

# *The Assault of the Present on the Rest of Time*<sup>1</sup>

Alexander Kluge

## **CONCERNING THIS FILM PROJECT:**

We speak about the *opera of the 19th century*; it is considered the summit of dramatic art. In the film *Die Macht der Gefühle (The Power of Emotion)*, opera was likened to a “power plant of emotions.” The film *Carmen* by Carlos Saura has shown that such older forms of dramatic art tap certain currents in spectators; this is something we did not know before.

Bound up with our own century is another “power plant of emotions” — the cinema. Presumably, in the next century, beginning sixteen years from now, we will call it *the cinema of the 20th century*. This art form is ninety years old — a love affair of the century. The cinema consists of screening rooms, movie palaces, theaters on the front-lines, as well as many other gathering places, wherever films are shown for money. It also consists of a series of fascinating technical inventions which, though very elementary compared with the capabilities of electronics, all have to do with the construction of a time machine. This cinema tells stories and it has produced artistic figures [*Kunstfiguren*] and idols. Obviously, this medium intrigues me. The present film project deals

(1) with elements of cinema;

---

1. The following passages are taken from pages 7-8, 10-11, 12-14, 27-30, 37, 55-56, 66-68, 79, 83-84, and 105-111 of *Der Angriff der Gegenwart auf die übrige Zeit* (Frankfurt/Main: Syndikat Autoren und Verlagsgesellschaft, 1985); this translation appears here with permission of the author. Kluge’s film of the same title, which is only loosely based on the book, was shown in the United States under the title *The Blind Director*. Its first U.S. screening was at the New York Film Festival in October, 1985. The translators wish to thank Miriam Hansen for many helpful suggestions.

(2) with the illusion of the city;

(3) with people acting in the city who have all kinds of things moving through their heads: personal experiences, notions about cinema, the reality of the city.

The stylistic link, and simultaneously the basis for a certain comic dimension corresponding to the seriousness of the situation, is the category of time (see below). Cinematic time, the “condensed dramatic time of cities,” a lifetime — wrestling with time obviously occupies the course of our lives. The title is a provisional working title. The film could also be called: *The Mystery of the Final Hour* (Last-Moment-Details)<sup>2</sup>, or: *Cinema and the Illusion of the City*. Please trust me to develop the definitive title as the work progresses.

### *The Plot*

The film has numerous plots. Five women are the main characters. [ . . . ]

All five stories deal with the often unnoticeable transitions between illusion and experience. This, you will easily observe, has been the subject matter of cinema from the start. The story of the five women is therefore woven together with a series of other plot lines in the city and with film sequences which in each case represent a cinematographic translation of their versions of reality. [ . . . ]

### *The Illusion of the City and the End of All Illusion*

There is a promise which is founded upon enclosed space. This promise, that of the big city, is about 8,000 years old. From the beginning, films dealt with the strength of this illusion: a man comes to the city in search of his fortune and is struck down by fate . . . In recent years our big cities — they are the cities in which the five women of the film live — have been reconstructed: subways, subterranean levels, new city centers and pedestrian malls are being built. For many people this construction is accompanied by the illusion that it leads further and further until cities suited to human taste evolve and the bustling yet livable city becomes an idol. The actual situation reveals no ambition in this respect. The reconstruction of the cities will soon be finalized. We will enter the 21st century with cities that are just like those we see before us. The city as an idol, Renaissance Florence, for example, belongs to the currency of illusion.

