

# literatur für leser:innen

22

3

45. Jahrgang

## Inhaltsverzeichnis

Hans Kruschwitz · „Ich versuchte die Leere in mir mit Vokabeln zu füllen.“ Identität, Sprache und Trauma in Olga Grjasnowas Roman *Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt* (2012)

Alexandra Juster · Juli Zehs Roman *Über Menschen: Konvivialistische Herausforderungen zwischen Stadt und Land*

Hans-Rüdiger Schwab · Die Kreuzigung „in eigenartig moderner Form“. Zu Detlev von Liliencrons Gedicht „Rabbi Jeschua“ („Golgatha“)

Benedetta Bronzini · Death as Performance in the Conversations between Heiner Müller and Alexander Kluge



PETER LANG

# Inhaltsverzeichnis

## Hans Kruschwitz

„Ich versuchte die Leere in mir mit Vokabeln zu füllen.“

Identität, Sprache und Trauma in Olga Grjasnowas Roman

*Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt* (2012) \_\_\_\_\_ 133

## Alexandra Juster

Juli Zehs Roman *Über Menschen: Konvivialistische Herausforderungen*

zwischen Stadt und Land \_\_\_\_\_ 145

## Hans-Rüdiger Schwab

Die Kreuzigung „in eigenartig moderner Form“.

Zu Detlev von Liliencrons Gedicht „Rabbi Jeschua“ („Golgatha“) \_\_\_\_\_ 159

## Benedetta Bronzini

Death as Performance in the Conversations between Heiner Müller

and Alexander Kluge \_\_\_\_\_ 183

## literatur für leser:innen

herausgegeben von:	ISSN 0343-1657 eISSN 2364-7183 Keith Bullivant, Ingo Cornils, Serena Grazzini, Carsten Jakobi, Frederike Middelhoff, Bernhard Spies, Barbara Thums, Christine Waldschmidt, Sabine Wilke
Peer Review:	literatur für leser:innen ist peer reviewed. Alle bei der Redaktion eingehenden Beiträge werden anonymisiert an alle Herausgeber:innen weitergegeben und von allen begutachtet. Jede:r Herausgeber:in hat ein Vetorecht.
Verlag und Anzeigenverwaltung:	Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, Gontardstraße 11, 10178 Berlin Telefon: +49 (0) 30 232 567 900, Telefax +49 (0) 30 232 567 902
Redaktion der englischsprachigen Beiträge:	Dr. Sabine Wilke, Professor of German, Dept. of Germanics, Box 353130, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195, USA wilke@u.washington.edu
Redaktion der deutschsprachigen Beiträge	Dr. Ingo Cornils, Professor of German Studies, School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK i.cornils@leeds.ac.uk
Erscheinungsweise:	3mal jährlich (März/Juli/November)
Bezugsbedingungen:	Jahresabonnement EUR 76,00; Jahresabonnement für Studenten EUR 34,00. Alle Preise verstehen sich zuzüglich Porto und Verpackung. Abonnements können mit einer Frist von 8 Wochen zum Jahresende gekündigt werden. Alle Beiträge sind urheberrechtlich geschützt. Übersetzung, Nachdruck, Vervielfältigung auf photomechanischem oder ähnlichem Wege, Vortrag, Funk- und Fernsehsendung sowie Speicherung in Datenverarbeitungsanlagen – auch auszugsweise – bleiben vorbehalten.

PETER LANG



Die Online-Ausgabe dieser Publikation ist Open Access verfügbar und im Rahmen der Creative Commons Lizenz CC-BY 4.0 wiederverwendbar. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

## Death as Performance in the Conversations between Heiner Müller and Alexander Kluge

### Abstract

The subject of this essay is the East German dramatist Heiner Müller (1929–1995) focusing on his role of interviewee and analysing his 24 conversations for the West German television with the director and producer Alexander Kluge (1932–). The conversations took place between 1988 and 1995 and are presented, in a shortened and modified version, in the two volumes edited by Kluge, *Ich schulde der Welt einen Toten* (1995) and *Ich bin ein Landvermesser* (1996). Indeed, Kluge is the first and only interviewer who turns Müller the individual into both a subject and an object, not only of recent historical events, but also of art itself. In this peculiar context, *Mein Rendezvous mit dem Tod* (1995), one of the last conversations between the two German artists, represent a unique case, in which Müller performs his illness and his own death in front of the cameras, thus becoming the protagonist of his last drama.

