

THOMAS ELSAESSER



GERMAN CINEMA

TERROR AND TRAUMA

CULTURAL MEMORY SINCE 1945

GERMAN CINEMA— TERROR AND TRAUMA

Cultural Memory Since 1945

Thomas Elsaesser



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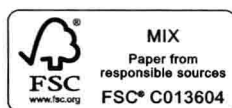
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GERMAN CINEMA—TERROR AND TRAUMA

In *German Cinema—Terror and Trauma*, Thomas Elsaesser reevaluates the meaning of the Holocaust for post-war German films and culture, while offering a reconsideration of trauma theory today. Elsaesser argues that Germany's attempts at "mastering the past" can be seen as both a failure and an achievement, making it appropriate to speak of an ongoing "guilt management" that includes not only Germany, but Europe as a whole. In a series of case studies, which consider the work of Konrad Wolf, Alexander Kluge, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Herbert Achternbusch and Harun Farocki, as well as films made in the new century, Elsaesser tracks the different ways the Holocaust is present in German cinema from the 1950s onwards, even when it is absent, or referenced in oblique and hyperbolic ways. Its most emphatically "absent presence" might turn out to be the compulsive afterlife of the Red Army Faction, whose acts of terror in the 1970s were a response to—as well as a reminder of—Nazism's hold on the national imaginary. Since the end of the Cold War and 9/11, the terms of the debate around terror and trauma have shifted also in Germany, where generational memory now distributes the roles of historical agency and accountability differently. Against the background of universalized victimhood, a cinema of commemoration has, if anything, confirmed the semantic and symbolic violence that the past continues to exert on the present, in the form of missed encounters, retroactive incidents, unintended slippages and uncanny parallels, which Elsaesser—reviving the full meaning of Freud's *Fehlleistung*—calls the parapractic performativity of cultural memory.

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INTRODUCTION

Terror and Trauma

The Power of Nightmares

In 2005, the British television journalist Adam Curtis produced a three-part program for the BBC, called *The Power of Nightmares*, subtitled “The Rise of the Politics of Fear,” in which he proposed the bold hypothesis that the Bush-Blair “war on terror” was not a response to 9/11, but the solution to an altogether different problem.¹ Instead of using the attack on one of the United States’ most visible and best-known icons, the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York, to restore a sense of rational order and national security to the country, or even to extract revenge on the perpetrators and their paymasters, the “war on terror” became an attempt to restore the authority of political leadership in Western democracies, by extracting a heavy price in civil liberties and individual freedom.

With the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the Soviet threat, so the argument ran, the West no longer faced a foreign “enemy” powerful enough to detract from domestic problems, such as poverty, unemployment and lack of social injustice at home. Nor was there an enemy that justified American hegemony in large parts of the world, notably the oil-rich Middle East and other strategically vital regions. Traditional party politics had also suffered a dramatic decline in credibility in Europe because of the decline of the nation state as the primary social bond that would keep individuals loyal to their country and its government. Cynicism, voter apathy, anxiety and the end of any hope for radical social change had bred a crisis in the legitimacy of democratic governments, demoted to being managers of free market economies and bail-out bodies for bankers and multi-national corporations. Into this crisis, the 9/11 attacks and

their aftermath came as an opportunity to change both the perception and the power politics of Western-style neoliberal governance.

Curtis, backed by a number of British and U.S. academics and policy makers, argued that politicians had used the traumatic impact of 9/11 and the climate of fear and uncertainty that it left, especially after further suicide bombings in Madrid (March 11, 2004) and London (July 7, 2005), in order to increase democratic governments' power over civil society and control over its citizen. Quoting a number of authorities who asserted that the idea of a conspiratorial worldwide network of Jihadists, out to destroy the West, is exaggerated and seriously misleading, *The Power of Nightmares* proposed an alternative scenario: "that politicians such as Bush and Blair have stumbled on a new force that can restore their power and authority—the fear of a hidden and organised web of evil from which they can protect their people."² The huge build-up of the security apparatus all over Europe and the United States, the Iraq war, the curtailment of civil liberties at home, the covert practice of torture and "rendition" of suspects, the outsourcing of military tasks and policing duties to private security firms, unaccountable and making enormous profits at the tax payers' expense, all fit into a picture of not letting a crisis go to waste, and acting on the famous adage by Milton Friedman, that "only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change."³