With regard to the reserves of illusion on which we live, we have a

---

2. In English in the original — trans.

series of currency reforms ahead of us. One could say: the principle of the present rages against the principle of hope and against all the illusions of the past. We live in a present which for the first time has the potential to become the power ruling over all other times. This is summed up by the phrase: **the uncanniness of time**.<sup>3</sup> [ . . . ]

These elements — the present, the city, uncanniness, finality, illusion (as a rebellion against finality) — are not connected in linear sequence, but variations on them are the principle of the film. [ . . . ]

### *In Closeup: Our Time*

In this film I would like to show a snapshot of the classical cinema from the perspective of today. The emphasis is on: “the perspective of today.” What do we mean by today? Such events as mass unemployment, the closing of shipyards, demands for the thirty-five hour week, structural change in the industrial areas, the consciousness industry, and so forth, have not been treated in feature films. Each of these themes, however, poses a challenge for cinema, to be sure not only in the sense of how to represent them, but rather in the sense of how to effect their cinematographic *translation*.

The infinite forms of filmic translation and the experiential concerns of our time require some restrictions. As far as the social dimension of present experience is concerned, this project focuses on the theme of temporal conflicts, of a struggle for time. In the filmic translation this corresponds to a critique of the categories of cinematic time.

### *Key Term: Essay Film*

As much as possible, I intend to narrate this film in the style of a fiction film. However, the means cinema uses to express its relation to the present need to be brought up to date. Many thoughtful touches of *mise-en-scène* have become hackneyed. In cases where experience, or, rather, its translation is blocked, we need to resort to the format of the essay film. I know of no other possibility to supply so much material so quickly.

### *The Secret of the Final Hour*

The lead characters, the five women, the two stories from the forties, the sequences in the film which deal with the illusion of the city, the handing over of the child, the threat of finality and the people’s rebellion

---

3. This is the subtitle of Kluge’s volume of stories *Neue Geschichten: Hefte 1-18* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1977) — trans.

against it (both of which are uncanny): each of these is a swan song. A parting with an illusion.

Such partings do not happen voluntarily. For example, I myself would not be prepared to part with the illusion that the cinema, to which I devote a large part of my working life, will have a triumphal entry into the 21st century. This idea enables me to deal realistically with the danger that the phenomenon known as the new media poses for film. One thus parts with an older illusion by constructing a new one. The latter becomes a reality when real materials are included. The road does not lead from error to truth, but rather to a more substantive process of illusion. In this regard, the third part of the film tells the following story:

Over the course of the 19th century, oil lamps supersede candle light, gas lamps supersede the oil lamps, and electricity supersedes all previous lighting fixtures. There appears to be a law that several technologies cannot exist side by side. There have been reports, however, that the older technology, in its terminal phase, brings forth once more a burgeoning array of forms. In any case, with this late vitality the older modes of lighting flare up and bloom anew. For an instant it seems that, at the last moment, the beauty of the chandelier and gas candelabra will allow them to outlive the ugly new technology. It was, however, in each case only a swan song. Now the question is: provided that the secret of the final hour brings forth blooms in many places of a society, can we then speak of an **alliance of the threatened** which, once they are united, could force the new technology into coexistence? This can be narrated just like the “Deconstruction of a Crime through Cooperation” in *The Power of Emotion*. But one could also describe it in terms of the elements at work in an industrial development. Such *real* developments also involve people, and are marked by fateful blows, by escapes, affection, death, and so forth. [ . . . ]

[From Sequence I:]

**THE HISTORY OF THE MEGALOPOLIS**

Human beings have lived in cities for only one per cent of their five hundred thousand year old history. And this invention, the city, can disappear as fast as its ghostly apparition began. [ . . . ]

The sequence contains a calm factual account similar to the one about the industrial world's fair in the film *The Power of Emotion*, but it is more elaborate. Shots that can only be made with the Bavaria Studio's front projection device are mixed with trick shots and live footage. Something like the following will be recounted: one can imagine a world

consisting of villages, indeed, the world itself as a village. It would be characterized by the absolute predominance of intimacy. Everyone cares for each other; everyone keeps an eye on each other. One can recreate an illusion of this with universal television; its reality, however, cannot be recreated by anything at all. We human beings have come to carry the village principle **within** us.