**Keywords:** Heiner Müller, Alexander Kluge, Performance, Death Iconography, Self-Representation

In addition to still being one of the best-known playwrights of 20th-century Europe, Heiner Müller (1929–1995) was also a leading figure in Germany's post-World War II intellectual and media *milieu*. The countless interviews and public conversations he released, especially since the second half of the 1980s,<sup>1</sup> made him known as East Germany's *Interviewkünstler*. Indeed, as Jan-Christoph Hauschild affirms,<sup>2</sup> during the last years of his life, Müller turned his presence in the media into his main form of expression, even to the point of transforming himself into a literary character. „Weise am Weisen ist die Haltung“, said Keuner the thinker to the philosopher, pointing out how the mask of the oracle is as important as the revealed prophecy.<sup>3</sup>

Müller the interview artist is as difficult to classify as his playwright *Doppelgänger*, who lived suspended between East and West: inseparable from his glass of whiskey and his cigar, also typical of the Brechtian *habitus* – just consider the self-portrait with a glass of liquor and a Virginia cigar in *Vom armen B.B.* (1927) – he hides his gaze behind thick dark glasses, is voluble and provocative, and adept at avoiding answers by alternating silences, anecdotes and quotations.

As already evident from the content of *Rotwelsch* (1982), from the “collection of errors” published by Verlag der Autoren (1986, 1990, 1994) while the playwright was still alive, as well as from his autobiography, *Krieg ohne Schlacht. Leben in zwei Diktaturen* (1992), composed and presented in the form of a self-interview, the

---

1 For further study see Heiner Müller: *Gespräche 1, 2, 3*. Frankfurt am Main 2008. As the three volumes published by Suhrkamp in the *Werke* series attest, Müller's career as an interviewee had already begun in the mid-1950s. However, it is only from the 1980s, and especially from 1989 onward, that the German and international media chose him as one of the main interlocutors belonging to the cultural sphere to discuss the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall from the perspective of a direct protagonist of History. At the same time, his role as an interviewed intellectual began to gradually take over his theatrical production, until it finally completely replaced it.

2 Jan-Christoph Hauschild: *Heiner Müller oder Das Prinzip Zweifel*. Berlin 2001, S. 7.

3 Bertolt Brecht: *Geschichten vom Herrn Keuner*. Frankfurt am Main 2013, S. 7.

content of Müller's conversations is also extremely varied. It ranges from sociopolitical analysis to a critique of civilisation, keeping history and theatre as the common thread and seeing the generation of conflict as the main goal of the dialectic itself. Good examples of this are *Zur Lage der Nation* (1990) and *Jenseits der Nation* (1991), two caustic instructional booklets on the geopolitical and cultural context of the German Democratic Republic in its last decade, which resulted from late-night conversations and long encounters in West Berlin cafes and hotels between Müller and Frank Michael Raddatz.<sup>4</sup>

If the interview, which draws as much from the psychoanalytic interview and from interrogation as it does from philosophical dialogue, is in itself a textual, composite literary genre which defies definition, it is even more difficult, as Jens Ruchatz points out,<sup>5</sup> to try to draw the fine line between reality and fiction within so-called "auteur interviews", which regard the artist as both subject and object of the conversation, thus becoming a true form of artistic expression.

Even less classifiable was the meeting in front of the camera between East Berlin's *Grenzgänger* and Alexander Kluge, a behind-the-scenes player in independent German television<sup>6</sup> over the past three decades. Since 1987, Kluge, who is the largest shareholder in the broadcasting company DCTP, in fact personally oversees three late-night cultural programs, which are now available online. The episodes often focus on wars from different eras and on particularly brutal and destabilising events (fires, bombings, atomic disasters, and unusually cruel historical or mythological episodes), interspersed and linked, using the technique of collage, of which Kluge is a master, with musical interventions ranging from opera to pop music, or portraits of leading figures in *Neuer Deutscher Film*. It is in this context that Kluge developed the format of the fake interview, in other words an explicitly fictional video-interview with historical and literary figures, usually played by actors such as Helge Schneider and Peter Berling.

It is under such premises that the collaboration between Müller and Kluge, who were almost contemporaries and both ready to resist the emotional and historical anesthesia of contemporary mass culture, resulted in a unique and visionary product in which form and content are inseparable and equally intense.

The model of the 'anti-interview' proposed by the filmmaker from Halberstadt, and perfected also thanks to the collaboration with Müller, is aesthetically unmistakable; the person who is the subject and protagonist of the conversation is made recognisable and identifiable in his or her social role – and as an 'expert' – through as many details as possible. The framing chosen is in fact not limited to the close-up, or the so-called *talking head*, that was typical of interviews at the time, but offers a wider view, which reveals the context in which the conversation takes place, while also

---

4 Frank Michael Raddatz: *Zur Lage der Nation*. Berlin 1990; Frank Michael Raddatz: *Jenseits der Nation*. Berlin 1991.

5 Jens Ruchatz: *Interview-Authentizität für die literarische Celebrity. Das Autoreninterview in der Gattungsgeschichte des Interviews*, in: Hoffmann T., Kaiser G. (ed.): *Echt inszeniert. Interviews in Literatur und Literaturbetrieb*. München 2014, pp. 20–47.

