Crisis and Astonishment

Alexander Kluge-Jahrbuch 9 | 2022



V&R unipress



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ISBN Print: 9783847116646 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847016649

Alexander Kluge-Jahrbuch

Band 9 | 2022

Herausgegeben von
Richard Langston, Gunther Martens, Vincent Pauval,
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ISBN Print: 9783847116646 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847016649

Richard Langston / Irina Simova (eds.)

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With 71 figures

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ISBN Print: 9783847116646 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847016649

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über https://dnb.de abrufbar.

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Umschlagabbildung: © Alexander Kluge. Quelle: Filmstill aus »Mondrian Krieg«, Juni 2022

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlage | www.vandenhoeck-ruprecht-verlage.com

ISSN 2365-7782
ISBN 978-3-8470-1664-9

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ISBN Print: 9783847116646 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847016649

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Richard Langston / Irina Simova

Editorial

I

"After 1991, following the disintegration of the Russian imperium," Alexander Kluge confessed in the preface to *The Devil's Blind Spot* (2004), "I had the feeling that the new century would take the bitter experience of the 20th century and turn it around into something hopeful."[1] Even though the emerging twenty-first century looked already like it was sliding backward "into the era of the Thirty Years' War," Kluge was quick to renounce cultural pessimism. "'There are no periods of decline,'" he declared, echoing his spiritual teacher Walter Benjamin's own renunciation of cultural conservatism in his unfinished *Passagenwerk*.[2] "It's more worthwhile," Kluge averred, "to examine the allegedly pre-modern period to find out what in it releases human power and what the power of the Devil."[3] Investigating the devil's blind spots—"Gaps in our world edifices"—is just one possible step in the process required for making sense of and, what's more, intervening in the persistent illusions of progress and the interminable, catastrophic course of history.[4] Another possible step is astonishment [*Staunen*].

1 Alexander Kluge, *The Devil's Blind Spot: Tales from the New Century*, Michael Chalmers/Micahel Hulse (trans.), New York 2004, p. vii.

2 Ibid., vii. Translation modified to reflect the standard English translation of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. See: Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Howard Eiland/Kevin McLaughlin (trans.), Cambridge 1999, p. 458.

3 Kluge, *The Devil's Blind Spot*, p. vii.

4 Alexander Kluge, *Die Lücke, die der Teufel läßt: Im Umfeld des neuen Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt a.M. 2003, p. 7. Unless otherwise noted, this and all other translations are those of the authors.

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II

In the eighth thesis of his seminal episodic essay "On the Concept of History," Walter Benjamin contends that astonishment is an essential element for reconceptualizating the twentieth century's disastrous concept of history:

> The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight. Then we will clearly see that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism. One reason fascism has a chance is that, in the name of progress, its opponents treat it as a historical norm.—The current astonishment that the things we are experiencing are "still" possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This astonishment is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.[5]

According to Sigrid Weigel, a precise reading of this thesis recognizes that Benjamin sought not to discredit astonishment per se as a disingenuous response to the normalization of violence, terror and war in everyday life. Rather, Benjamin's objective was to reject the "philosophical status given to" what Aristotle claimed in *Metaphysics* as the starting point of all philosophizing: *thaumazein* [θαυμάζειν], which is rendered as either "astonishment" or "amazement" in English and "Staunen," "Bewunderung" or "Verwunderung" in German.[6] When subsumed into the modern business of philosophy, Benjamin insists, astonishment becomes nothing less than a corroborative tool of what might be best called cynical reason, what Peter Sloterdijk, many decades later, defined as "*enlightened false consciousness*" or "to act against better knowledge."[7] Far from discarding astonishment altogether, however, Benjamin places astonishment, Weigel persuasively adds, "at the possible beginning of a cognition of an untenable notion of the history that engendered it and at the same time marks the end of precisely that notion of history."[8] What Benjamin calls for, in other words, is the recovery of *thaumazein* as a mode of perception (*aisthesis*) especially attuned to suffering

5 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *Selected Writings*, Michael W. Jennings (ed.), vol. 4, Cambridge 2003, p. 697. Harry Zorn's translation renders "Staunen" in the original German as "amazement." We explain or reasons for using "astonishment" below.

6 Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, Georgina Paul/Rachel McNicholls/Jeremy Gaines (trans.), London 1996, p. 146. See also: Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b. On the standard translation of the Greek θαυμάζειν and its derivates (θαῦμα, θάμβος, and ἔκπληξις) into English and German, see: Elenor Sain/Tobias Trappe, "Staunen, Bewunderung, Verwunderung," in: Joachim Ritter/Karlfried Gründer (eds.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 10, Basel 1998, pp. 115–24.

7 Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Michael Eldred (trans.), Minneapolis 1987, p. 5–6.

8 Weigel, p. 147.

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(*paschein*).[9] Intense affect is, however, one of several constituents needed to break with the long reigning concept of history and the suffering it causes. Another essential constituent is the gaze.

III

The German word for astonishment—*Staunen*—has acquired various meanings since its emergence in the early seventeenth century. Aside from its original meaning of "starr sein" [to be rigid], *staunen* has primarily denoted "gedankenvolles sinnen und träumen" [thoughtful pondering and dreaming]. "Even more clearly," the Grimms dictionary goes on to explain, "the concept of gazing comes to the fore when amazement is associated with certain directional indications."[10] According to Jonathan Crary, by the time the verb *staunen* finally entered the Grimms dictionary in 1910, looking and seeing assumed entirely new guises compared to the dominant ways European vision had operated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when the "objective ground of visual truth" was "stable and fixed."[11] Since then, the physiology of human vision did not change so much as "the plural forces and rules composing the field in which perception occur[ed]."[12] So, if astonishment was once understood in terms of a visual geometry in which an alien object or event seen at a distance shattered an observer's sense of normalcy, which in turn led to "a second, intellectual birth," how then has the modern *dispositif* of vision comprised of technological instruments, techniques, institutions, discourses and socioeconomic forces influenced the feeling of astonishment?[13] There was no doubt in Benjamin's mind that the sight of persistent catastrophe failed to incite the astonishment necessary for jettisoning an affirmative concept of history. For that, another kind of seeing was needed.