But Curtis complemented this by the then quite widely accepted view of a conservative and capitalist conspiracy—made famous a few years later in Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*—with a possibly even more audacious hypothesis, based on a startling set of parallels. He pointed out that the "origins" of both the conservative "war on terror" and militant Islamist radicalism to which it claimed to be the response, were not only fundamentalist in inspiration (neo-con fundamentalism versus Jihadist fundamentalism), but had charismatic, if to the wider world little-known leaders, who developed their ideas at roughly the same time (1949), in roughly the same place (the American Midwest, i.e., Chicago and Colorado), and in response to the same perceived decadence of liberalism, materialism and individualism. If Chicago economist Leo Strauss inspired many of those who became the spokesmen of neo-conservatism during the Bush presidency (William Kristol, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, and Dick Cheney), it was Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian exchange scholar spending time in Greeley, Colorado, between 1948 and 1950, who went on to found the Muslim Brotherhood that inspired Al Qaeda. The devout and learned Qutb was so traumatized by America's acquisitive consumerism and its loose sexual mores, that he resolved to protect his country and Islam from any and all of its blandishments and influences, not unlike the neo-cons who vowed to roll back the permissiveness and narcissism they saw as the legacy of the students' anti-Vietnam movement, the hippies and the sexual revolution: "Both [the Islamists and neo-conservatives] were idealists

who were born out of the failure of the liberal dream to build a better world. And both had a very similar explanation for what caused that failure. These two groups have changed the world, but not in the way that either intended. Together, they created today's nightmare vision of a secret, organized evil that threatens the world. A fantasy that politicians then found restored their power and authority in a disillusioned age. And those with the darkest fears became the most powerful."⁴

The lessons that Curtis drew from his material are not always straightforward. When uncovering these unlikely parallels and dark cabals, he himself tends to subscribe to some version of a conspiracy theory or "grand design." The roots of *both* the libertine individualisms *and* of the conservative fundamentalisms that he claims arose against them in response can be traced back to the failures of Western Enlightenment, and its ideals of political liberties and individual freedoms. What, one wonders, did these essentially conservative and religious opponents of democracy have in common with left-wing critics of Enlightenment, such as Max Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno of the Frankfurt School? The latter were fierce critics of capitalism and, at least initially, advocates of socialism, while the former, at the least the neo-cons, were fervent believers in capitalist enterprise and self-reliance, coupling their moral critique of individualism with an economic and political critique of socialism, calling the European style social-democratic welfare state a "nanny state," fostering all kinds of dependencies. Whether the Muslim Brotherhood can be understood in such terms is equally debatable, given that it was opposed to Nasser's form of secular nationalism with a socialist agenda, as much as it now rails against Western capitalist policies, especially when espoused by their own autocratic leaders.

Perhaps Curtis' parallels make a different point: that power manifests itself in modern societies obliquely and indirectly, often via proxies and hidden agendas, with unforeseen and unintended consequences, across reactive moves rather than proactive strategies. Equally important, however, would be the insight that antagonists or rivals for power appear to achieve their goals not when they oppose each other, but when they consciously or inadvertently collude or cooperate with each other, as the "terrorists" and those waging "war on terror" seem to have been doing: each traumatizing civil society into accepting the consequences of the "politics of fear," and acquiescing in the resulting political paralysis or gridlock democracy. Terror and trauma, too, would then no longer stand in a relation of cause and effect, nor be in opposition to each other. Together they would make up an antagonistic mutuality, sustained by the complementarity that enlists trauma in a strategy for control, just as terror is always a strategy for intimidation. Terror and trauma would then be the two sides of a state of exception when governing the ungovernable: politics of fear from above and from below, with globalization and finance capitalism the twin dragons at the gates of hell.