6 In 1987 Kluge founded DCTP (*Development Company for Television Program*), an independent platform, now also a web-TV with its own programming, which provides television content to private channels, including the BBC and Germany's RTL, SAT 1 and VOX, through a licensing system designed by Kluge himself (he is also a trained lawyer) which, using a careful media policy, has allowed it to obtain complete autonomy regarding the content of its formats.

allowing the viewer to focus on the *habitus*<sup>7</sup> and gestures of the interviewee himself. The conversations take place mainly in public places, for example at a crowded coffee table, at the Berliner Ensemble, or at home in the interviewee's private study. The playwright is often portrayed with his typewriter, or handling books, constantly reminding the viewer of his public role. Thanks to the skillful positioning of the cameras, the "East Berlin prophet" often appears enveloped in an aura of light, thus evoking his divine dimension through the image. The editing of the video-interviews is also characterized by Kluge's style. To underscore the most significant moments of the conversation, Kluge often overlays in white letters the inscription "Der Dramatiker Heiner Müller", followed by fragments of texts taken from the ongoing dialogue, to further associate the thought expressed with a face in the viewer's mind. To highlight the cuts and the introduction of new topics of discussion, the director also often uses collages, either historical or openly macabre. A good example is "*Verschleiß*" von *Menschen / Genosse Mauser / "Opfer der Geschichte"*,<sup>8</sup> in which during part of the conversation uncensored images of an autopsy run in the background. In most of the conversations, the interviewer appears only as a calm and agreeable voice-over, often in open contrast to the topics being discussed. „Ich fühle mich nur wichtig im Zusammenhang mit anderen Menschen. Deshalb sieht man mir ja auch bei meinen Fernseh-Interviews so gut wie nie ins Gesicht“,<sup>9</sup> confessed Alexander Kluge in an interview. In fact, as he further explains, his own maieutic technique is rooted in the Platonic dialogue and even more in Kleist's „allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden“,<sup>10</sup> which allows access to the interlocutor's unconscious by eliminating the emotional filters imposed by the contemporary *auteur* interview. The format that characterizes the video-interviews by the director from Halberstadt has the universal converge with the particular through questions concerning trivial aspects of everyday life, loosely associated with historical anecdotes, myth, and philosophy. Given the passions the interlocutors have in common, what takes place in this particular case is a dialogue carried on two different lines, one which results from the superficial conversation, which occurs live in front of the camera, and another that derives from a constant philological, deep probing of the constellations of thought that arise from what has just been said. Thus, Müller's coping with the needs of his newborn daughter becomes the occasion to talk about the difficult choice of Agamemnon, who by starting the Trojan War is compelled to sacrifice Iphigenia,<sup>11</sup> while the passion for cigars becomes the cue to address the crisis between Cuba and the United States,<sup>12</sup> and the lust for knowledge *vis-à-vis* ancient historiography serves as a parallel to analyse the blind will to power that marked the rise and fall of Real Socialism.<sup>13</sup>

7 Pierre Bourdieu: *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford 1990.

8 Alexander Kluge: *Gespräche mit Heiner Müller*: <https://kluge.library.cornell.edu/de/conversations/mueller/> [20.11.2023].

9 Alexander Kluge: „Ich liebe das Lakonische“. In: *Der Spiegel*, n. 45/2000, S. 336–340, here p. 337.

10 Heinrich von Kleist: *Über die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden*. In: *Sämtliche Werke von Heinrich von Kleist*. Ed. by Roland Reuß/Peter Staengle/Ingeborg Harms, vol. 3, Basel 1988, pp. 3422–3423.

11 Kluge: *Die Welt ist nicht schlecht, sondern voll*. In: Id.: *Gespräche mit Heiner Müller* <https://kluge.library.cornell.edu/de/conversations/mueller/> (20.11.2023).

12 Kluge: *Der letzte Mohikaner*. In: Id.: *Gespräche mit Heiner Müller* <https://kluge.library.cornell.edu/de/conversations/mueller/> (20.11.2023).

13 Kluge: *In den Ruinen der Moral tätig*. In: Id.: *Gespräche mit Heiner Müller* <https://kluge.library.cornell.edu/de/conversations/mueller/> (20.11.2023).

There are also questions concerning childhood, which are approached from a true and proper psychoanalytic perspective. For instance, in *Porträt für Heiner Müller (zum 60. Geburtstag)*,<sup>14</sup> a conversation chosen to introduce the East German playwright to the audience, Kluge encourages the interviewee to recall his memories, asking him to describe a typical school day, the appearance of his mother, and early teenage recollections. As in his autobiography, the great absentee, the protagonist of Müller's obsessions and repressed memories is once again his father, who symbolizes betrayal, as well as the brutal, yet failed relationship of the individual with History itself.