9 On the relationship of *thaumazein* with *aisthesis* and *paschein* in Plato and Aristotle, see: Stefan Matuschek, *Über das Staunen: Eine ideengeschichtliche Analyse*, Tübingen 1991, p. 19.

10 Jacob Grimm/Wilhelm Grimm, "STAUNEN, verb," in: *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, online publication, www.woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB?lemid=S41742 (Accessed 15.12.2023).

11 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge 1992, p. 14.

12 Crary, p. 6.

13 Matuschek, p. 8; Crary, p. 8.

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IV

Not long after German lexicographers linked astonishment with vision, but well after the emergence of the new docile observer uncovered by Crary, Benjamin took a keen interest in collecting "old children's books, fairy tales and beautiful legends" while working on his dissertation on Romantic art criticism.[14] Illustrated children's books like Friedrich Justin Bertuch's lavishly illustrated, twelve-volume *Bilderbuch für Kinder* published between 1792 and 1830 assumed a special place in his collection. Recalling Benjamin's hobby, Gershom Scholem wrote, for example, "In June 1918, we found the first volume of Bertuch's picture book for children—from the Weimar circle—at an antiquarian bookseller in Bern, of which he then acquired several more volumes. It was a particular focus of his loving attention."[15] Initially, Benjamin had no clue what to make of his special collection of books. "In a few years I will know what some of these works mean to me," he confessed in a letter addressed to his childhood friend Ernst Schoen in July 1918, "for some of them it may take a very long time."[16] By 1924, however, he did finally put his finger on the value of illustrated children's books like Bertuch's. Color illustrations typical of the late eighteenth century afforded children fantastic ways of looking that circumvented the "philanthropic theories" that enlightenment pedagogues embedded in their accompanying stories.[17] Far from imposing the narrow abstract logic of adulthood on its young readers, the book's radiant copperplate engravings of sundry animals promised to activate children's unschooled eyes, trigger their fantasy and project their untrained way of seeing outward into the world much like baroque emblems once did.[18] To advance this goal, Bertuch even went so far as to advocate cutting out the book's illustrations

14 Walter Benjamin to Ernst Schoen, 31 July 1918, in *Briefe*, Gershom Scholem/Theodor W. Adorno (eds.), vol. 1, Frankfurt a.M. 1966, p. 198.

15 Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, Frankfurt a.M. 1975, p. 86.

16 Benjamin, letter to Schoen, p. 198–199.

17 Walter Benjamin, "Alte vergessene Kinderbücher," *Gesammelte Schriften*, Hella Tiedemann-Bartels (ed.), vol. III, Frankfurt a.M. 1991, p. 17.

18 Compare Benjamin's account in "Alte vergessene Kinderbücher" with Bertuch's own preface, in which he insists: "Das Auge des lebhaften Kindes sieht ganz anders als das Auge des Mannes, das sich beschränken und abstrahiren kann. Das Kind aber sieht die ganze Menge höchst verschiedener Bilder und Gegenstände, die auf der Tafel zusammen stehen, alle auf einmal, springt mit seiner lebhaften Imagination von einem zum anderen über…" [An active child's eye sees quite differently than that of a man, which can limit and abstract itself. The child, however, sees the whole multitude of different images and objects standing together on the board all at once, jumping from one to the other using his vivid imagination…] See: Friedrich Justin Bertuch, *Bilderbuch für Kinder: enthaltend eine angenehme Sammlung von Thieren, Pflanzen, Früchten, Mineralien … alle nach den besten Originalen gewählt, gestochen und mit einer … den Verstandes-Kräften eines Kindes angemessenen Erklärung begleitet*, vol. 1, 2. ed., Weimar 1801, p. 3.

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and turning them into toys, something Benjamin found remarkable enough to repeat.[19] How, it's now worth asking, might we grasp Bertuch's picture book as an alternative technique of observation, one that afforded the child's gaze an ability to avert the modern *dispostif* of vision? Might this technique be a key for making astonishment matter again in a world full of mediated images?

V

In his Poetikdozentur für faktuales Erzählen held at Bergische Universität Wuppertal in spring 2022, Marcel Beyer wrestled with very same problem Benjamin outlined in thesis eight. Without ever employing the word *Staunen*, Beyer reported on what he calls the "obscenity" of Russia's war on Ukraine as captured in photographs and videos the author collected while browsing the Internet, surfing social media apps and watching television.[20] Not intended as any moral indictment, obscenity for Beyer conveys instead the outward-facing spectacle of war—the ob-scene of ruthless Russian aggression—broadcast digitally for all the world to see. Of particular interest in his first-person account of looking at pictures of war from the comforts of his Dresden home is the presence of animals, or lack thereof, in the theater of war. "In the pictures I've seen since the Russian army invaded Ukraine on the morning of February 24, I've noticed something. Something that can't be seen in these pictures. The crows are missing."[21] Unable to speak to the horrors around them—" Animals cannot bear witness," Beyer insists—animals captured on camera nevertheless represent for him an index of the obscenity of war.[22] In other words, there is something astonishing about them. In animals, we see pure innocence, and their suffering instills in us feelings we should otherwise have for human suffering.[23] When absent in photos of Russia's war, they call our attention to the ghostly presence of violence events. When present, they point to a conciliatory sense of normalcy: life—be it human, animal,

19 Bertuch, p. 5: "Das Kind muß damit völlig umgehen können wie mit einem Spielzeuge; es muß darinn zu allen Stunden bildern, es muß es illuminiren; ja sogar, mit Erlaubniß des Lehrers, die Bilder ausschneiden und auf Pappendeckel kleben dürfen." [The child must be able to handle it as if it were a toy; he must make pictures in it every hour of the day, he must illuminate it; he must even, with the teacher's permission, be allowed to cut out the pictures and stick them on cardboard.] Cf. Benjamin, "Alte vergessene Kinderbücher," p. 16.