Terror and Trauma: The Violence of the Past in the Present

In some ways, this book pursues a parallel project, even though it is conceived in a different context (Germany since World War II), has a narrower focus (the cultural history of German cinema), and is concerned with the consequences and afterlife of a different history (the Nazi regime and the Holocaust). But it is not unreasonable to think of “terror and trauma” as the alternative subtitle for “the power of nightmares” and vice versa. More specifically, this book came out of a slim volume published in Germany in 2007, to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the relatively short period of extreme violence and terrorism, at the origins of which was the Red Army Faction (RAF), a group of political activists who could be said to have practiced an earlier version of the politics of fear.⁵ Known as the Hot Autumn (or *Deutsche Herbst*), the RAF’s series of assassinations, bank robberies, hostage taking and counter attacks by the police and the government’s security services shocked and traumatized the Federal Republic of Germany in the fall of 1977 into a virtual state-of-emergency.⁶ The aftereffects of “Germany in Autumn” have been felt ever since, while its back-stories, prehistories and subsequent narratives are being periodically recycled, reevaluated, and reinterpreted, with no agreed version in sight about the motives of either the chief protagonists or the true significance of these events, half “past history” half “living memory.”⁷ 1997 and 2007 were particularly intense years of retrospectives and reassessments when, with varying degrees of cooperation, the perpetrators of the violence and the relatives of their victims, the representatives of the State and of the security forces had their say on television and in print, along with further “actors”: eyewitnesses, participants, historians, sociologists, filmmakers, and trend analysts. A veritable RAF Industry has established itself around its afterlife, to which I have devoted chapter 4.⁸

What became evident was that the periodic returns of the RAF as a topic that just “would not go away” showed similarities with West Germany’s other recurring trauma topic, namely the Nazi period and the premeditated genocide of the Jews. For this perpetually returning past, a special term was coined: *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* variously translated as either “coming to terms with the past” or “mastering the past,” but quite odd in German, insofar as in the word *Bewältigung* resonates *Gewalt*, i.e., violence, and implies an obstacle to be overcome. It thus makes the past into something undead, a threat or at any rate, a force or agent that has to be wrestled down. The RAF and the Nazi past were also linked insofar as one of the justifications the group’s members gave for their action was that the Federal Republic was still essentially a Nazi state, while those who condemned their politics as well as their actions referred to the RAF as “Hitler’s children.” How could the RAF be opposed to Nazism and emulate Nazism at the same time? What was behind this compulsion to repeat, to enact or act out, along with the inability to find closure? How did commemoration become such an important part of West Germany’s public life, and why did the

occasions for commemoration invariably produce scandals, missteps, misunderstandings and moments of intense embarrassment: for politicians, public figures and even for responsible and respected writers?

It was questions like these that prompted me to write the book. I wanted to listen more closely to this perpetual murmur of a country talking to itself about its repugnant past across generational, political and emotional divides—occasionally resulting in faltering dialogue, more often rising to a crescendo of mutual recrimination, and in one instance, the RAF episode, ending in deadly violence. What the interminable dialogue with the past and with each other also showed was evidence that the main antagonists often seemed inadvertently to complement each other, as if not only the RAF and the Nazi past might just be two sides of the same coin, but as if a trauma of unacknowledged or disavowed guilt and the terror unleashed by a small group of militants were also communicating vessels. As a film historian, I wanted to examine these delicate and troubling issues across their repercussions in the particular counter-public sphere of the New German Cinema, which during the 1970s and early 1980s had been an internationally recognized “new wave,” creating a series of films that spoke critically about Germany, but also spoke on behalf of Germany: again a potential paradox, since the films were largely financed out of the public purse, but (with rare exceptions) ignored, shunned or even ridiculed by the general film-going public and television audiences in West Germany.