It is an illusion insofar as hardly any modern person could **really** put up with the sense of time associated with the village. In comparison, our villages in the Federal Republic are decentralized urban installations. In other words: in the course of barely a hundred years, perhaps only fifty years, the village principle, that is, intimacy has disintegrated in all of Western Europe from an all-powerful present into two components, the past and the hope for a future.

One can see this in a simple example. As long as most lives were spent in villages, no act of war or the burning of a city (such as the burning of Magdeburg) could wipe out a country or continent. The evenly settled countryside acted as a buffer against massive annihilation. Now, for about the last five thousand years, the city has entered the picture. In it, human beings are crowded together. This expresses itself above all in the sense of time: time becomes **dramatic**. Cities, says Richard Sennett, open up the possibility of channeling human aggressiveness into parallel paths and thereby of liberating it. The citadel, ambition, sacrifice, the public sphere, condensed time, the various arts of remembering, specialization, the separation of actors and spectators, the principle of drama, and finally electrification, cables everywhere, war as a principle (rather than simply as something opportune) — these are derived from the invention of the city. In this artefact, the city, which corresponds to everything Sigmund Freud discusses in his essay *The Future of an Illusion* (*Standard Edition XXI: 5-56*), destructive forces have been struggling with constructive combinations of forces issuing from the same illusion about the city since its inception. Realities such as enclosed space, condensed time, and a sense of drama allow passions and spontaneity to develop. Nothing else we know can produce and organize more intense concentrations of mental energies. In this way, a Babylon, a Florence, a Nuremberg, a Berlin, a Paris, and so forth, come into being. Then, too, cities in the Ruhr, or a transit city like Ulm arise when longings drive generations out of small towns into district towns, state capitals or cosmopolitan cities. While people continue to amass illusions allowing the city to grow into a metropolis, decay necessarily also sets in so that cities, because so much is under construction, never really come into being —

at least never in the form of the city as an idol. Throughout, the unconstrained conflict of destructive and constructive forces in the cities (or on the planet as a city) has an objective limit: in a situation in which public life and the realm of intimacy collapse simultaneously, in which villages disintegrate as cities become more sprawling, people can no longer escape from one sphere to another. They cannot live this way. They would either implode or explode. In this respect cities are never finalized (*endgültig*). [ . . . ]

We are looking at ninety years of cinema. In terms of human life spans, this corresponds to three generations. In sixteen years the question will arise: cinema in the 21st century?

Our time shatters all temporal measures just as it obliterates spatial categories. Either we wait around or things go too fast. Therefore we must reinterpret the concept of drama.

[From Sequence II:]

Filming the theme: **What is a minute?** At issue is one minute among the 1440 minutes in a day. A minute on its own, extracted from this day, for example a minute before death, would be something different. We have, in turn, about 36,000 such *days* between our birth and death. You treat a minute carefully if you are as forgetful as Rita Merker. It's so easy to forget. She makes no progress with her diary.

Short sequence of clocks, cameras, film projectors of various sizes, the Maltese cross. These are all clocks. Clocks do not reproduce the present; a more useful measure of time is the pulse. In music: *tempo ordinario*. In the image: a conductor takes his pulse. The orchestra waits. The conductor raises his baton. The music begins.

Film speed is another way to measure time. Half the time in a movie theater is spent in the dark. The film is illuminated for 1/48th of a second; the film's passage through the camera or projector takes up another 1/48th of a second during which darkness prevails. That is, at the movies, our eyes look at something outside for 1/48th of a second, and for 1/48th of a second they look inward. That is something very beautiful. [ . . . ]

NEW YEAR'S EVE 1900-1901. The 20th century commences. Several things will happen that nobody can quite imagine:

- (1) the destructive weapons of the 20th century;
- (2) "the myth of the 20th century";
- (3) the city in the 20th century;
- (4) the cinema of the 20th century.

