

Document Citation

Title	The challenge of Alexander Kluge
Author(s)	Barbara Scharres
Source	<i>Art Institute of Chicago. Film Center</i>
Date	1988 Nov
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	4
Subjects	Kluge, Alexander (1932), Halberstadt, Germany
Film Subjects	Der angriff der gegenwart auf die übrige zeit (The blind director), Kluge, Alexander, 1985 Gelegenheitsarbeit einer sklavin (Part-time work of a domestic slave), Kluge, Alexander, 1973 Abschied von gestern (Yesterday girl), Kluge, Alexander, 1966 Deutschland im herbst (Germany in autumn), Brustellin, Alf, 1978

THE CHALLENGE

What exactly would you call "challenge" in the experience of watching a film, since one person's idea of entertainment can be another's evening in hell? In the challenging mode there is the horror film, for instance, aiming aggressively to provoke a response of fear, anger or shock. There are abstract films that can fascinate by testing your powers of perception. And then there are the films of Alexander Kluge, like beautifully intricate equations inviting you to follow the clues, connect the dots, to discover and explore the sum total of his themes for yourself. On Fridays and selected Saturdays throughout November and December the Film Center presents a retrospective of the work of Alexander Kluge, one of the principal architects of the New German Cinema. The series creates a larger picture of Kluge the artist—his evolution as a visual stylist with a propensity for collage-like construction and his development as a provocative visual philosopher. Through eleven feature films and a program of short films the series provides a rare chance to survey the most formally adventurous side of the New German Cinema, where sharp observations of a troubled modern world meet a poetic grasp of history.

Kluge's original and non-traditional approach to filmmaking may have something to do with the fact that he was not a filmmaker by training. Born in what is now East Germany, formerly a lawyer, a teacher and a prize-winning author, he brings influences of his former professions to bear through the complex associations he makes between fiction, politics and culture. His film *YES-TERDAY GIRL* is a perfect example. Adapted from his own book based on a legal case he encountered, the film tells the story of a petty thief and occasional prostitute lost in the "economic miracle" of West Germany.

"Happiness, says Freud, is the fulfillment of childhood wishes. I am convinced that film has something to do with happiness. Film = movie = something constantly moving forward despite all those who would stop it." This statement by Kluge, with its curious emphasis on happiness, describes his approach to a philosophy of life, art and history through film fiction and biography. Kluge's films are never far removed from the dilemmas of the individual. His segment of the omnibus film *GERMANY IN AUTUMN* dramatizes the soul-searching of a history teacher as a response to the hijackings and terrorism plaguing Germany the year the

film was made. While he is the most overtly political of all the New German Cinema directors, his work remains emotionally involved and personal, the voice of an individual artist. Never dry or didactic, Kluge's films are centered around emotion as a driving force in human destiny. *THE POWER OF EMOTION* is comprised of a barrage of images and dramatic incidents forming a complex statement about memory and feeling.

Dry and caustic wit is also a notable feature of Kluge's work. He provocatively titles his saga of one woman's route to something like happiness *THE OCCASIONAL WORK OF A FEMALE SLAVE*. The heroine Rosewitha, wife, mother and part-time abortionist, searches for political enlightenment in this black comedy of errors. Kluge expands, sometimes comically, on her rage and misdirected enthusiasm, yet

adds the fact of these failings into her eventual modest triumph of achieving a new measure of self-determination in her life. Kluge's earliest short films played on ironic contrasts between duty and decency, often exploring the compromises an individual might be willing to make in the face of various circumstances in recent German history. *PROVEN COMPETENCE BETRAYED* is a fictional story of



THE BLIND DIRECTOR. November 11

a police officer who has sworn loyalty to no less than five different German regimes in his career.

One of Kluge's achievements is that he has succeeded in producing what are essentially personal and experimental films for a worldwide audience. Winner of Germany's highest cinema prizes and the Critics' Prize at Cannes, his work has attained a visibility and recognition that often comes only to those directors who work in a mainstream mode. Following a strategy of what he calls "antagonistic realism" he challenges his audience to interact with the images he presents, drawing their own conclusions or even disagreeing with him. His many-layered *THE BLIND DIRECTOR* seems at first to poke fun at the film industry, yet draws the viewer ever deeper into a moving contemplation of the role of art as a record of the continuity of life.

"The Challenge of Alexander Kluge" continues in December. See the next *Gazette* for detailed information. The Film Center thanks the Goethe House, New York and Anthology Film Archive for organizing this retrospective, as well as Angela Greiner and the Goethe Institute, Chicago.

—Barbara Scharres

OF ALEXANDER KLUGE

positively no chase." (BS)

DREAMY DUD: HE RESOLVES NOT TO SMOKE, 1915

WHO PAYS) (Episode Seven: BLUE BLOOD AND YELLOW), 1915
YOUNG ROMANCE, 1915

*Babette Mangolte:
I am the Camera*

THE COLD EYE

(a.k.a. MY DARLING BE CAREFUL)

1980, Babette Mangolte, USA,
90 min.