The first occasion for analyzing this intertwining of countervailing forces came in 1997, when for the twentieth anniversary of the Hot Autumn, German television screened a two-part docudrama, *DEATH GAME* (directed by Hans Breloer), seen by millions of German viewers. What caught my attention was that it echoed *GERMANY IN AUTUMN* (1978), an omnibus film directed by several of the iconic names of the New German Cinema, controversially received at home, but widely discussed abroad. *DEATH GAME* seemed to me best understood as a “remake,” but one where repetition-with-difference called for an altogether more unusual interpretative strategy, one that required these multiple framings, retroactive causalities and shifting temporalities because the events had assumed the force of traumatic symptoms. Redolent of allegorical meaning, these symptoms had the power to act back on the events, as if the effects in retrospect altered the causes that had given rise to them. Breloer’s docudrama retold the story of those months in 1977, but reversed many of the arguments of *GERMANY IN AUTUMN* as well as shifting the emphasis to a different cast of characters. It was like a mirror image of the earlier work, revealing not only the difference between an oppositional, avant-garde film, made for the cinema screen, and a more mainstream, compliant television production. *DEATH GAME* also marked the political shifts that had taken place between 1977 and 1997, with the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Wall and German unification being the main turning points. “*Antigone Agonistes: The Red Army Faction, Germany in Autumn and Death Game*” was first presented at a conference

devoted to the figure of Antigone in literature, film and philosophy, organized by Joan Copjec at the State University of New York at Buffalo. As the text is available in book form and on-line, it has not been reprinted here.⁹

This rewriting of the RAF episode in *DEATH GAME* into something quite different from how it had appeared in the filmmakers' first-hand testimony that was *GERMANY IN AUTUMN* made me want to examine how the New German Cinema itself had dealt with the history of terror and violence it had inherited. Taking its intellectual figurehead, Alexander Kluge as my main example, I looked at the films not for a critique of Nazism, but for the more invisible traces of what in the 1960s and early 1970s was still referred to by the metonym "Auschwitz." The result, "Absence as Presence, Presence as Parapraxis," was given as a lecture at Tel Aviv University in May 2000. It was there that I first developed the concept of "parapraxis," the English translation of the Freudian term *Fehlleistung*, which was to become the major poetological, political and interpretative device, in a series of case studies of films and filmmakers that form the bulk of this volume. They are framed by essays of a more theoretical nature, on "Terror and Trauma: Siamese Twins of the Political Discourse," "The Poetics and Politics of Parapraxis," and a look back at "Trauma Theory," which an essay of mine called "Postmodernism as Mourning Work" had helped to extend to film and media, as a critique of "representation."¹⁰ Other essays, notably "Memory Frames and Witnessing: Burden of Representation and Holocaust Films," "Generational Memory: The RAF Afterlife in the New Century," "From Holocaust Memory to Guilt Management," were expressly written for the present volume, and are meant to reflect on yet another intervening decade, taking us into the new century, where some of the issues still won't go away, and others resurface and return: turning "mastering the past" into the post-trauma of a perpetrator nation, either engaged in "guilt management" or reclaiming for itself, too, the status of history's victims.

Memory and Trauma—The New Markers of Identity

By way of a more general introduction to the chapters, I want to briefly consider Germany's persistent preoccupation with its recent past across several broader considerations that also point to present day Europe and beyond. Chief among them is the urge to invest so much of identity—personal, collective, national—in "memory," and to promote, as memory's most authentic manifestation, the search for and effects of "trauma." Much has been written in the last decades about "collective memory" and the late twentieth century European culture of commemoration, both for and against. Negative, as symptomatic for the penchant of this continent in geopolitical decline to cling to its past and to fetishize even horrific parts of its history, in waves of nostalgia, that act as a defense against an uncertain future. Positive voices, i.e., those in favor of more "memory studies" would argue that cultural memory is an ethical duty:

towards the many senseless deaths that the twentieth century has witnessed, but also as a salvage mission, to rescue from oblivion what “creative destruction” and relentless technical innovation are so rapidly discarding or rendering obsolete. This so-called memory boom,¹¹ with its nationally distinct memory discourses and periodically changing memory frames, is a theme throughout this study, partly implicit, because willy-nilly contributing to it, and partly critically reflected and challenged, as in chapter 4 on the RAF afterlife, chapter 10 on Holocaust memory, and chapter 11 on trauma theory.