Apart from the delight derived from flashing lights and the pleasure in

moving images (even meaningless ones), there is the overwhelming need for a simple story: boy meets girl, or girl meets boy, or *cousin* meets *cousine*, etc. That's my idea, says the producer in 1901, now make a film out of it. At any rate, that's how simple the basic urge to watch a film is, says Anna Eilers as she is talking with the experienced box office cashier at the Olympia theater. Yet, she adds, the story was never filmed according to our wishes. There are always these ingredients: cancer, separations, mistakes, happy endings, a host of obstacles derived from the arsenal of drama, but never a story like this: a boy meets a girl, everything goes well, they are compatible, and when they are 71 years old, they look back and think it quite nice that they met. For once, says Anna Eilers, this would be a **clearly defined position**.

In accordance with the montage of the entire film, the short history of the cinema alluded to here (seen from the vantage point of the question: when will the story *boy meets girl*<sup>4</sup> finally be filmed without further ado?) is divided among different scenes of the second and third sequences. It partly involves self-contained scenes (dramatized), partly film clips (edited, optically transformed).

NEW YEAR'S EVE 1918-1919. A party convention in the Prussian House of Lords. How one participant of this convention in 1918 imagines World War II: Ludendorff bought UFA; now it is taken over by Privy Councillor Hugenberg who already owns the Scherl conglomerate; the German cinema at its high point in 1942; films are shown in an area reaching from Bordeaux to Kharkov; the head of German cinema is Associate Judge Dr. Pfennig whom we see in a JU 52 as he flies over his flickering empire; one day he is suddenly dethroned because he received a package of black market meat from the Prague studio; the film studios in Warsaw have not been used since the German occupation. Among mannequins, props and costumes, in the wide spaces of illusion, sheltered from the rain, the caretaker and his wife have set up their nest, guarding these studios which the world has forgotten; with a small group of friends they have little parties; using some costumes, they have fun and make up little games, just as in the early days of the movies. At night, in the capital of Austria [*Ostmark*], film workers re-cut the montage they produced during the day in order to destroy a piece of the "present" — they want to remain in their privileged positions. Film history began with Lumière's documentaries. Since then, documentation has been progressively suppressed. Throughout the war, Fred Wittlich of PK-Company tries to capture authentic

---

4. In English in the original — trans.

images of battle scenes on celluloid. But whenever he rushed to the front, even at top speed, the battle was over, and he found the troops playing cards. Now, finally, at the end of April, 1945, he was able to produce documentary shots of the battle for the newsreel scheduled to appear after April 8, 1945. In Tunisia, feature films belonging to the U.S. army were captured in a German tank offensive. Scenes in the Propaganda Ministry while one of these films is screened. The Americans' greater skill as far as entertainment value, *i.e.*, the political in film, is concerned. Can we do it too? First attempts during the production of the German color film *Münchhausen*. [ . . . ]

[From Sequence III:]

**THE CINEMA ANIMAL**

Portrait of a person addicted to the cinema. The atmosphere is the same as in Sequence II, that is, still within Monday night. The animal is looking for a cinema it finds congenial. It is characterized by a tendency to view the real streets as a movie while in the theater it views things objectively. This species of animal is supposedly threatened with extinction. [ . . . ]

A montage sequence, in part with imaginary images: "In principle, when we perform a rapid or accelerated action, we experience a contraction of time, but when we remember the action we expand its duration" (Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of Time*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1971: 276). Clocks, a chronometer at work, a time clock. "A diagram of homogeneous time. Succession and duration as the culture in which concepts breed." "Grasping time is tantamount to freeing oneself from the present: not only to anticipate the future on the basis of regularities unconsciously established in the past, but to unfold a series of conditions which do not resemble each other and are only linked . . . by movement. To comprehend time, therefore, is to transcend space through intellectual agility. This means, above all, reversibility. To know it, on the other hand, is to retrace it in either direction and thereby to proceed beyond the actual course of events" (Piaget 283 ff.). "The state of 'innocence' which precedes the phase of critical construction." "Realism is egocentric."