20 Marcel Beyer, *Die tonlosen Stimmen beim Anblick der Toten auf den Straßen von Butscha*, Göttingen 2023, p. 8.

21 Beyer, p. 7.

22 Beyer, p. 16.

23 Beyer, p. 18: "Vielleicht sucht man im Tier vielmehr Anzeichen einer Regung, die man dem Menschen, sich selbst, zuzuschreiben gewohnt ist." [Perhaps one looks in animals for signs of an emotion that one is otherwise accustomed to attributing to humans and to oneself.]

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or both—goes on such that the concept of history—Benjamin's bête noire—continues unchecked. In a word, the obscenity of animals in photos of Russia's assault on Ukraine affirms the lingering trouble with astonishment.

VI

Taking Bertuch at his word, Kluge began cutting out animals from digital copies of *Bilderbuch für Kinder* not long after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. He then pasted them into photos of the carnage in Ukraine and compiled his collages into a three-channel short film of no more than two minutes and thirty seconds entitled "The Amazement of Animals / The Mourning of Creatures." Presented in August 2022, at a workshop held at Fundaziun Nairs in Switzerland's Engadine valley, Kluge's film is just one of several recent works in which the artist applies Benjamin's thinking about astonishment, the concept of history and idiosyncratic techniques of childhood vision in Bertuch's picture books to his long-standing need to understand war. Many of these early animal collages can be found in Kluge's book *Kriegsfibel 2023.* In an interview with Maximilian Kisters published in *Philosophie Magazin* in April 2023, Kluge explained his objectives thusly:

> …these animals provide comfort. They are prints of animals from the time of Caspar David Friedrich. These animals do not belong to our present. But they do belong to evolution, and therefore to us, no matter what period of history they find themselves in. When such images of animals—from the period of 1807 and at the same time messengers of Walter Benjamin's thoughts—now end up in current press photos of destroyed tanks and the misery of the war in Ukraine, they say: something in our subjective interior, our feelings, resists the perception of a present that has gone mad. The distribution of guilt and innocence doesn't help to explain it. Such reality is distorted in itself. "The Astonishment of Animals," which dates from 1807 and comes from Walter Benjamin's complete works, brings an anti-realism to these current images. The press photos show facts, the animals represent feelings.[24]

Instead of reading the photographic traces of animals for the ambivalent ways they confirm the hegemonic concept of history as Beyer does, Kluge seeks to intervene in the very *dispositif* of vision itself. By inserting Bertuch's wonderous eighteenth-century animal illustrations into twenty-first century scenes of war, Kluge lives up to Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach by colliding two temporalities to expose the neutralization of astonishment: to observers looking at

24 Alexander Kluge/Maximilian Kisters, "Kinder sind die wahren Chronisten des Kriegs," in: *Philosophie Magazin*, 05. 04. 2023, Online-Journal, www.philomag.de/artikel/alexander-kluge-kinder-chronisten-des-kriegs (Accessed: 20. 12. 2023).

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animals interloping in war photos, it suddenly becomes "ob-scene" that looking fails to translate into appropriate feelings of horror.

VII

Ever since *The Devil's Blind Spot*, Kluge's conjecture that the twentieth-century concept of history continues to wreak havoc in the twenty-first century has proven uncannily prescient. Unlike the last installment of the *Alexander Kluge-Jahrbuch*, which dedicated itself to the carnage of war and mourning, the following yearbook's thematic core turns its sights to another set of attendant concepts: crisis and astonishment. The former concept, a function of history, flourishes unabated, while the latter, arguably a cousin of obstinacy, still requires critical intervention. It might, therefore, be enough to call astonishment a crisis unto itself, as astonishment so often fails to be anything more than a pretense for philosophical interpretation. Yet the crisis subtending so much of what should be astonishing in our chaotic twenty-first century world leads us back to the organizational question of social experience. Why the things we experience in the twenty-first century are still possible has to do with the erosion of experience itself. No wonder then that Kluge and his old friend Oskar Negt reconvened in late 2021 to record a series of new dialogues on Immanuel Kant for their fifth book of collaborative philosophy.[25] What about Kant's classical concept of "*Publicum*," they ask, requires translation for it to do critical work necessary for reinvigorating our twenty-first century public spheres? That the German press was quick to champion Beyer's Poetikdozentur as a litmus test for charging Kluge's *Kriegsfibel 2023* with moral relativism is indicative of the ways in which looking and reading still fail to amount to a critical reckoning with astonishment: "Kluge says in this primer and in his interviews," one journalist summed up in his indictment, "that he already prefers to deal with the question of what will come after the Ukraine war. This is very understandable, but what kind of peace is that supposed to be if he begins to ignore the question of responsibility?"[26] On the

25 Cf. Oskar Negt/Alexander Kluge, *Kant Kommentare*, Leipzig 2023. See the English translation of interview eight included in this yearbook.