What deserves special comment, however, is that memory has become one of the chief markers of identity, individually as well as collectively. Once upon a time, nations and communities tried to unite around a common project, directed towards the future (changing the world, fighting for a better life) that ensured a sense of personal identity and collective belonging. Now it is shared memories, or the retrospective construction of a group (manifest in the use of “generation” as a period marker) that defines self-worth and creates the (fraying) ties that bind. This in turn casts much of life under the signs of loss and disaster, making *survival* a generic term for being alive, if not the sole goal of life itself: a not altogether unproblematic development, as thinkers otherwise as different as Zygmund Baumann and Alain Badiou have argued.¹² It is in this context that one needs to see the emergence of trauma as such a central trope, outside any clinical application or context. Trauma has come to prominence not just within the various memory discourses, but in popular culture as well, where it tends to refer not only to victims of past and present disasters, but is extended to all “survivors,” and can even include those that might once have been considered perpetrators. It is as if the catastrophes (of history, but also of life itself) are either of such enormity that individual or even collective agency cannot account for them, or that—in the case of violent events, such as a world war and unspeakably inhuman acts, such as the Holocaust—their afterlife in memory is what becomes the actual trauma, making all those exposed to this afterlife, regardless of their individual life story or role in the events, at once its survivors and victims.¹³

How did trauma become the new currency of identity *and* victimhood, indeed of identity *as* victimhood? How can it refer to an individual or a group that occupies positions of both victim and perpetrator? What is the role of the new public sphere of permanent media presence and twenty-four-hour news coverage in promoting such a broad array of potentially contradictory references? While an analysis of the term’s current use is most certainly in order—my contribution was the essay on “Postmodernism as Mourning Work” and is the “Postscript on Trauma Theory,” chapter 11 of this volume—I also found it necessary to look for an overarching concept that had a different pedigree, but shared similar properties, such as being inherently double-sided and self-divided, bracketing the tensions of active and passive, language and embodiment, intention and contingency, the past in the present, and the “other”

bound into the self. For a number of reasons I hope will be clear in the chapters themselves, I did not want to resort to the vocabulary of modernism (ambiguity, aporia) or postmodernism (in-between-ness, hybridity, entanglement), or even deconstruction (undecidability, deferral, difference).

However, it would be disingenuous to claim that the idea of *parapraxis* that I eventually opted for, does not share many of the concerns expressed in these terms, and indeed their weaknesses, while possibly adding some more of its own. Crucial in my choice was the dual and reversible meaning of Freud's German original *Fehlleistung*, which gives this psychoanalytic term a broader reach as well as a more precise definition than that of the "Freudian slip." In particular, I wanted to demonstrate that it was especially illuminating when thinking about the cinema as a medium of conflict and of conflicted situations, establishing a dynamic field of active and passive, with its narratives generally tending towards closure, but in many cases capable of carrying apparently self-contradictory meanings that do not just delay or suspended resolution, but achieve an equilibrium all of their own.

The major gain of its double-sidedness, however, is that for my subject of terror and trauma, *parapraxis* can, in the encounter with moving images ("moving images" here understood in its widest sense, as visual and aural events) produce both a politics (in public life, the spheres of political action) and a poetics (manifest in literature, the cinema and other spheres of symbolic action). This claim of the centrality of *parapraxis*, especially when dealing with trauma, I try to make good with reference to the particular situation of Germany since World War II, in its politics and in its cinema. It leads to the hypothesis that Germany's particular ways of (not) mastering the past holds lessons for other nations, for other situations and perhaps for the West quite generally. *Parapraxis*, in other words, as a *pharmakon*: the poison as the cure.