What is offered to the television audience during the approximately twenty-four interviews<sup>15</sup> filmed between 1986 and 1995 and aired on PRIMETIME/SPÄTAUSGABE, 10 TO 11<sup>16</sup> and NEWS & STORIES, is a concentrate of the poetics of both interlocutors, presented in a dialectical key, challenging the viewer to distinguish the true from the plausible through historical, literary, and personal anecdotes. "The person is a stage, an idea",<sup>17</sup> argues the director from Halberstadt, explaining the genesis of his television productions and historically themed prose publications. The result of the only series of video-interviews granted by Müller to a regular interlocutor is an obstinate inquiry into the fragmentary nature, or, as Kluge likes to call it, "polyphony",<sup>18</sup> of the human being, as well as into its historical dimension: this is achieved through the portrayal of the controversial author of the *Hamletmaschine*, who stages himself as an *exemplum*, and chooses to reveal his private persona for the first and only time.

„Vielleicht spüre ich das Ganze ja am heftigsten in seiner Zertrümmerung“,<sup>19</sup> Kluge says, motivating his own selection of content for *Chronik der Gefühle* (2000). Likewise, it is precisely in the moments of maximum weakness and fragility of the interviewee that these video-interviews come to life.

What motivates Müller's choice to turn himself into his own *readymade*, or, in his own words, to evolve "from object to subject of History"<sup>20</sup> through media performance, is History itself. In fact, 1989 marks a second rupture in the public and private life of the author of *Wolokolamsker Chaussee* (1984–1988). In the fourth episode of the series, *Kentauren*, a horror story written in the footsteps of Franz Kafka, he dreamed of the coming of a new era, marked by apparent calm, by the sudden disappearance of the enemy and of known reality, prophesying the implosion of the Soviet bloc and

---

14 Kluge: *Porträt für Heiner Müller (zum 60. Geburtstag)*. In: Id.: *Gespräche mit Heiner Müller* <https://kluge.library.cornell.edu/de/conversations/mueller/> (20.11.2023).

15 All conversations that took place from 1986 to 1995 between Heiner Müller and Alexander Kluge were filmed and are now available at: <https://kluge.library.cornell.edu/conversations/mueller/> (20.11.2023). According to Kluge's own rough estimates, the material filmed, from which the approximately twenty-three interviews were edited and aired on the private RTL channel in the programs 10 TO 11 and PRIMETIME between 1989 and 2012, amounts to about 400 hours. After the television airing and Müller's death, a selection of seventeen conversations was published in print, following extensive editing and rewriting, by Rotbuch Verlag, in the two volumes *Ich schulde der Welt einen Toten* (1995) and *Ich bin ein Landvermesser* (1996).

16 10 TO 11 was first aired on RTL on May 2, 1988. Each 24 minute-episode covers numerous topics, mainly concerning art and culture, in the form of an interview or conversation. For many years the regular interviewer was Alexander Kluge himself.

17 Kluge: „Ich liebe das Lakonische“, p. 338.

18 Didi-Huberman: *L'œil ouvert d'Alexander Kluge*. In: "Le Monde", *Livres*, 07.04.2016, p. 2.

19 Kluge: „Ich liebe das Lakonische“, p. 338.

20 Heiner Müller: *Die Gespräche 1*. Frankfurt am Main 2008, p. 200.

the consequent end of the German Democratic Republic as a historical-political, cultural and social reality, and as the main subject and ideal audience of his own works.<sup>21</sup>

The time frame covered by the video-interviews with Alexander Kluge thus concerns an era in which death and metamorphosis concretely erupt into the playwright's life, thus questioning his very identity. A decade after the writing of *Hamletmaschine* (1979), this identity finds new reasons to be decomposed, unmasked and destroyed before the evident ineffability of the present through theatre. What falters, first of all, is the word itself, like Francisco Goya's hand, which trembles before the ghosts and obsessions of the *Black Paintings*, declaring the impossibility of representing the invasion of history in art except with interrupted brushstrokes. It is the playwright from Eppendorf himself who, in *Krieg ohne Schlacht*, engages in a comparison with the saturnine painter of the Spanish War of Independence, reading in artistic metamorphosis an inevitable reaction to the upheavals in the real world.<sup>22</sup> The same dialectics are called into question, in response to media insistence which presses the East German playwright for confirmation of alleged contacts with the Stasi and, at the same time, to gather prophecies about the nebulous future of Germany's reunification. „Aus der Sicht des Stotterers Kleist: von der allmählichen Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden zur allmählichen Verfertigung des Schweigens beim Reden“<sup>23</sup> states Müller on November 23, 1990, observing the disorientation of two societies following the definitive disappearance of a wall that was not only political and ideological, but also temporal. Silence becomes the new protagonist of Müller's stage, where texts, dense and overloaded with meaning, come to break abruptly, to atomize into poems and fragments, or dissolve into images, as hoped for in the conclusion of the dreamlike and surreal description contained in *BILDBESCHREIBUNG*.<sup>24</sup>