26 See, for example, Tobias Rüther, "Menschen, Tiere, Panzer und Fiktionen," in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 15.04.2023, online publication, www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/themen/ukrainekrieg-buecher-von-kluge-und-marcel-beyer-18820492.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex_3 (Accessed: 16.04.2023). The initial basis for Rüther's as well as Beyer's rebuke of Kluge is his support for withholding arms from Ukraine published in an open letter to Chancellor Scholz in *Emma* in April 2022. Additional fuel used to fan the flames was gleaned from Kluge's interview published in *Die Zeit*, which accurately announced that "Alexander Kluge glaubt nicht daran, dass Panzer den Krieg beenden werden. Nur ein völlig neues Denken könne den Notausgang weisen" [Alexander Kluge does not believe that tanks

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public sphere's recourse to morality in times of war, Kluge, like Theodor W. Adorno before him, is clear: "I am a moral person, but morality is not a tool against war."[27] Like Bertuch's *Bilderbuch für Kinder*, Kluge's primer is designed to stoke our imagination, to draw attention to historical differences in our vertiginous age of blurred lines and borders, to juxtapose hard facts with emotions and, above all, to provide us with the capacity for orientation. Taking sides may feel like the morally right thing to do, but chances are it will very likely fall short of altering the reigning concept of history let alone the catastrophic structures it seeks to name.

VIII

The seeds for *Jahrbuch* 9 emerged out of a series of Skype conversations with Alexander Kluge over several years. It was his suggestion to bring together the promise of transnational public spheres with the topics of astonishment, the contemporary specter of war and the invention of photography. These four themes were and continue to be topics of concern for Kluge's recent work and they are all reflected in the contributions comprising this volume. In light of the recent digital transformation of the public sphere, which Kluge discusses at length in dialogues with Oskar Negt in *Kant Kommentare* (2023) and Stefan Aust in *Befreit die Tatsachen von der menschlichen Gleichgültigkeit* (2023), Kluge has emphasized the value of fostering transatlantic dialogues with comrades in the Americas. *Jahrbuch 9* expands this network to include voices from Latin America. Anything but a vanity project, such dialogues are significant for Kluge insofar as they shift his aesthetic politics to a space between the denigrated public spheres in both the Americas and Europe. It is this strategic displacement that informed the editors' decision to designate English, the de facto lingua franca, as the primary language of this volume of the *Alexander Kluge-Jahrbuch*. The first of its five text clusters frame the volume's twin themes of crisis and astonishment. Texts and interviews on astonishment and crisis—manifest in both war and the erosion of public spheres—are followed by Kluge's juxtaposition of the right-wing US Capitol riots on January 6, 2021, and the American civil war. Cluster two as-

will end the war. Only a completely new way of thinking can provide an emergency exit]. See: Alexander Kluge/Peter Neumann, "'Vorstellungen von Glück sind ansteckend,'" *Die Zeit*, 19.02.2023, pp. 46–7, online publication, https://www.zeit.de/2023/08/alexander-kluge-ukraine-krieg-ende-frieden (Accessed: 16.04.2023). Ironically, Rüther's overarching accusation—Kluge exercises a gross privilege "im Frieden über den Krieg anderer Leute nachzudenken" [thinking about other people's wars in peace]—insists that Kluge, arguably the preeminent theoretician of feeling, is entirely indifferent to astonishment.

27 Kluge/Kisters.

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sembles dialogues on Kluge's collaborative work on images. This cluster spans Kluge's work on cinema to his partnerships with painters (like Katharina Grosse) and poets (like Ben Lerner) to his very recent experiments with AI, in general, and deep learning, text-to-image models like Stable Diffusion, more specifically. If the task of poetics is to bring objectivity and emotion into contact with one another, then these exchanges attest to how important Kluge's word-image collaborations are for his work. The third cluster of texts are exclusively scholarly in nature and wrestle with themes—pedagogy, politics and revolution; technology, the image and fantasy—central for framing how crisis and the gaze of astonishment inform Kluge's aesthetic. A cluster of these contributions engage questions of ecocriticism, necropolitics, negative imperialism and global collection practices to reveal Kluge's sustained investment in producing a critical visual and textual language for the translational public sphere of late capitalism. The fourth cluster includes a report from the Alexander Kluge Vorlass held at the Akademie der Künste and two book reviews. As with every *Jahrbuch*, the volume concludes with a bibliography of publications from 2021.

IX

The *Alexander-Kluge Jahrbuch* is a trilingual, peer-reviewed yearbook dedicated to fostering the critical study of every aspect of Alexander Kluge's work. An international platform intent on bringing together a wide range of disciplines and theoretical approaches, the yearbook welcomes both essays and reviews written in English, French or German. Detailed information about submission guidelines as well as the editorial and advisory boards can be found both in German at passagen.univie.ac.at/alexander-kluge-jahrbuch and in English at klugejahrbuch.web.unc.edu. Unsolicited submissions are always welcome and can be submitted to one of the yearbook's five co-editors; their contact information can be found on either of the yearbook's aforementioned websites.

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ISBN Print: 9783847116646 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847016649

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Alexander Kluge

The Astonishment of Animals[1]

Walter Benjamins favorite children's book, Friedrich Justin Bertruch's *Bilderbuch für Kinder* (1807) depicts ANIMALS. Benjamin bought the twelve-volume work a second time as an adult.

The illustrations therein are from a time long ago. The prints date back to the years when Caspar David Friedrich made his paintings. Transposed into present-day scenes from the ATAVISTIC WAR in Ukraine, these animals are astonished. Photography does not reproduce reality completely: Human wishes go missing. "If they are self-confident, they assume the form of an animal" (Derrida).

The snake from Bertuch's *Bilderbuch für Kinder* (1807) obviously hails from a different time and a different world than the ones in which "a rocket strikes a city block in Ukraine." The animal and the contemporary image form a contrast. This is a visual example of a "temporal perspective." It is unlikely that a written text can convey this kind of "narrative perspective."

Translation: Richard Langston

1 This text originally appeared as "Das Staunen der Tiere" in: Alexander Kluge, *Kriegsfibel 2023*, Berlin 2023, pp. 47–9.

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Three images from the exhibition "Alexander Kluge – Werkstatt" held at Fundaziun Nairs, Scuol/Switzerland, 25 August 2022–23 September 2022. These images are also contained in Kluge's 2022 film *Mondrian Krieg Tiere*. © Alexander Kluge.