Parapractic Politics: Failed Performance

The Freudian term *Fehlleistung*—which translates as "failed performance" as well as "performance of failure"—first suggested itself to me as the appropriate term by which to highlight a series of uncanny parallels and unexpected coincidences in the history and politics of West Germany since 1945. Some of these I detail in chapter 4, but their common denominator was that on certain public occasions, usually to do with anniversaries, commemorative events and official speeches, public figures often failed, in quite spectacular ways, to perform as they were expected and no doubt intended to. These *faux pas* or breakdowns of the symbolic mandates were more than missteps, because the truths they inadvertently let slip invariably referred back to *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* or some equally unresolved and deeply conflicted aspect of German national identity and self-image, indicative not only of divisions that could not be papered over, or of feelings that refused to be suppressed, but pointing to hidden connections

and strange continuities across divided loyalties, divergent histories and deep ambivalences of affect and feeling. Such failed performances also occurred between the generations, where oedipal conflicts between fathers and sons were doubled by the son generation appearing to *act out* hidden or missing agendas of the father generations. In other words, such performances failed, but also succeeded, because it was only through their failure that their meaning could become manifest. Thus, *Fehlleistung* at first came to stand for a different way of making sense of the moments of collusion or sudden illumination, within the violent confrontations between the perpetrator-fathers and their rebellious sons (and daughters) around the RAF episode, but it eventually led me to a new understanding of why Germany's *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* could not (and perhaps should not) succeed: in its failure it was already succeeding, even if this insight was always a retrospective-retroactive one. These parapraxes, in the arena of politics and public life, highlighted the way that speech acts and body language, gesture and tone had become saturated and colored by the disavowals, the deferrals of responsibility, the compromises and sins of commission and omission accumulated since the Nazi period and pervading its afterlife. The stumbles of *Fehlleistung* signposted but also vindicated the difficult path to eventual accountability of official Germany and individual acknowledgement of the terrible wrongs done in the nation's name, across personal slips of the tongue, public gaffes and political scandals that nonetheless revealed their coherent historical frames and retroactive inevitability.

Parapractic Poetics: The Performance of Failure

As indicated, *Fehlleistung* is most useful for my purposes because the single word is a typically German compound that contains the potentially irritating but suggestive contradiction of “failure” and “performance,” pitting intention against result, or maybe putting result before intention and thus appearing to mock the latter. Its reversibility and play with cause and effect are the main resources for its creative potential, which led me to identify a *poetics* of parapraxis. Here, the stress is on failure as something that needs to be *performed*: the more or less strategic deployments of failure (in different guises: mishap, bad timing, non-sequitur, absurdity, wordplay, bad puns, skewed metaphors) become textual effects or narrative strategies, a tactic observable above all, though not exclusively, in several key films of the New German Cinema.

It is in the various case studies, mostly of individual films that I track down some of the parapraxes and tease out the overt or hidden purposes they seem to serve. Of course, in a general way, these essays inscribe themselves in what by now is a vast literature, setting out to describe or analyze how West Germany and its cinema did or did not “master the past.” As such, it may indeed seem that I am going over familiar terrain—over and over again—as if the very effort that the book represents is itself a symptom of its subject, i.e., of failed

Vergangenheitsbewältigung in the modus of repetition and parapraxis. This could well be true, and if the case, I accept at least one implication, namely that for a German of my generation, the generation born during or near the end of World War II, it is impossible to step outside a certain circularity, when talking about Germany and German cinema. Especially among those of us who have spent most of their professional lives abroad, any attempt to presume detachment and distance is to risk being in denial, just as too close a proximity can lead to a false sense of familiarity. Which is why, alongside parapraxis, related terms such as *witnessing* and *testifying*, *identification* and *overidentification*, *observation* and *self-implication* keep coming up throughout.