In his eulogy of Heiner Müller, delivered at the Berliner Ensemble on the day of the playwright's funeral, Alexander Kluge reversed the perspective of the last years of his friend's life. Silence is interpreted as the parenthesis that preceded a new creative explosion, involving „ein Sächsischer Römer, ein Preussischer Stoiker“, who writes in sonnet and rhyme and who, replacing Ophelia and Lady Macbeth, places two new women as the pillars of his existence, namely his mother and daughter, both of whom are omnipresent in the video-interviews.<sup>25</sup>

Faced with the fulfillment of Brecht's *Fatzer's* prophecy, which sees the present invaded by phantoms coming from the future,<sup>26</sup> the 20<sup>th</sup> century “dinosaur”<sup>27</sup> knows that he belongs to the generation of the vanquished, to the realm of the dead who occupy the cellars of memory and who must be unearthed.<sup>28</sup> It is primarily by following Benjamin's theses on history, which he repeatedly cites, that Müller approaches the video-interviews, lending himself to becoming a historical document through the format proposed by Kluge, which is centred on memory and the free association of thought.

21 Heiner Müller: *Die Stücke 5*. Frankfurt am Main 2005, p. 291.

22 Heiner Müller: *Krieg ohne Schlacht. Leben in zwei Diktaturen*. Köln 1992, p. 213.

23 Heiner Müller: *Die Schriften*. Frankfurt am Main 2005, p. 201.

24 Heiner Müller: *Die Prosa*. Frankfurt am Main 1999, p. 112.

25 Alexander Kluge: *Trauerrede auf Heiner Müller*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OO11WPNx9zQ> [20.11.2023], min. 14.

26 Müller: *Die Stücke 5*, p.386.

27 Ivi, S. 295.

28 Raddatz: *Jenseits der Nation*. Berlin 1991, p. 31.

In planning the conversations, as Kluge himself states,<sup>29</sup> the two interview-artists immediately agree in establishing poetic models to which they will adhere in their joint project: a literary Olympus which includes Tacitus, the laconic Mannerist historical chronicler who is fascinated by brutality, as well as a key figure in the transition from historiography to literature; Heinrich von Kleist, the guerrilla spokesman of the internal conflicts that prevented German political and cultural unification; and Ernst Jünger, who, like the playwright from Eppendorf, sees in pain and catastrophe the prerequisites for the palingenesis of humanity.

In addition to the three declared deities, there are as many others, formally concealed, which accompany the *Interviewkünstler's* last performance in the form of quotations and anecdotes. First and foremost is Bertolt Brecht, omnipresent throughout Müller's work, followed by Franz Kafka, the "first Bolshevik writer",<sup>30</sup> the embodiment of the bewildered land surveyor K., who sees writing as his last foothold on earthly reality; and, inevitably, Ovid, chosen by Kluge as the supreme deity for being the advocate of the failed attempt to orientalise Western civilisation through the elimination of the fear of death through hope in metempsychosis.<sup>31</sup> *Orpheus Geflügt*,<sup>32</sup> dedicated to the slaying of Orpheus during the fierce uprising of the Thracian peasants, yet excluded from the world of poetry because it was never sung by Eurydice's lover, is recited by Müller in contrast to the antithetical *Senecas Tod* in the video-interview of the same title. Here the analysis of the Stoic approach to the transience of life has the dual purpose of introducing this theme in a personal key, and of offering a first performance, in which the death of the classical poet, extremely theatrical when compared to the condition of the playwright in contemporary times, takes centre stage.

Erupting into Müller's life in the early 1990s, in addition to History, is the looming ultimate metamorphosis of every human being, which in this case appears in the form of an esophageal cancer. „[...] Der Körper verändert sich, wenn dieser Ort sich verwandelt, zum Beispiel unmöglich wird“,<sup>33</sup> explains the playwright in *Wandlungsfähigkeit des Körpers*, revealing his own alter-ego as a postmodern Keuner.<sup>34</sup> In fact, by the time Heiner Müller falls ill, he has long since become the thinker Keuner of his era, both in his role of poet and interviewee, as demonstrated by the opening quote of the first volume of the *Gesammelte Irrtümer*.<sup>35</sup> What brings Müller even closer to his Brechtian *Doppelgänger* is that he himself becomes the symptom of the evil that afflicts the nation.