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Alexander Kluge / Richard Langston

Astonishment as Experience: From Singularity to Commonwealth

Kluge: My latest feature-length film is called *Cosmic Miniatures* and has to do with the cosmic dimensions in which we can recuperate in the *longue durée.* I want us to be able to perceive, observe and respond to history, but I also have a terrible aversion to the questions that history raises. I can only overcome this when I take a short break in outer space. There's nothing more comforting than the fact that the speed of light is indeed constant. It's far removed from our own speeds. It's extremely fast. To march at 300,000 kilometers per second would be a huge challenge for ants, and yet 87 billion generations of ants could probably cover the distance from the Earth to the Andromeda Nebula. That's a comforting perspective entirely independent of me, the time span of my life and all the many problems confronting us now in the present.
Langston: That's a perspective that's also fundamentally philosophical in its orientation.
Kluge: It's just as philosophical as it is absurd because ants can't walk in space. But how do we actually know that? How do we know that creatures smaller than ants aren't able to walk in space without feeling the coldness?
Langston: This brings us back to our topic, namely astonishment, *Staunen.*
Kluge: *Thaumazien* is a basic Aristotelian idea and it's so clever.
Langston: Astonishment is a reaction deeply rooted in our bodies, isn't it? It affects us in ways quite different than how the planets and stars do.
Kluge: Celestial bodies don't determine our destinies physically, but rather by the fact that we take refuge in them. This is evident by the fact that people are eager to name them. They say with astonishment "Pegasus!" when, in fact, the stars don't really assume the shape of a horse. This exudes a certain eeriness and corresponds to the concept of *similitudo*, i. e., similarity as a structural feature of trust. This mimesis is also what dominates the constellations in Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas.* It begins with the images of soothsayers in Babylon who read the future from sheep livers. We know that it's never been scientifically proven that animal innards can predict the future. Nevertheless, the nature of a sheep's

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liver is related to celestial bodies thanks to astrology and hepatoscopy. Using the magical powers of our imagination, we recognized a pattern.
Langston: In this speechless moment of astonishment, the mimetic faculty, as Walter Benjamin called it, creates something familiar out of the foreign.
Kluge: This faculty immediately tries to find orientation. Orientation is nothing more than what the sun does. Creating orientation is our evolutionary dowry.
Langston: Rosa Luxemburg's famous last words—"I was, I am, I shall be!"—are relevant in this respect. In the flow of time, we incorporate something unknown and then make sense of this new thing for the future, such that a trustworthy bond may arise. It's nothing more than the principle of hope.
Kluge: Those final words spoken shortly before her death convey a certain assured hope. It's not, however, the kind of hope that arises in the moment. Rather, throughout her life Luxemburg stored hope like fruit in jars intended for the long winter. These jars contain consolidated experience as well. She poured hope and experience into these three sentences, which are nothing less than a political grammar of revolution.
Langston: Isn't there also something evolutionary in her sentence? We humans are convinced of our faculties such that anything strange that comes at us can be defeated or, at the very least, be made recognizable in the future.
Kluge: A person's breath, πνεῦμα in Greek, is the voice that says: I was, I am, I shall be. I will be in my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren. I have also been in earlier times. That's why someone who wishes to commit suicide—he says with all his intellectual powers, 'Everything is hopeless, I am going to kill myself'—cannot forcibly drown himself. At the last moment, the will to breathe rooted in his lungs will drive him back up to the surface for air. He would have to secure heavy blocks to his ankles to remain under water long enough to do the deed. Suicide isn't easy. This is a clinical sign of what you referred to earlier as hope. Hope is not to be understood in the everyday sense, but rather as a certainty in our cells and in the fact that newborn babies carry within them a will power to live in a hopeless world. With every birth this hope starts anew. This permanent resetting within us, which is part of the continuity of life and literature, is as if a book were suddenly new. To my astonishment, the story therein has changed its content overnight. What I read yesterday on page 162 of Adorno's *Minima Moralia* has been transformed, not in any old way, but rather into an entirely new text. This is a real ability of books. Naturally, we know that books really don't change physically overnight. And yet they somehow do. A true, poetic interpretation of a text is one that considers how it's changed on page 162 by virtue of other books and publications in the archive. Collaboration in the arts needs to explore the tunnels that narrators bore like moles in their pursuit of bestowing form on reality. Whether I take recourse to Warburg's *Mnemosyne* or Benjamin's

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constellations, my task is nothing less, nothing more than working on a new Bauhaus of subjective experience.

Langston: You're talking about a constantly changing archive of human experience, in which texts containing past experiences lie buried. Our task is to constantly renew our relationship to this archive. Otherwise, we're as good as lost.

Kluge: Take, for example, the ability to lift something. The Greeks called this *maieutikós*, the midwifery of Socrates. Maieutics and astonishment are closely related insofar as I happen upon something in my lifetime that leaves me feeling amazed. Both throw me backward and allow me to start again. That's astonishment. It's a marvel of nature that children can emerge from hopelessly screwed up marriages, thrive, carry on with their lives and still be armed with a spark of hope. That's why it's possible for us to search back through all the many clouds of chance. Another expression of this is the American constitution, the pursuit of happiness located in our inner selves, which have an inherent drive to seek out good fortune. However, you need to understand the language of cells and also accept the languages of the diaphragm, the gaze and the ears. You need to perceive astonishment in multiple languages and then translate it into a language of evolutionary Babylon. Otherwise, it would not be expressible. That would result in polyphony. Hope is polyphonic.

Langston: Astonishment can lead to philosophical reflection. It can forge new relations. A third possibility would be denial, wouldn't it? I am wary of astonishment. Something unexpected stops me in my tracks. I avoid what has caused me to marvel.