8:00

A young artist, Cathy Digby (the voice of Kim Ginsberg), lives in lower Manhattan and struggles with her own idealistic notions of art in relation to her hip and not-so-hip friends and adversaries on the gallery scene. In this most fictional of all her films, Babette Mangolte loads additional complexities onto her strategy of making the camera eye the main character. We the audience are, in other words, Cathy Digby, hearing her voice, the voice of an actress, speak for us, but seeing through her eyes. Here is one cause for divergence, for the better we know Cathy the less we want to align with her self-defeating attitude and self-righteous air. In fact, she begins to look like the aspiring artist surrounded by the real thing. Her friends get more interesting as the film progresses—David, the young painter the art critic, the writer of paperback novels, the old school friend. Mangolte challenges the viewer's ideas of impartiality. She welds a bond between the viewer and the main character then dares you to break it. (BS)

Friday, November 11

*The Challenge of
Alexander Kluge*

THE BLIND DIRECTOR

(a.k.a. THE ASSAULT OF THE PRESENT UPON THE REST OF TIME)

(DER ANGRIF DER



OCCASIONAL WORK OF A FEMALE SLAVE, November 11

GEGENWART AU DIE UBRIGE ZEIT)

1985, Alexander Kluge, West Germany, 113 min.

6:00

In this most sublime synthesis of Kluge's collage techniques and narrative, he conveys a feeling commentary on callousness and fleeting time in the modern world through a series of unique metaphors. A scene from a

production of Verdi's *Tosca* sets the tone with its 19th century concepts of tragedy and drama. From that point Kluge begins his "assault," spinning out modern tragedy as a strange narrative of dulled pain and abdicated responsibility. A foster mother is ordered by the court to deliver her young charge to an aunt. Arriving in a new city with the orphaned child, she finds a richly appointed townhouse undergoing reno-

vation, and a woman who can't even spare her maid's precious time to care for the little girl. That night, unnoticed, the foster mother and the girl pack up and escape. In a slyly surreal and comic sequence, a film director goes blind in the middle of shooting his sixty-third feature. The producer is obliged to keep him on the job due to iron-clad contracts, and is left to explain to the press how a blind director can function. The

contemporary obsession with rushing through time, with leveling it out to one noncathartic continuum safe from the highs and the lows, is under attack in *THE BLIND DIRECTOR*. With quiet authority Kluge brings his narrative vignettes together in a vivid evocation of the inescapable emotion of art. (BS)

OCCASIONAL WORK OF A FEMALE SLAVE

(GELEGENHEITSARBEIT EINER SKLAVIN)

1973, Alexander Kluge,
West Germany, 91 min.
With Alexandra Kluge

8:00

A wry, social satire, *OCCASIONAL WORK OF A FEMALE SLAVE* centers around an unlikely heroine who doesn't really accomplish anything but is triumphant nevertheless. Rosewitha Bronski, played by Alexandra Kluge (sister of the director), is a 29-year-old German housewife and former nurse who supports her young children and chemistry-student husband by running an illegal abortion clinic. When the police investigate the business, Rosewitha's ironic means of earning enough money to have more children of her own comes to an end. After she is forced to quit, Rosewitha's husband gets a job in a chemical factory. Meanwhile, Rosewitha and her former partner, Sylvia, decide to become political activists. In search of a cause, they target her husband's factory which is rumored to be leaving for Portugal, a move that would leave many workers jobless. Rosewitha's protest proves to be not only futile but succeeds in getting her husband fired. In the process of her fight against social constraints—both in the corporate world and at home in the domestic world—Rosewitha loses many battles. However, she succeeds in unleashing the "power that is within her," her ultimate goal.

This was Kluge's third feature film and reveals his interest in Brechtian and Godardian techniques of distancing (which were in more common use in the European "art" films of

the early seventies). The film follows an episodic course with interruptions of intertitles, pictorial montages, and voice-over narration. However, Kluge treats the self-consciousness and political theory of the film with a sense of humor. As part of their self-taught political education, Rosewitha and Sylvia try to memorize lines from Brecht's "Three-Penny Opera," and the film ends with Rosewitha selling brats wrapped in political pamphlets outside the chemical factory. (VK)

Saturday, November 12

Film Genre: The Musical

GIGI

4:00

See November 8

The Challenge of Alexander Kluge

Short Films by Alexander Kluge

Total running time: 97 min.

6:00

This rare selection of shorts by Kluge (all but the first Chicago premieres) demonstrates the German director's wide-ranging interests, yet the most specific theme that emerges in his work in different guises. One might call it the insidiousness of history—a force of human continuity, impulse and folly that impinges on the individual. In *THE ETERNITY OF YESTERDAY*, Kluge lets the audience confront fragments of Nazi architecture accompanied by a collage soundtrack of remnants of speeches and martial music. Ruined monuments and past sounds testify to the concreteness of Nazi dreams. One of Kluge's favorite forms is the biography, through which in documentary or fictional form he ties characters to the larger scheme of their times.