“HOW TO GET RID OF THIS MOST WICKED BODY”.<sup>36</sup> Cancer, the lover and cesspit that dwells within Merteuil in the mortal duel that concludes *Quartett* – but also the party that in *Germany's Tod in Berlin*<sup>37</sup> devours Hilse from within, making him the symbol of the putrefaction of the socialist Utopia – affects the author himself. He who

---

29 Alexander Kluge: *Ich schulde der Welt einen Toten*. Berlin 1995, p. 12.

30 Müller: *Die Stücke 5*, p. 385.

31 Kluge: *Gespräche mit Heiner Müller*: <https://kluge.library.cornell.edu/de/conversations/mueller/> (20.11.2023).

32 Müller: *Gedichte*, p. 49.

33 Heiner Müller: *Die Gespräche 3*. Frankfurt am Main 2008, p. 838.

34 Brecht: *Geschichten vom Herrn Keuner*, p. 97.

35 Heiner Müller: *Gesammelte Irrtümer*. Frankfurt am Main 1986, p. 2.

36 Müller: *Die Stücke 5*, p. 56.

37 Heiner Müller: *Die Stücke 3*. Frankfurt am Main 2001, p. 207.



had invoked it within his own works, becomes, in fact, the protagonist of his own last play. The drama of the author/Hamlet, thus, takes place within the video-interviews, exactly when the time of history and the time of theatre coincide.

Even before becoming the subject of the video-interviews, illness and death, both as a metaphorical farewell to theatrical production and the end of an era, and as the fate of the poet, become first and foremost the protagonists of Müller's written works, especially in the case of the poems, where echoes of Kafka are increasingly evident, for example in the fragment AUF DER SUCHE NACH ODRADEK, which condenses in seventeen words the poetics of the writer from Prague and his existential condition that sees earthly life as a bitter condemnation, for which the second metamorphosis, after birth, is the only hope of redemption.<sup>38</sup>

The metamorphosis that suddenly deprives Gregor Samsa of both speech and human semblance, turning him into a horrible insect, and even more so the condition of wandering imposed on the Hunter Gracchus,<sup>39</sup> who has been transformed into a butterfly, suspended between Riva del Garda and the afterlife, surrounded by messianic symbols, indeed provides one of the most interesting interpretative keys to the late writings of the man that Alexander Kluge called the land surveyor of the second postwar era.

It is precisely in the only form of expression in which Müller allows himself to write in the first person that we see the first interpenetration of literature and life, as evidenced by abruptly interrupted fragments and crystalline, laconic lyrics, such as those in ICH KAUE DIE KRANKENKOST DER TOD, dated December 12, 1995, and the even more dramatic undated fragment in which Müller, a poet on Golgotha<sup>40</sup> on the verge of giving up his life, sacrificing himself for a humanity that has betrayed him, notes „warum mir Vater?“<sup>41</sup>

Cancer itself, undefeated hero, and flesh of his own flesh,<sup>42</sup> rendered through the description of the poet's physical perceptions and the medical procedure he must submit to, appears as the subject, among numerous texts, of *im spiegel mein zerschnittener körper, auftauchen in der isolierstation, dialog, SHOWDOWN*.<sup>43</sup> As we read in *STERBENDER MANN IM SPIEGEL*,<sup>44</sup> *FREMDER BLICK: ABSCHIED VON BERLIN*<sup>45</sup> and *VAMPIR*,<sup>46</sup> living has become a battle, punctuated by the primary needs of the body,<sup>47</sup> in which the poet, naked and surrounded by mirrors, awaits the end with the awareness of those who have been sentenced to death. Seized by new obsessions, this time private, such as the difficult leave-taking from his newborn daughter who,

38 Müller: *Die Prosa*, p. 300.

39 The *Jäger Gracchus*, compelled in his undead state to wander the earth without memory or destination, also appears in one of Müller's last poems, which features the painter-demiurge wandering through a desolate moor in the guise of Charon, ferryman of souls to the realm of oblivion (Müller: *Gedichte*, p. 309).

40 The parallel that sees Müller as a new messianic figure at the moment of his sacrifice on earth is also carried forward by Kluge in *Mein Rendezvous mit dem Tod*.

41 Müller: *Die Prosa*, p. 328.

42 Ivi, p. 354.

43 Ivi, p. 280–285.

44 Ivi, p. 217.

45 Ivi, p. 287.

46 Ivi, p. 318.

47 Ivi, p. 312.

due to their imminent separation, has become for him a source both of hope and of pain.<sup>48</sup>

It is in the context of the above-mentioned poems – some of which were written, as a superstitious gesture of attachment to life, while hospitalized – that the playwright's most singular video interview is situated. This interview, entitled *Mein Rendezvous mit dem Tod*, and dedicated to the attempt to surgically remove the esophageal cancer that would kill him a few months later, was aired on February 20, 1995.

