as well, though the American viewer may not be familiar with the West German convention of glamorous female announcers (who thereby become celebrities) to make transitions between programs and within magazine shows. These announcers are not reliable, as they give us item numbers without items or skip numbers in a sequence.

Each program in the series is a kind of television magazine show of mixed items, not as the bag of stories we usually expect, but as a concatenation of cultural elements recombined and repeated to make a point about their interrelationship. Other Brechtian narrative techniques are the preview of coming attractions (we are not hooked on what will happen but on how what happens), and recurring scenes or "rests" in which nothing happens (a color ball rotates in *Madame Butterfly Waits*, a star flashes in *Antiques of Advertising*) in which to reflect.

In fact, anyone who expects a story from any sequence or program in this series will be left perplexed, asking what's next, what's the point? Of course, this drive to closure is the power of fantasy that Kluge wants to frame, not replicate. Instead, the series is like a game which offers a series of situations in which fantasy elements are reproduced and recombined. We make the connections and draw the conclusions.

Those unfamiliar with many of the operas, films, comics, and historical events to which Kluge refers will still be able to enjoy the series for its graphic play and several unmistakable image combinations. The fantasies in *The Eiffel Tower*, *King Kong* and *the White Woman* are probably the most accessible in the series at this level, with the condensation of the white hero's



Madame Butterfly Waits

body and the head of King Kong, on one hand and the displacement of the Eiffel tower to the American West on the other.

Those familiar with the opera and silent film will appreciate other subtle displacements and twists: for example, the combination of opera stories with silent film footage in *Madame Butterfly Waits* or the soundtrack aria (from *Gianni Schicci*, with pop accompaniment) and other operas in *The African, or Love with a Fatal Outcome* make a statement about their thematic interchangeability. *The African Woman...* is about the dark heroine of the age of exploration, the opera, and film who is always abandoned by her white lover. She always dies, while he arrives back home "with a story to tell." Kluge doesn't shirk from including the films of his West German contemporaries in this critical context: Volker Schlöndorff's *Coup de Grace* is deromanticized by removing the whirling camerawork which makes the shooting to death of the

countess/Communist like an ecstasy of sexual penetration—but the viewer who hasn't seen Schlöndorff's film couldn't know this. In Kluge's edit, the heroine's soldier-lover shoots her perfunctorily and gets on a train.

Many of the themes Kluge treats are on the contemporary critical agenda—for instance, Helene Cixous has written on dying sopranos, Klaus Theweleit on the fantasies of militant masculinity, ethnographic criticism has said much about relations to "otherness"—but Kluge offers us a means of both experiencing the visual and aural power of these fantasies as well as the means to reflect on them.

Alexander Kluge's films have been shown in a major traveling retrospective sponsored by the Goethe Institute in several American cities in 1989, including Los Angeles, but most of us will have our first opportunity to see examples from his television work here. Produc-

tion for television has been a focus of his efforts since the collapse of the market for "serious" film in West Germany since 1982.² He is part of a collective of independent filmmakers that produces two hours every week for television broadcast, including a cultural news magazine and individual productions. Mixed documentary and fiction, a return to early visual forms and formats such as the variety show and the extremely long serial (such as the 18 hour *Heimat*) are part of the context of experimentation in which this series by Kluge was originally shown.

— Margaret Morse, 1989

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Notes

¹ See Kluge's theoretical work with Oskar Negt, *The Public Sphere and Experience*. Excerpts are reprinted in October No. 46, a special issue on Kluge.

² See the interview with Kluge by Yvonne Rainer and Ernest Larsen in *The Independent* (June 1989).

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Screenings

Kluge

Madame Butterfly Waits. 15:00, color, 1988.

Themes of 19th century opera are reprised and enacted in silent movies and old postcards. The program begins with a contemporary executive reenacting the aria from *Don Carlos* ("She never loved me...") for his lover. He uses household props to stage the aria, he "air-conducts" and the couple sings along to what is evidently a recording. Gruesome acts from five different operas (massacre, infanticide, revenge, execution, sexual exploitation and abandonment) are suggested by silent movie footage from two films framed like a backdrop within a window or theater, interspersed with segments of a graphic color-ball and two male radio listeners.

The Eiffel Tower, King Kong and The White Woman. 25:00, color, 1988.

If the resemblance between the RKO logo and the Eiffel tower never occurred to you before, this will clinch the association. King Kong appears in various collages of a white cruise ship, meanwhile a victory has been won and photographed in France in November 1918, and someone in a cartoon has stolen the Eiffel tower, which now stands over an abyss in the American West. Will the Eiffel tower be rescued? Will a man swimming against economic tides finally rescue his money? Where will dinosaurs and other assorted animal and bird forms come to rest? King Kong/the white hero is called to play bridge and Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* is quoted for the first time in the series: "Why do we say that time passes and not that it is created?"