"Let us imagine a creature who, from birth to death, does the same work uninterruptedly, always at the same speed — for instance, building the Great Wall of China. In his case psychological time would coincide with physical time . . ." The durations could be measured in terms of the dimensions of what is constructed. There is a certain moral Utopia in the idea that I could measure my life's capacities, even if it were



only a question of moving along a straight stretch of road. Without detours I would have control over my abilities to do good deeds.

It will turn out that this reflection on the grammar of time in the friendly, simple time machines of the cinema can be pursued clearly only in documentaries. That film is used to nourish illusion is really a mistake. At the moment just before death, mistakes in the form of silhouettes enter the picture. Sequence of back-lit shots, so-called silhouettes. Music. Strongly imaginary. [ . . . ]

## APPENDIX

### *Notes on Details in the Script*

#### Note 1: "POCKETS OF FATE"

The best way to measure the gaps in a tragic, irrevocable system, the pocket of fate within it, is through the comic. For this purpose, the cinema has developed artistic figures [*Kunstfiguren*] who also form the basis of the star system: perfection, in each case with one flaw. Because of their scale as well as their imperfections, these people are fascinating. These qualities not only make them lovable, they also serve as the spectator's point of entry, the necessary discount. The five women, supplemented by countless other persons as well as the six men whose actions populate this film, imitate a typical trait of classical movie characters. My ambition is to show that there are ways out of the irrevocability and the sheer "distended present" that the high point of the best years of our lives seem to be. This is the significance of the heading of the third sequence — the secret of the final hour. It corresponds to the historical experience that something beautiful, useful, older, something that is vitally threatened by new developments, engenders sympathy and mourning at the moment of its demise.

#### Note 2: THE PRESENT

Developing programs involves, above all, a decision about the flow of time: its acceleration, retardation, the time of experiencing it, response time, time to be gained, time to be lost, and so forth. The production of the ability to remember, of a horizon, a perspective, of precision, certainty, movement (in two senses, as motion and emotion) — all this is realized through ever so fine manipulations of time. Evidently time possesses a grammar.

In this respect the category of the present is a convention. Between "just now" and "already" there is a boundary (in terms of the Arriflex camera this boundary has a duration of 1/48th of a second and a surface

of 35mm) which represents the present. It is something imagined rather than something real. In the modern world, this next-to-nothing has, increasingly, passed itself off as something, indeed, as potentially everything. The consensus among people about what belongs to our time, what is important enough for an announcement or a play, is decided through categories such as topicality or “our present.” Every earlier present had the tendency to do away with the past and to put limits on the future. In our day, for the first time, the forces of the present have the objective power to close the horizons of the future irrevocably and to cut off the past. At any rate, the present **thinks** it could do so. “The past, however, is not dead; it is not even past.” And without a future horizon, that is, without hope, people would not even have the strength to agree with each other about what the present is. In this respect, each quantum of time says: “I was, I am, I will be.” And if one looks closely, it will add: “I sense, I could, I may not, I wish,” and so forth. At least this is the way film time works.

**Note 3: “DISTENDED PRESENT”**

The present could not effect its seizure of power over other times if it were not for something in human beings in complicity with it. The latest research calls this the “distended present” (Brose). Professional qualifications, expectations about life are being devalued on a large scale; people become unemployed, lose parts of their lives for which they have worked. They cannot come to terms with this new situation simply in an objective way. Facts are one thing and the wishes that find these facts unbearable are something else. Frequently, these people opt for temporary solutions after the defeat they have suffered. For example, they get a new job, or (in relationships) a new partner because this does not involve a final decision. Something remains suspended between past and future — and we call this the present. It is something different from waiting and something other than life: a new way for fate to strike. In order to describe it, one must record the gentler tones of time. Scenes emerge whose characteristics are neither tragic nor genuinely comic, but oscillating. Something emerges that is neither dream nor reality. This happens voluntarily, indeed, because people freely will it. And what I find most important is that these new kinds of behavior are the opposite of ambivalence and irresoluteness.