Kluge: Far away from society, I can still be a hermit full of astonishment, but I can also bind myself to others. I was amazed when I met my wife. I was especially astonished to discover that, as an unfaithful, polygamous person, I suddenly had eyes just for her. No one else came into question. Forty years ago, we had two children and today we have two grandchildren. I didn't plan that. It came about thanks to astonishment. Astonishment is, in other words, a versatile tool at our disposal.

Langston: Since we're not self-contained beings, astonishment activates characteristics in us that allow us to link up with what we previously knew nothing about.

Kluge: Like when a world explodes or when I give up an illusion or when a firmly established image of reality is disrupted. Astonishment shatters the solidity of dominant, preconceived images. It's what returns me to the elements of my being. In such an instance, the senses—in particular, our ears—must respond. Intelligence needs to assemble itself anew. I'd love to make a semantic field for astonishment that reaches back to the beginnings of Aristotelian philosophy. I can't emphasize enough just how insightful such a network would be. (Incidentally, this is also the core of Jürgen Habermas' book *Also a History of*

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Philosophy.) Such a field would need to include the art of midwifery as well as the medical arts of antiquity's head physician, Chiron. Half man, half horse, Chiron was a hybrid. Zeus' half-brother and Asclepius' tutor, he gave up his immortality for Prometheus. Apollo fathered Asclepius, who clearly possessed healing powers. Asclepius could even be called Jason, a savior. Because Apollo was incapable of handling his own child with care, he handled him over to Chiron, who, in turn, raised the child. To this day, Asclepius is the emblem of the medical arts. Medicine is always astonished that, on the one hand, medicine works to some extent and, on the other, that nature ultimately decides. A good doctor is always astonished.

Langston: Such an intervention mustn't be too violent.

Kluge: Sometimes it's even homeopathic.

Langston: But some sort of violence does play a role in astonishment. The moment I am seized by astonishment, I lose my balance. I am torn from my usual balancing act.

Kluge: In the moment of astonishment, I'm condemned to openness on account of the ways my powers of perception and my own heart are structured. There are always two things to be astonished by: the event that astonishes me and myself who is astonished. I could sit down and say, 'I'd rather take a bath. I wish to know nothing of this.' Astonishment is thus a two-sided operation. It's like, for example, a group of people standing in front of an armored tank and the recruit in the tank putting the vehicle in reverse. Astonishment is a moment of reorientation within a given reality, when a small gap opens in the linearity of intentions and the will to rule. In this respect, astonishment is both anti-dictatorial and anti-authoritarian.

Langston: The root of this would be the Hegelian concept of externalization [*Entäußerung*] or the dialectic of subject-object relations.

Kluge: Every living cell has walls that nurture its interior. The same goes for our bodies and our minds. They spin cocoons around us. It takes something erratic to interrupt these enclosures. If you were astonished all the time, you wouldn't be able to live. Conversely, we could examine how astonishment ends adulthood by returning us back to our childhood. If I am suddenly amazed when I'm ninety—because something is sublime or terrible or simply different than my usual experiences and therefore shocks me—then I have to go back and start again at age of seven.

Langston: There are incidentally vignettes in Adorno's *Minima Moralia* about astonishment. Take, for example, the story of the family friend, a world traveler, who comes to visit. She brings with her souvenirs from afar and tells the host's children stories in such an unfamiliar way that they marvel at what she says. The children's astonishment is not negative, but rather an expression of wonder and curiosity. In this instance, what is foreign is not threatening. The children don't

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withdraw into their shells. They don't protect themselves from the visitor. On the contrary, they're completely open to what is new.

Kluge: Let's make a sematic field for astonishment, shall we? You just said, "to marvel at." To be flabbergasted by something. To wonder. Amazement. To allow oneself to take in something strange. To experience a happy moment. To be surprised.

Langston: We shouldn't ignore, however, the eighth thesis in Benjamin's essay on the concept of history, in which he explores the relationship between astonishment and philosophy.

Kluge: Johannes Kepler famously said, "The gaze learns from the mind." You can turn this sentence around and say, "The mind learns from the sudden gaze." You can't be astonished by a chain of thoughts. The moment when you're surprised and the chain of your thoughts voluntarily pauses, that's the difference between amazement and fright. That's where the Three Fates pick up the thread anew. You can't nurture it because it's spontaneous. You can't be astonished on purpose. When you're asked to be amazed, you're not prone to respond. That's why "being amazed" and "being surprised" both belong to astonishment. My world view isn't shattered in the least because it's an organic whole, a cocoon, that, when pierced, immediately seals itself up again just like a patch of skin that heals after it's been broken. When you're astonished, something slips into your soul for a short time before your soul closes itself up again. The cocoon is immediately restored.

Langston: Astonishment is a fleeting moment.

Kluge: It's actually an expression of a singularity [*Singularität*], which is different than something merely individual [*eine Einzelheit*]. For Hegel, there are decisive details [*Einzelheiten*] that are called singularities [*Singularitäten*]. There are particularities [*Besonderheiten*] that organize themselves around a core or a root and then crystallize. A particularity that coalesces like water into ice is crystalline. This is the root of all thought. In this respect, an encyclopedia comprised solely of particularities is somewhat more advantageous than one compiled from general rules and formulations, which is also theoretically possible.

Langston: Let's go back for a moment to that chiastic turn of Kepler's statement: "The mind learns by the sudden gaze." Benjamin writes the following in his famous essay on the concept of history: "The astonishment that the things we experience are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical." With the help of Kepler's chiasmus, we recognize how the problem of astonishment, as Benjamin assessed it, is, in fact, closely linked to translation. When I see something unexpected, I want to understand it and so I first make an appeal to my powers of reason then apply linguistic structures to render it into language. In the moment of actual astonishment, however, a short circuit occurs, and both the

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mind and language are taken offline. The philosophical potential of something truly unexpected doesn't arise automatically.