Here the poetic baggage of the two interview artists finds the highest point of convergence: what for the director and interviewer is the documentation of the most genuine human experience on earth, coincides with the possibility for the interviewee to confront himself with the protagonists of his texts and with his obsessions. The material presented to the audience, undoubtedly the most personal of the autobiographical documents made public by Müller while still alive, encompasses within it the multiple goals and contents of the entire *corpus* of video-interviews. It not only definitively consecrates the East German playwright on the international postmodern artistic scene, but also turns the last mask of the condemned poet into a genuine literary character.

Although the mask chosen by Müller for his final performance is very close to the *habitus* of the preceding years, the metamorphosis that occurred in him as a result of his illness has irreversibly affected his appearance: now in front of us, smoking a cigar in a black suit, is a man with a feeble voice, looking the spectator in the eye, hinting at a sad smile. Müller attempts to maintain control of the conversation by declaring at the outset that he is about to narrate „eine merkwürdige Erfahrung“, thus ascribing to his own illness the value of a curious scientific study, recalling in doing so the educational and poetic approach that the two artists intend to give to their public conversations.

Indeed, the audience witnesses the description of a battle. The very title of the conversation is an open reference to World War I and to how soldiers found death in the trenches.<sup>49</sup> The operation itself, in which the surgeon, an artist armed with a “war dagger”, performs his masterly exercises on a completely shaved and anesthetised body, creating a new form of writing in which the canvas is the individual himself, whose skin is carved and etched, recalling what occurs to the condemned in Kafka's penal colony.

His awakening after the operation, as described in a fragment that is contemporaneous with the interview in question: „Mit der Wiederkehr der Farbe droht die/ Auferstehung/ ICH HABE DIR GESAGT DU SOLLST/ NICHT/ WIEDERKOMMEN TOT IST/ TOT. Der Tod ist ein Irrtum“.<sup>50</sup> It is a true and proper resurrection imposed by the body, sensitive to the stimuli and perceptions coming from reality. We thus witness the final detachment between the transcendent and the immanent within the human being. As described in *SENECAS TOD*,<sup>51</sup> and reiterated in this dialogue, the only realm in which the two instances can remain as one is poetry itself. If the memory

---

48 Ivi, p. 327.

49 As Alexander Kluge explains in the introduction to the video interview, the title was taken from a poem written by an American soldier during World War I, who describes the Battle of Ypres as his own encounter with death, in a trench.

50 Müller: *Die Prosa*, p. 308.

51 Ivi, p. 251.

of suffering is not present in the mind, which has been deprived of the experience by anesthesia, it is the body that holds the memory. It acts autonomously, weeping through infections, and expressing itself through pain, a symptom that shows up after some time, as Müller himself points out.

The description of his stay in the intensive care unit, where he suffered a fever (a symptom of the body's processing of the battle that has just taken place), and was in a state of semi-consciousness, provides the two interview artists with an opportunity to create a new chain of thoughts, this time reading in contemporary history the post-operative symptoms of the Napoleonic wars, industrialisation, and the emergence of nation-states, which characterized the 19th century. At the same time, Müller, who was completing the first draft of the last act of *Germania 3 Gespenster am toten Mann*, which has both Hitler and Stalin as protagonists, interpreted the shock suffered by East Germany following the occupation by Communist Russia as post-operative trauma, comparable, as we can also read in *Deutschland ortlos. Anmerkung zu Kleist*,<sup>52</sup> to the sudden 13<sup>th</sup> century Mongol invasion which ravaged Crimea and Poland, reaching as far west as Croatia and putting the vary fate of European cultural identity into question.