TEACHERS THROUGH CHANGE interprets fascism through the lives of four teachers, while *PROVEN COMPETENCE BETRAYED* fictionally recounts the paradox of a police officer who gave unswerving loyalty to five radically different German regimes. *PROTOCOL OF A REVOLUTION* goes

one step further in inventing history through television coverage of a fictional Latin American revolution. Kluge alternates "behind the scenes" coverage with the allegedly objective to expose the mechanics of manipulation with pointed irony. (BS)
THE ETERNITY OF YESTERDAY

(*DIE EWIGKEIT VON GESTERN*), 1963
TEACHERS THROUGH CHANGE (*LEHRER IM WANDEL*), 1963
PROTOCOL OF A REVOLUTION (*PROTOKOLL EINER REVOLUTION*), 1963
PROVEN COMPETENCE BETRAYED

(*PORTRAT EINER BEWAHRUNG*), 1964
FRAU BLACKBURN, BORN "JANUARY 5, 1872, 1967
FIREMAN E.A. WINTERSTEIN (*FEUERLOSCHER E.A. WINTERSTEIN*), 1968
NEWS FROM HOHENSTAUFFENS



SMILES OF A SUMMER NIGHT, November 13



ALL THESE WOMEN, November 13

(NACHRICHTEN VON DEN STAUFFERN), 1977

GERMANY IN AUTUMN

(*DEUTSCHLAND IM HERBST*)

1978, Alexander Kluge, A. Brustellin, R.W. Fassbinder, E. Reitz, K. Rupe, H.P. Cloos, B. Sinkel, V. Schlondorff, R. Mains, West Germany, 121 min.

8:00

The terrorist kidnapping and murder of Mercedes Benz executive Martin Schleyer, a plane hijacking, acts of police repression, and the alleged suicides of three imprisoned terrorists were the events that prompted a group of New German Cinema directors to join creative forces and make the film *GERMANY IN AUTUMN* as a response to the terrorism and police state atmosphere that was darkening West Germany in 1977. The nine filmmakers chose diverse forms—documentary and fictional—to make their individual points. Alexander Kluge was the primary organizer behind the collaborative work. His own segment became the kernel for his feature film *THE PATRIOT* (showing Dec. 16). His montage sequence combines historic images of Germany with dramatized scenes of a doubtful history teacher searching a wintry landscape for the "foundations of German history." With this sequence Kluge introduces the main character Gabi Teichert and the central theme of *THE PATRIOT*.

One of the most memorable segments of *GERMANY IN AUTUMN* is that directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. His is an intensely personal sequence in which he alternates between a scene of his lover/roommate and himself arguing, and a kitchen discussion between his mother and himself debating the current political state of affairs in Germany. *GERMANY IN AUTUMN* is a dark, sometimes despairing, cluster of "essays" in response to the reactions that were overtaking West Germany in the late Seventies. It represents a fascinating compilation of New German Cinema directors'

Friday, November 18

*The Challenge of
Alexander Kluge*

THE POWER OF EMOTION

(DIE MACHT DER GEFUEHLE)

1983, Alexander Kluge, West
Germany, 115 min.

"I think that everything that happens on this planet, everything that moves, is basically funded by emotion, but emotions have no institutional power. They are everywhere, only they can't be seen. I didn't start the film in a rational way, I didn't say to myself, I have this subject and I'm going to make a film about it, rather I had the urge to observe, in my immediate surroundings for instance, how feelings move. There was a whole gamut of emotions: 'All emotions believe in a happy ending' and they all tacitly believe in eternal life. What captivates me here with emotions, and it will continue to captivate me in many other films in the future, is the possibility of showing or expressing something out of its movement alone."—Alexander Kluge

A cinematic treatise on the power of human emotion, Kluge's twenty-sixth film combines documentary and fiction to explore just what emotions are capable of. (AS)

YESTERDAY GIRL

(ABSCHIED VON GESTERN)

1966, Alexander Kluge, West
Germany, 88 min.

8:15

Adapted from a section of his book *Life Stories*, and based on a legal case he encountered as an attorney, Kluge's first feature, *YESTERDAY GIRL*, develops a theme important to the director's later work; namely, the relationship of history and story telling. The film's protagonist Anita G. (portrayed with stunning intensity by the director's sister Alexandra) is a character created by the past. A young Jewish refugee from East Germany, a petty thief and an occasional prostitute, she has no place in the prosperous West Germany of the "economic miracle."

The narrative follows Anita G.'s search for work, love and a home, and her struggle to maintain her individuality in the bourgeois and conformist society. Somewhat reminiscent of work of Godard, the film incorporates distancing devices such as ed intertitles and actors' directly addressing the camera. The *International Film Guide* notes, "One of the film's most exciting aspects is the performance of Alexandra Kluge, the director's sister. Their intelligent, moving study of youth out of tune with society's standards is the best legacy yet of the new movement in German cinema." (AS)