Kluge: Certainly not. It lives off *incentives*, which sometimes come from inside us— 'I always wanted to know that…'—and sometimes from outside. "I stumble and then think, 'Why did I stumble on this day and at that hour?'" I mean stumbling in the broader sense. I pause for reasons entirely subjective in nature. If I pause because of a car accident, that would be a reason entirely objective in nature, but it doesn't lead to astonishment. When the inertia of my sluggish daily grind is interrupted, I feel amazed. In that moment, I encounter other temporalities, which otherwise pour out of me and are shapeless and are therefore immediately forgotten. We're daydreamers.

Langston: We're gradually approaching basic philosophical questions here: What is existence? What are we made of? Where are we? In which worlds do we find ourselves at home?

Kluge: …in neither world. Not in the world of evolution from which we came, where we once were animals. In that world, we lacked wolfish tools like claws. Our ability to strangle creatures is deficient when compared to that of other prehensile animals. We're also not particularly well armed. What's more, we're born a tad prematurely. On the other hand, we are also imperfect social beings. In this respect, philosophy is the study of our failures. In the gap between our abilities lies our powers of self-criticism of those very abilities. This is both a virtue and a dowry that demands an indirect and enumerative, a poetic and narrative way of doing philosophy. Such an approach is markedly different from a geographical method, which maps the earth and its essential features according to a plan. Geography creates surveys, but it also creates enormous abstractions. Nothing is more ridiculous than illustrations of Napoleon holding a map.

Langston: We humans are capable of expansion.

Kluge: That we are. We're capable of expansion against our will.

Langston: But can't it be dangerous when such a potential reaches a tipping point?

Kluge: Yes, but the chance for tipping over isn't that extreme. If I'm astonished and my usual activities are interrupted, it's not as if I'm doing something bad right away, that is unless I refrain from reacting altogether. I can make myself guilty or I can be afraid of missing out on something. That's astonishment. That may be the case, but it's rather unlikely because I'm not amazed for all that long.

Langston: Astonishment presupposes not only singularity but also transience.

Kluge: The main road on which we march throughout our lives consists of continuity, sustainability, the strength of character and identity. At the same time, there are small interruptions. I fall, for example, and suddenly have the impression I'm walking in the wrong direction. Imagine another example: Oedipus' interruption at the crossroads where he kills his father. It's entirely pos-

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sible that his knee could have started to hurt him so bad that he was forced to take a break at the side of the road. His father's convoy continues onward to Thebes without incident. Oedipus doesn't kill him, and he doesn't go blind.

Langston: I'd love to ask a biologist how our human ability to be astonished differs from an apparently similar behavior in ravens, for example. They are incredibly adaptive birds, aren't they? To what extent should we understand astonishment in evolutionary terms?

Kluge: That's very interesting. What other animals are astonished? Can their instincts be interrupted and, if so, do new patterns emerge that oppose their usual behavior? Biologists would probably say there are not many animals that can do this. There are evolutionary twists and turns throughout entire genera of animals. At the level of individual organisms, there is no such thing as astonishment in nature. Conversely, entire species can be astonished enough to change suddenly.

Langston: But an evolutionary turn can hardly be compared to astonishment. It has little to do with this self-reflective capacity for expansion.

Kluge: Absolutely. Consider that branch of marine animals called craniates, which, according to some, first developed a backbone and then only later grew a head. If this theory of their evolutionary development holds, then craniates are animals that refused to grow up. They interrupted their adolescence out of disbelief that they would become as boring as their parents. By forming an inner backbone to which proteins were attached differently, they believed they wouldn't continue living out their existence at the bottom of the sea according to their parents' customs. Craniates are our ancestors. All insects and vertebrates come from them. They emerge from an evolutionary turn by internalizing a tradition, their backbone, which we use today to walk upright.

Langston: The cultivation of traditions naturally requires a society capable of reproducing itself. For us human beings, this includes reason. Oskar Negt said the following on the subject of commonwealth in a lecture from 2001: "Rationality is not only a matter of thought. It is also a matter of constituting society itself. Reason recognizes itself through philosophy and constructs itself politically by acquiring a practical sense of reality in a commonwealth freely designed by its citizens themselves."[1]

Kluge: This reality is like our outer skin. As evolutionary animals, we launch ideas, plans, or cocoons into the world, which we then crawl into to make ourselves feel comfortable. We're always amazed that these spaces already exist. That's probably how the first houses came about. It was an idea at first, then someone made a cave or a tree house somehow and suddenly they realized, 'Yes, that's something we could settle down in.' It's like the hermit crab, which nature gave its own house. Nature is as capable of developing itself as man is. Nature's

1 Oskar Negt, *Politische Philosophie des Gemeinsinns*, vol. 1, Göttingen 2019, 286–287.

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ISBN Print: 9783847116646 – ISBN E-Book: 9783847016649

astonishment does need to be examined from the perspective of evolution. Which creatures express their amazement and how? When are they astonished? How does their astonishment change them?