I would really prefer to recount all this exclusively in the form of dramatized stories. Because it occurs in a single place and on a single day, the second sequence gives me the opportunity to narrate in the manner of the fiction film. On the other hand, the explosive force of the

theme demands free (non-dramatized) modes of representation. I will try to concentrate these at the beginning and end of the film.

**Note 4: FINALITY**

As a category of the future it is rather unbearable. Imagination exhausts itself in denying this finality which is ultimately death. In all cases in which finality is intuited, imagination (or desire) prefers the indefinite. In all cases in which something is not yet definitively final, we demand certainty and precision. In this respect, happiness, for example, should be something precise — a source of the comic.

**Note 5: THE FINALITY OF OUR CITIES**

One of the clearest expressions of finality is enclosed space. Anyone looking at a tomb can see this.

In December of 1983, Karl-Heinz Bohrer, the new editor of the monthly *Merkur*, called me. He asked whether I could write an essay with the title: "The Finality of Cities." I was taken aback. Up till then I had assumed as a matter of course that the renewal of our cities, the installation of pedestrian zones, underground malls, subways, the establishment of satellite cities, and so forth, would continue until once again we would live in cities as I used to know them. I did some research, asked around. This illusion was not mine alone. In reality, however, there is much to support the view that the cities, as they are now constructed, will be our dwellings as we proceed into the 21st century. An essential result of my research is that a chronicle of the modern city — no more than its prehistory — cannot be represented in the form of essays or dramatic scenes. Rather, it is a cinematic theme. What is especially fascinating to me is the so-called "invisible city": the urban structure which is lodged in our nerves, feelings and knowledge. The urban principle and the dramatic principle (of condensed time, of suspense) are like cousins. Corresponding to this urban principle are unmistakable characters and destinies.

**Note 6: PERSPECTIVE ON THE CENTURY: NEW YEAR'S EVE, 1918**

I intend to produce this sequence in collaboration with Margarethe von Trotta. New Year's Eve, 1918 (including New Year's Day) is a turning point in our century that will never come again. World War I is still fresh in people's minds. It laid bare something of the character of reality in the 20th century. By comparison, the perspective of New Year's Eve, 1900 (that is, 1899-1900) is almost naively illusionistic — as if the 19th century were extending into the 20th. Now, however, on New Year's Eve, 1918,

illusions are scattered to the winds only to be replaced, however, by countless new ones. But the decisions of January, 1919 have not yet been made. For a moment it seems as if Germany could develop in many different directions. On this day, nobody governs anywhere. The leaders restrain themselves. In the former Prussian House of Lords (the *Landtag*), the founding convention of the Communist Party takes place. Rosa Luxemburg delivers her speech, "Proletarians in Uniform." The leadership of this newly founded party is voted down that very same night.

This material can be seen in the context of Margarethe von Trotta's Luxemburg-film; collaboration about this historic juncture makes sense.

#### **Note 7: CHANGES OF TIME AND STYLE**

Just as the film *The Power of Emotion* dealt with elements of the opera, and *Artists under the Big Top: Perplexed* with aspects of the circus, the film *The Assault of the Present on the Rest of Time* is about the cinema because it presents an abundance of things in fragmented form. A series of actions, set in the contemporary city or shown as historical superimposition, is paralleled by the narration of well-defined short movie scenes using doctored film clips or a front projection device. In this way, the pictorial narration moves across time. Because there are clear changes of time and style, the spectator can easily notice the narrative process; furthermore, this process is conveyed musically. These image changes, which create a bridge from one story to another, are not individually accounted for in the script. Until such cinematographic renderings are produced from the materials themselves, they can be described only with great difficulty. Part of the pictorial and stylistic changes can be echoed in live-action takes. Therefore, as in the three previous films, I plan to have three independent camera teams working in succession. Cutting sessions will be interrupted by additional shooting sessions.

*Translated by Tamara Evans and Stuart Liebman*