If the body and mind, as a result of the disease, have taken separate paths, imposing an internal dichotomy within the individual, the same occurs in the video-interview itself, which, through a collage of images depicting Müller in his own ICU bed, create a rupture, separating the historical from the poetic and documentary themes, addressed in the second part of the conversation, which focuses on post-surgery rehabilitation. „Genosse du bist nicht umsonst gestorben/ Gefallen an der Front der Dialektik“,<sup>53</sup> recited the requiem for the Revolution in the monologue that witnesses the metamorphosis of man into the machine of the bureaucratic apparatus. The silence, which until now had been allegorical, and already prophesied, through Kafka, in *Kentauren*, becomes real as a result of the operation, reaching the climax of paradox by requiring the playwright, who has made of the word his religion, to have to learn to speak again. „[...] Leben lernen mit der halben maschine/ Atmen essen verboten die frage wozu/ Die zu leicht von den lippen geht der tod/ Ist das einfache sterben kann ein idiot“,<sup>54</sup> writes Heiner Müller during his days at Berlin's Charité hospital, bringing together through this extremely private lyricism the new poetics of illness, and the affirmation of the metamorphosis of the 'man-machine' into a 'mutilated machine' in need of being re-educated to life. Müller's linguistic rehabilitation offers the opportunity for the two *Interviewkünstler* to put language itself, now understood as a performative act of the body, broken down into sounds devoid of semantic meaning, under the knife. They are in fact vowels with a purely phonic purpose that the playwright recites, similarly to the ideal actor in Kleist's *Marionettentheater*, in front of Alexander Kluge's camera. Müller's performance thus takes on a new connotation, very close to the content of the studies on the language of silence and on speech as a linguistic act undertaken by his friend and collaborator Robert Wilson (*Deafman Glimpse*, 1970), and by John Cage, a musician and philosopher who made the absence of sound, or rather the

52 Müller: *Die Prosa*, p. 385.

53 Müller: *Gedichte*, p. 234.

54 Ivi, p. 280.

impossibility of such a condition in real life, the leitmotif of his entire work, of which *Silence: Lectures and Writings* and *Lecture on Nothing* (1959) are the manifesto.

From the negation of individual identity, which reached its apex in *Hamletmaschine* with the destruction of the photograph of the writer, passing through the explosion of language into fragments, we reach the last stage that precedes non-being: the dismemberment of the “man-machine” into the mechanical parts that compose him. Indeed, the last part of the conversation analyses the multiple meanings of the verb ‘darstellen’, or ‘to represent’ which, as Müller himself anticipates at the beginning of the video interview, in the medical field indicates bringing to light what is hidden by the body itself: „[...] Dieses Vokabular ist interessant, die Darstellung des Magens. Das heißt, es wird alles weggeschnitten, was die Sicht auf den Magen behindert. Das heißt darstellen. Das hat mich so an Liebermann erinnert: Zeichnen heißt weglassen“.<sup>55</sup>

If Max Liebermann’s „Zeichnen heißt weglassen“<sup>56</sup> creates an immediate connection with the figurative arts and with Michelangelo’s approach to the material, i.e. the *non finito*, the multiplicity of meanings proposed here brings us back to the challenge posed by the two interview artists, who shed light on reality through the fiction offered by performance and the medium of television.

The last monologue of the *Interviewkünstler* is dedicated to the convergence of reality and fiction. In *THEATERTOD*,<sup>57</sup> which he recites in front of Alexander Kluge’s cameras, the playwright addresses the death of the actor in the solitude of an empty theater, consecrating himself and his own death to the stage. Thus, in *Mein Rendezvous mit dem Tod* the essence of life and the essence of theatre ultimately converge, demonstrating how nothing can be more real than theatre itself.

---

Death as the last taboo of modern society, comparable only to terrorism, is a recurring theme in Müller’s public conversations, both with Kluge and with Frank Michael Radatz, well before the interview recorded after his discharge from the ICU. What has changed in the latest interviews, when compared to previous ones, is the progressive identification of performance with reality.

To underscore this convergence, a collage of the documentation of both the illness and the surgery appears in *Mein Rendezvous mit dem Tod*, consisting of photographs taken by Müller’s wife, the photographer Brigitte Maria Mayer, later published in the volume *Der Tod ist ein Irrtum*.<sup>58</sup> It is a macabre celebration of intimacy, in which the body of the playwright very much recalls that of Rose Sélavy, the female alter-ego of the man who first turned his existence into a *ready-made*: Marcel Duchamp.

The sublimation of death through performance emerges in the interviews between Müller and Kluge through the figure of Seneca, whose voluntary death, an honorable and theatrical gesture, is observed through the lens of Tacitus in the interview *Der Tod des Seneca*. Credit is given to Emperor Nero’s teacher for turning the last

---

**55** Kluge: *Gespräche mit Heiner Müller*: <https://kluge.library.cornell.edu/de/conversations/mueller/> (20.11.2023).

**56** See also Hatje Cantz: *Max Liebermann: Zeichnen heisst weglassen. Arbeiten auf Papier*. Saarbrücken 2004.

**57** Müller: *Die Prosa*, p. 286.

**58** Brigitte Maria Mayer: *Der Tod ist ein Irrtum*. Frankfurt am Main 2005.

metamorphosis of the human being into a work of art capable of outlasting him throughout the centuries.<sup>59</sup> A goal which the East German playwright also hoped for in his last video-interviews.

---

**59** Kluge: *Gespräche mit Heiner Müller*; <https://kluge.library.cornell.edu/de/conversations/mueller/> [20.11.2023].