As for us humans, our dowry is such that commonwealth arises first unconsciously. We make so many agreements that, were they bricks, we realize in astonishment only afterwards that we already have a house before we ever set out to build one. Later, this house—this objective commonwealth—affects us egocentrics by amazing us and shaping us. In other words, commonwealth is a phenomenon of recognition. People have already accomplished something and suddenly they recognize that they did it already. The Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years' War, came about by chance in both Osnabrück and Münster. The peace negotiators had one week to secure the signatures for a treaty that was precarious till the very end and repeatedly threatened to fall apart. No one believed that their efforts would bring about peace. Everyone expected war to break out again afterwards. On the whole, the reign of peace held until the French Revolution. There were, of course, various cabinet wars in the interim, but no absolute wars and certainly no disorderly ones either. Then came the French Revolution, which unleashed the ravages of war once again because it promised the people omnipotence with great self-confidence: 'Yes, we are the masters of everything. We can wage wars ourselves!' From that point onward until Napoleon's fall in 1815, some elements from the Thirty Years' War resurfaced, albeit against a very civilized backdrop. At the same time, the French built for posterity and developed a pro-civilian law. I don't underestimate the great deeds accomplished in this period. With Metternich came the resumption of a peace that was not so much decreed as it was found. With the Thirty Years' War, you have to imagine that tiny building blocks were worked out one after another for five long years, above all the experience required for ending the war in Münster and Osnabrück because the two warring parties couldn't get along and Protestants and Catholics refused to negotiate in the same city. What interests me above all are the many small agreements. If the Catholics had to return a town to the Protestants, and vice versa, then the number of churches affected must not be negatively impacted because in matters of faith there are no majorities before God. That's a minor insight achieved after thirty years. Nevertheless, this little accomplishment made the rounds for five years and ultimately became a small piece of the final peace accord. Peace assembles itself out of molecules like this one that were just lying around. There was no master architect involved, only reality itself. Commonwealth is its own architect. This is what Negt means. His point makes evident that collectivity already resides within us, even though we're unaware of its presence. We're unaware that we've long been *citoyens*, even though we still regard ourselves as bourgeois. We think we're progressive, when, in fact, we're really just medieval. Nevertheless, we knew that capitulating with

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white flags in the spring of 1945—our way out of war—was a good thing. It's difficult to transform this mode of perception into habit. At every step of the way, it alternates between antagonistic realities, such as between water, land, air and all the other elements as well as between being and non-being. Progress actually comes about from amphibious, multi-phibious, poly-phibious alternations. It takes place partly alongside humans, without them ever knowing it, and partly through them.

Langston: You spoke earlier about reflection. In the moment of reflection, the possibility of social bonds emerges.

Kluge: That's something human. Incidentally, it's a kind of artificial intelligence without digitality. Reflection is actually a tool or an apparatus.

Langston: …a second-order operation.

Kluge: It produces commonwealth. We human beings assume various guises. Leibniz says that we humans are organic machines and that we work on an organic machine, which, incidentally, is constantly influenced, promoted and animated in its microstructure by blind organisms that are not subject to our control. In this respect, one could say that what we call cities is, in fact, a human being in disguise. It's a human creation in the form of houses, properties, streets and so on, which have an effect on us. The very same city can be found within us. If we extrapolate it once again, we might arrive at a space station at some point. This isn't always progressive. If we say a form of radiation emanates from human beings, then we're really talking about a reciprocal interaction. This totality corresponds to seventy-seven cities: one imaginary and another one real, one imagined and another one in the future, one possible and another one in the past and so on and so forth. You can describe Lagos, for example, only in these terms. That's pure Negt. That's Critical Theory. However, the unfolding of this theory doesn't lead to the creation of a map. For that, you would need a map of astonishment that shows, for example, where countries are and where they were some 250 million years ago. I am amazed by tectonic shifts and must therefore expand my idea of what is possible. On the other hand, I am amazed that the Ukraine War is happening in our century, even though we acquired so much experience in the twentieth century that should have prevented what is being repeated now. I just want this war to go away.

Langston: In a previous interview, you mentioned in passing how terrible the current state of the public sphere is in Germany. It's no different in America. To what extent does Benjamin's criticism of astonishment apply to the problem with the global public sphere?

Kluge: That's right. Astonishment isn't about propagating philosophy as an end unto itself in order to affirm everything as it already is. Rather astonishment marks the beginning of philosophy. This initiator of thought starts like this: There's something I don't know. I then give birth to an idea as if it were a child.

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This piece of alternative reality is then followed by another and then another. I eventually realize that these thoughts are nothing new. In fact, they're ideas that already exist. I've merely failed to take notice of them. We should have created a constitution for humanity long ago, one comprised of more than just words. We need to gather up its contents just like the Brothers Grimm once worked.

Langston: Astonishment is, in other words, an essential experience for the collector.

Kluge: Yes, that's right. All the building blocks necessary for such a constitution were created long ago, but it takes 800,000 years to bring them together. That's just my assertion, but it would be astonishing were it possible. Now I've gone and used the very concept we're talking about—astonishment—in a colloquial sense and amazingly it has nothing to do with the actual seriousness of astonishment.

Langston: The telos of this collecting is inherently social in nature. In another passage, Negt writes, "The most stable commonwealth is one, in which everyone is more or less average: average abilities, average illnesses, average defects. Politics is for average people."[2]

Kluge: That comes straight from Marx, who applied the theory of value to calculated averages of labor power. That's actually one of the strangest things for us to understand. It's not true that history is shaped by outstanding personalities like Caesar, Alexander the Great and Pope Gregory. World history is, in fact, moved by the sum total of average energies, but history's heroes are the ones who always knock it off course. But you can't put it quite like that either because average abilities are not sufficient enough for collecting. You must aggregate the labor power outside of one's own person. You need something like our transatlantic cooperation in order to bring together energies, gather up what has already been invented and then marvel at it.

Langston: But we're not talking about philosophy in ivory towers either. Astonishment is an everyday experience. For it to be relevant, it must occur among groups of people within a shared public sphere. To what extent can astonishment by triggered aesthetically? Which aesthetic forms are capable of activating astonishment and for what purposes? Isn't it reasonable to say that media concerns are highly invested in colonizing astonishment?

Kluge: Neither the beautiful nor the idea of the sublime can achieve this. Only a work of art that develops a free space of expression, which, in turn, is not commonplace, is suited for such a goal. Everyday language is polished because I must speak practically and quickly. In business and mass media, it's even more polished. It's quite another thing, however, to go collecting according to the principle of astonishment. You can't cash in on something astonishing that stimulates our sensory organs—the real collectors within us—in such a way that they accu-

2 Negt 278.

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