To be more specific, the aspect of repetition and return is relevant, insofar as the present volume is my third attempt to “come to terms” with the 1970s and 1980s. The intersection of cinema, national identity and the politics of representation during these two decades was unique in Germany’s post-war history. This is why the period and some of its films are still my implicit reference point, now examined across a different conceptual lens from the way the prevailing *auteurist* perspectives tended to perceive the New German Cinema at the time (focused mostly on the singular vision and work of Wenders, Herzog, Syberberg, Fassbinder, Kluge, Reitz, Schloendorff, von Trotta, Sander, Farocki, Sanders-Brahms). But *Terror and Trauma* also differs from how I myself wrote about the New German Cinema in the 1980s and 1990s, which was from an institutional point of view, and had as one major focus the divergent reception of the films in Germany and the Anglo-American world.¹⁴ At the same time, the book is a sort of sequel to my study on R.W. Fassbinder, in which I looked at the recasting of a nation’s identity and its self-understanding across the cinematic oeuvre of an outsider who became—paradoxically and parapractically—a representative by the very force of his deviancy and unrepresentativeness.¹⁵

Fassbinder also seized on national trauma in his films (THE BRD TRILOGY, LILI MARLEEN, BERLIN ALEXANDERPLATZ) as well as produced shock and scandal with his films (“I don’t throw bombs, I make films”). Whereas in *Fassbinder’s Germany*, the director’s rewriting of German history in the form of doomed or impossible love stories was the central theme and guiding thread, in *Terror and Trauma* the key issue is *absence as presence*, i.e., what in the cinematic self-representations of Germany from the 1970s was also absent, or rather *what was present in its persistent absence*. It is in this sense that this is my third attempt to “read” the cinema of this most turbulent period of Germany’s post-war history, principally to register the after-shocks of the non-representation of the “missing” (i.e., Germany’s Jews, but in the twenty-first century also other victims), but then to pursue the consequences of this absence into their oddly overemphatic presence since the 1990s. If *Terror and Trauma* is the third volume of a trilogy of sorts around the New German Cinema, after *New German Cinema A History* (1989) and *Fassbinder’s Germany* (1996), it is also a retrospective

revision of the earlier books, with the benefit of a hindsight that nonetheless cannot afford to claim to be the view from outside, or of a detachment that comes with age.

Nor is my aim to make new discoveries of hitherto overlooked films and filmmakers. I return to some canonical figures (Alexander Kluge, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Konrad Wolf), and include other, in this context less often cited, but by no means unknown names (Harun Farocki, Herbert Achternbusch). Of some of their films I offer readings that are not exactly counter-readings or symptomatic readings, but perhaps qualify as sympathetic interlinear readings—between the lines, across the gaps, with and against the grain—also in view of the aforementioned abundant literature on the subject.¹⁶

The Politics of Representation

Most studies of films dealing with the Nazi period and the Holocaust in German post-war cinema tend to operate within a classical concept of representation, which is to say, they either imply a realist epistemology, or take a constructivist position. Representations are judged as to their “accuracy” and veracity, or are evaluated in relation to the ideological assumptions they hide or disguise, and the rhetorical tropes deployed to this end. Specific films are praised for their realism and authenticity, or regarded as symptomatic, which is to say, ideological. This ideology tends to be indicative of “repression,” “disavowal,” “bad faith/bad conscience,” and the films are generally judged to be incapable of speaking “the truth” about the Nazi crimes. To the more responsive (analytically troubled or theoretically versed) critics, other options have presented themselves: the “allegorical” hermeneutics of a Walter Benjamin, for instance, or Siegfried Kracauer’s decoding of a filmic text’s social hieroglyphics are frequently emulated models.¹⁷

The readings I am proposing differ from these approaches. They respond to the special challenges posed by the controversially debated “limits of representation” when addressing the overabundance of images of Nazi rule and the corresponding lack of images documenting the Holocaust. The latter’s “unrepresentability” is not to be confused with the paucity of first-hand photographic evidence, but pertains to the enormity of the crimes to which no representational medium, mode or genre could be adequate or appropriate. Thus, rather than espousing either realist or constructivist perspectives, which might identify (positive or negative) “representations of ...”, I draw attention to the distribution of roles inherent in the images that have come down to us and through whose eyes do we see what we see, what role—witness, bystander, secret sharer—is assigned to us (chapter 2). Elsewhere I take another “limit of representation” as the specific dilemma of films made in (West) Germany about the recent past, summed up by varying Samuel Beckett’s dictum: “it can’t be represented, it must be represented.”¹⁸ Not that many filmmakers have