Antiques of Advertising. 15:00, color, 1988.

Ads for defunct and foreign products are interspersed with newsreel and documentary footage. The result is a distanced view of the link between desire and commodities. For instance, footage of the Hitler youth with "S" shirts performing a swastika is overlaid with an ad for "Stabil." Products become strange interlopers when they pop up in romantic movies of the Nazi period. Ads in other languages also strip products of desire: Soviet fashion is demonstrated in cyrillic, phallic chocolates unwrap magically and a product named "Time" is sucked dry to a Japanese voiceover. A hollow product of unknown use floats in space like the monolith of *2001*.



The Eiffel Tower, King Kong and The White Woman

The African Lady, or Love with a Fatal Outcome. 25:00, color, 1988.

As storms cross over an orchestra and notes fly by, a ship is sinking. While one woman sleeps, another is rescued (in her sleep?). The following opera guide is said to include imaginary operas "of our lives in big format" as well as *Die Valkyrie*, *Othello*, *Madame Butterfly*, *Carmen*, *Aida*, Margarete von Trotta as the countess/Communist, the African Lady, Solaris, and many others. We find ourselves (that is, the female voice speaking from our position) prompted in our roles by a pair of whispering opera prompters. Though the outcome for the heroine is fatal, the ship arrives in time for Christmas, plying its way through computer graphic stars.

Blue Hour Tango Time. 25:00, color, 1988.

The story of the Argentine tango star, Carlos Gardel is retold in a (computer graphic) theater in which his 1935 movie is projected. If the tango is "a sad thought one can dance" then we are offered the spectacle of romance as compensation. The battle of the Marne and the cooling towers of an atomic plant provide the context of the desire for "a new beginning." "At last, at last" lovers clinch and "FIN" appears on black. Gardel was killed in a plane crash about the time his film was released. The appearance of Valentino among the enormous crowds at Gardel's funeral is a reminder of what depths of emotion were attached to a similar personage not so foreign and obscure to us.

Why Are You Crying, Antonio? 25:00, color, 1988.

Chamberlain, Mussolini and their aides attend a 1938 performance of *Macbeth* in Rome. This audience is itself made into the raw material of opera. The site of the negotiations between Chamberlain and Hitler which resulted in invasion of Czechoslovakia is diagrammed and Chamberlain's limits are explained in clever graphic signs in another act of the opera. Chamberlain and his aides are charged with lack of fantasy, a fatal flaw. Meanwhile, in September 1939 a Nazi officer's happy love story is interrupted only to be resumed (we are told) in 1953, as he comes back from Soviet captivity. A film clip of two bodies in the midst of war devastation asks "Why are you crying, Antonio? Are you afraid to die?" The theme of "a new beginning" is the fantasy outcome here, as a "film" in computer graphics shows a parade of French soldiers in 1918 celebrating the end of war in unbelief and hunger for freedom.



The Eiffel Tower, King Kong and The White Woman

Changing Time (Quickly). 25:00, color, 1988.

We see the celebration of New Year's Eve with fireworks in 1988, repeated exactly in 1923, in 1908 and in munitions explosions in 1812 as well as an air attack in World War II— and there is no difference in the image. Meanwhile, a group of women tries to remember the words of the third stanza of Schiller lyrics to Beethoven's Ode to Joy. Freeways, clocks and the solar system form categories which shape experience while Lenin's lying in state reminds us of the previous one we saw of Gardel. Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt are philosophers of the city visualized as a gigantic clock. Finally, Freder in *Metropolis* tries to hold back the hands of the enormous clock/machine anticipating the turn of the century. 1900.

Japanclips. 21:00, color, 1988.

The machine is introduced into the thousand year-old garden, as a feudal Japan is modernized. American-Japanese relations are traced in 19th century prints and twentieth century newsreels, scrolled, magnified and submitted to electronic effects. The emperor is shown visiting an iron foundry in much the same way he visits a grove in cherry blossom-time. Lighting technology changes from candles and gas to electronics—now the empress can visit the rice fields under waves of computer graphics. Newsreels make much of the emperor's signature on the articles of surrender at the end of World War II and of MacArthur's triumphant return to the United States. It is with utmost irony that we hear the emperor's admonishment to the coal industry (via an American newsreel voice collaged into this program for West German television): "So it is my hope, you will make your very best efforts..." The screen abruptly cuts to black. The series ends.